

## Where Are the Shepherds?

TEXT: Ezekiel 34:1-6; John 21:15-17

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on November 9, 2025*

The Island of Iona is a small island in the Inner Hebrides off the western coast of Scotland. It's 3.5 miles long and 1.5 miles wide. It's famous as the site of St. Columba's monastery in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and it was from Iona that the monks spread out to bring Christianity to Scotland and eventually all of Britain and beyond. The Vikings sacked the early monastery and it lay in ruins until a Benedictine Abbey was built there in medieval times.

The Abbey, too, was ruined by the Scottish Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and was finally restored in 1938 by a minister from Glasgow named George MacLeod, who wanted a project to give work to the unemployed in his city. The modern religious community of Iona sprang from Rev. MacLeod's vision of Christians of all denominations who would work with and for the poor around the world for peace and justice.

The island today attracts thousands of tourists in the summer months, and 75-100 people who come each week in the spring and summer months to live on the island as part of the Iona Community, sharing in work, and joining together in the renovated abbey for worship each morning and each evening. I participated in one of those weeks there back in 2004.

There isn't a whole lot else on the island. Most of the tourists only come for the day. There are some B&B's where some tourists stay, some small shops, and there are a handful of year-round residents who have small farms with sheep, some cows, and a few chickens and horses here and there. Even at the height of tourist season I could wander the island and find solitary places along the beach or up on one of the high, bare hills.

You have to watch out that you don't step in a bog and sink to your knees...been there, done that. And you have to stay away from a couple areas where the tiny, swarming, biting beasties called midges hide. But, for the most part, you can always find a private place, a thinking spot. The farmers have made peace with the tourists wandering amongst their sheep and cows, as long as we remember to close the gate as we enter and exit the pasture.

And so, one day I had finished my chores at the MacLeod Center and wandered down the one lonely road, through a couple of pasture gates, and down to the beach on the north side of the island. After some time alone with the rocks and sand and waves, it was getting close to suppertime, and I needed to start the walk back.

Back up the beach, back through the pasture gates and back onto the road I went, until I was about a quarter of a mile from the center. At that point I could see that the pasture gates on either side of the road were open, allowing the sheep to cross the road and head from one pasture to the other. No one was anywhere nearby, but clearly the sheep knew the routine and almost all of them were now in the new pasture. All of them, in fact, except two.

I held back a bit from the gates so as not to frighten the sheep and to let the last two get across, but then I saw the situation more clearly. The two sheep that were left in the old pasture were a pitiful sight. Lamé with foot rot and probably other things, they could hardly move. One of them consistently fell onto her front knees, now black with mud and dirt. And so she hobbled and crawled...on her back legs and front knees...painfully trying to get to the gate and then across the hard road.

Her friend stayed close but wasn't in much better shape. The other sheep didn't fall to her knees, but she limped and hobbled ever so slowly, also trying to make the painful pilgrimage to the new pasture with the rest of the herd. Tears were streaming down my face as I watched them. They were too big or I would have taken

them on my shoulders and carried them across the road myself. My own knees hurt every time the one of them fell on the hard asphalt of the road.

I looked around. There was a house nearby, but no one was in sight. Where was the shepherd? No one was out along the lonely road. Someone had come out and opened the gate at some point, but where were they now? Anger and panic welled up inside me. The sheep were hurting...the sheep were lame...they could barely get to the pasture. Where are the shepherds? I wanted to run up and down the road and scream for them. Shepherds! Where are the shepherds?!

I stood there and cried and prayed for the hurting sheep, and as I did, I began to hear that inner voice...the still, small voice that I have come to know as the voice of God. And this is what it said.

“So it is with my world...with my people...with my children. They are lame and hurting. It’s not that they don’t want the good pasture. It’s not that they don’t know where it is. They are lame. They are diseased and hurt. They cannot get there. They need shepherds, but the shepherds are busy elsewhere. The shepherds sit back and say, ‘the door is open, they will come if they wish,’ but they cannot come. They are lame, they are hurting, they need the shepherds to bring them. Tell the shepherds to care for the sheep.” And then the voice was still.

