

**Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 13, 2018**

**Solemn Evensong**

**By the Reverend Stephen Gerth**

*Year 2: Ezekiel 3:16–27; Hebrews 12:18–29; John 6:37–40*

If think about the book of Ezekiel, my mind usually goes first to two passages that get read more than once in worship in the course of every church year. What's first? Ezekiel's vision of the valley of the dry bones.<sup>1</sup> The second is the passage where God speaks about being the shepherd of his people. God says, "Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out . . . I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep . . . I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will watch over; I will feed them in justice."<sup>2</sup>

There's a context for these gentle words. God steps forward to be the shepherd because the religious and political leaders of Israel have failed in their duties. God's indictment here is not about idolatry or the worship of other Gods, but about the most basic duties of leaders: to care for those in need.

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<sup>1</sup> Ezekiel 37:1–14.

<sup>2</sup> Ezekiel 34:11–16.

The shepherds have fed themselves, while people have gone hungry. God asks, “Should not shepherds feed the sheep?”<sup>3</sup> The shepherds did not strengthen the weak, did not heal the sick, did not care for the injured, and did not seek out the lost—and they ruled with cruelty. So God declares, “I will rescue my sheep.”<sup>4</sup>

God’s judgment brings to mind the words of Matthew’s Jesus about the coming judgment of the nations. Those who did nothing for the least of Jesus’ sisters and brothers will be separated from those who did.<sup>5</sup>

The declaration of Jesus as shepherd is found in all four gospels. In the Letter to the Hebrews, Jesus is “the great shepherd of the sheep.”<sup>6</sup> In a vision of the Revelation to John, the Lamb who was sacrificed is the shepherd who guides his lambs to living water, all of whose tears will be wiped away by God.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel 34:2b.

<sup>4</sup> Ezekiel 34:12.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 25:31–46.

<sup>6</sup> Hebrews 13:20.

<sup>7</sup> Revelation 7:17, 21:1–4.

In tonight's first lesson, and throughout the book of Ezekiel, the prophet is addressed 93 times by God as "son of man"—meaning a son of Adam, a mortal human being.<sup>8</sup> But in the New Testament, the Son of man is more than a child of human Adam. He's the Son of the Most High.<sup>9</sup>

In the lesson we heard, Ezekiel is told he will be bound with cords, as will be the Son of God be bound and nailed to a cross. Our understanding of the food will be transformed from the fat and flesh of rams and goats to living bread and a saving cup, Jesus Christ's body and blood.

You and I are familiar with hearing in the New Testament about debates within Judaism among Sadducees, Pharisees, and different groups of religious zealots. In the period before, during and after the exile in Babylon, there was a debate between those who wanted all descendants of Levi, and not just the descendants of Aaron, to be priests and those who did not.

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<sup>8</sup> Arnold J. Tkacik, "Ezekiel," *The Jerome Biblical Commentary: Volume I: The Old Testament*, Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc.), 349.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 1:32.

I was surprised to read in a short article about the book of Ezekiel that “Ezekiel, Zechariah, and [others] . . . [were] staunch members of the priestly circle of Jerusalem, and to that extent opposed to the liberal tendencies of [Deuteronomy]”<sup>10</sup>—I didn’t know Deuteronomy had “liberal tendencies.” In the New Testament, not only is Jesus Christ the great high priest, but as the First Letter of Peter proclaims, all believers are “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.”<sup>11</sup> In the language of the New Testament, I’m a presbyter, that is, an elder. I’m sorry that the identity of “priest” has been lost for the people of God.

There’s a lot of transformation between the world of Ezekiel and the world of the incarnation. The very little bit of work I’ve done on Ezekiel has opened for me, I hope, a path that is inviting me—perhaps you also—to new learning about what the New Testament

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<sup>10</sup> Carroll Stuhlmueller, “Post Exilic Period: Spirit, Apocalyptic,” *The Jerome Biblical Commentary: Volume I: The Old Testament*, Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc.), 339.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Peter 2:9.

means when it proclaims that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of God's plan for humankind.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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