

### I Myself Will Be the Shepherd

There have been plenty of bad shepherds throughout the history of humanity. Shepherds who have fed themselves rather than their flock; who have clothed themselves with the wool, rather than clothing others; who have neglected to care for the weak, the sick, the injured.

One such bad shepherd was a man named Ratko Mladic, the Bosnian Serb former general who this past Wednesday was convicted of war crimes and genocide. From 1992-1995, Mladic was the chief military organizer of the campaign to drive Muslims, Croats and other non-Serbs off their land, in order to create a new homogeneous state for the Serbs in Bosnia. In 1992 alone he was responsible for the slaughter of 45,000 men, women, and children. As we can imagine, survivors of the genocide, many of them widows or refugees, were overwhelmed with emotion following the verdict.

As we just heard from the prophet Ezekiel, God calls all such bad shepherds to account, including not just foreign despots but Israel's own. The list of these leaders' atrocities sounds all too familiar. They feed themselves rather than the flock; they eat the fat, and clothe themselves with the wool. They do not strengthen the weak, do not heal the sick, do not bind up the injured, do not seek the lost, do not bring back the strayed. The clear implication being that that these are precisely the kinds of things a good shepherd, or king, or world leader should concern themselves with.

So into this void of political justice and religious righteousness steps God. "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep," God declares. The emphatic nature of God's statement should not be missed. The Hebrew could be literally translated "Here I am! I will now be the shepherd." I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them. I will feed them. Because you are not getting it done."

The metaphor of a leader as a shepherd has been around a long time. Twenty-five hundred years ago being a shepherd was as common a vocation as being a dairy farmer or hog farmer is today. But more than just rounding up the herd for the next milking or the next butchering, as we heard from Chuck and Rose this morning, raising sheep carries with it additional responsibilities: sheering them periodically, marketing not just their meat but their wool; protecting them from predators; literally leading them from one patch of grass to another; helping them find enough fresh water.

When Lois and I were in Israel almost seven years ago, we saw actual shepherds in the hill country surrounding Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and the Sea of Galilee. It really brought the words of the Twenty-Third Psalm to life, with its vivid depiction of God as our shepherd, who makes us lie down in green pastures and leads us beside still waters. Who protects us from all enemies with their rod and staff.

One of the commentators I read this past week noted how the shepherd in Psalm 23 is depicted as being "armed to the teeth," with a rod in one hand and a staff in the other. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry when I thought of how many pastors today are starting to carry concealed weapons into the pulpit with them. Such a thought completely violates our sense of the kind of shepherd leader Jesus would be, and therefore we are called to be. Would you feel

well cared for if I had a nine-millimeter up here with me? Or better yet an AR 15? I'd surely lose my job. And yet we shouldn't overlook the fact that this role of armed protector is emphasized in our beloved Twenty-Third Psalm.

Just as the role of a bringer of justice is emphasized in this morning's passage from Ezekiel. "I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep," the Lord God declares emphatically. Reminding us again that justice was to be the primary concern of a political leader in biblical times. If only that were the case today. All sheep deserve to be fat and well-fed (right Chuck and Rose?). We all know the reality is that there are some parts of the world where the sheep, that is, the people, are woefully and inexcusably underfed. Why aren't our world leaders doing something about it? They should be fired, until we find one who will!

Of course, even ancient scripture reminds us that justice isn't only the shepherd's job. And that it isn't only the world's leaders who are being judged. It is also the sheep themselves. Ezekiel reminds us that the fat sheep are precisely those to push with flank and shoulder, those who butt all the weak animals aside with their horns, scattering them far and wide. That God will judge not just between shepherd and shepherd, but "between sheep and sheep." That those of us who are the fat sheep have a responsibility to care for the lean sheep, until we all are fat—or at least, have enough to eat.

I think of our world's "scattered sheep," namely the thousands and thousands of homeless refugees. They aren't just our leaders' responsibility. We very often are the ones pushing them with flank and shoulder, and butting them with our well-polished horns.

In addition to its clear call for justice, one of Ezekiel's most poignant emphases is God's personal, passionate, ongoing love for us as God's sheep. "I myself will seek out my sheep," God says through Ezekiel. Which is wonderful news. Because we all get lost or scattered from time to time. We all feel weak, and fall sick, and get injured. And I find it very comforting to hear that it is God himself and herself who will personally take over my care, who will help me find the richest pastures and most fresh watercourses. "I, the Lord, have spoken," Ezekiel declares on behalf of God. Somehow, I don't doubt the prophet, or God, for a minute.

Amen.