And so, I wandered back to supper, my heart breaking for the two sheep, and my spirit wondering and digesting the message I had been given. As I thought about the message in the hours and days that followed, first I thought it was a message for pastors of congregations. After all, even the word pastor, comes from the traditional, pastoral imagery of the clergy as shepherds of their congregations. The symbol for United Methodist bishops today is still the shepherd’s crook.

And that was part of the message. But from ancient times, throughout the Near East, and certainly during the time when Ezekiel lived and prophesied, the metaphor of the shepherd was used, extensively and across cultures, for kings and other high-ranking political leaders. And they are the target of Ezekiel’s ire in chapter 34.

Remember the context for the entire book of Ezekiel. Although the book bears his name, it doesn’t claim to be written by him but rather to chronicle the prophet’s visions and teachings. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Ezekiel is placed right after the book of Jeremiah. In the Christian Old Testament, Lamentations is squeezed in-between the two, but it’s assumed that Jeremiah wrote Lamentations, so the two prophets are still side by side.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel are very different personalities, but they go together because Jeremiah was only about 30 years older than Ezekiel, and both men endured the horrifying siege that starved the city of Jerusalem to the point of cannibalism. Both men were taken into exile, but to different places. The elder prophet, Jeremiah, was taken to Alexandria in Egypt, while young Ezekiel was taken to Babylon, where his prophetic call began and where the book bearing his name also begins.

The communities of exiles in the two places developed very differently, but what they shared was a desire to compile written histories of their faith and people while there were still those alive who remembered it—the actual events in some cases and the millennia-old oral traditions in others.

A very large portion of the Hebrew Scriptures were first written down, during the exile, in those two communities; and when you find parts of the Old Testament that tell the same stories with different details, that’s frequently the result of those writing in Alexandria choosing to tell the story differently than those engaged in the same project in Babylon.

A great example of that is First and Second Kings and First and Second Chronicles; each of which are two books in our Old Testament but just one book in the Hebrew Scriptures: Kings and Chronicles. Kings came out of the Alexandria community, and *their* focus was a more matter-of-fact telling of who was king, when and where, and the various stories around them.

But Chronicles, which covers much of the same period, came from the exiles in Babylon; and *their* interest was not so much in what happened, but to dig for the answer to their burning question of why God would let such a horror happen to them.

God had promised King Solomon that God would dwell in the temple Solomon built forever; and here it was, a smoldering ruin, and God's people carried off in chains, unable to fulfill the laws of God without the place required to do it, including the inability to repent of whatever they might have done to make God so mad. Were they even still God's people anymore?

The Babylonian exiles compiled *their* histories to try to find the answer to that question, and the book of Chronicles they produced lays the blame for their plight squarely at the foot of Israel's shepherds—their kings.

Ezekiel, now a leading prophetic voice in that community, brings that indictment right at the start of chapter 34: “Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? <sup>3</sup>You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. <sup>4</sup>You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. <sup>5</sup>So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. <sup>6</sup>My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.”

There's more to that condemnation, but the chapter closes with the image of God as the true shepherd. “For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. <sup>12</sup>As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will feed them with good pasture . . . there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture. . . . <sup>15</sup>I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. <sup>16</sup>I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

Notice the turn there at the end. . . Ezekiel has moved from the behavior of the shepherds to what the sheep themselves are doing, a theme he then continues starting in verse 17:

<sup>17</sup>As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats: <sup>18</sup>Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? <sup>19</sup>And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?

<sup>20</sup>Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. <sup>21</sup>Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, <sup>22</sup>I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

<sup>23</sup>I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. <sup>24</sup>And I, the Lord, will be their God.”

All I can say is that Jesus knew his Ezekiel and Ezekiel knew the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and the teachings of Isaiah, who was describing the kind of behavior that Ezekiel is condemning well before the Babylonians came knocking. We read some of that as our Call to Worship.

Jesus covers Ezekiel 34—all of it—across the four Gospels. It's the judgment scene of separating the sheep from the goats in Matthew 25. The very first test that determines who is saved and who is condemned in Matthew 25 is whether or not the hungry were fed. It's the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15. It's the good shepherd versus the hired hand in John 10. It's the Beatitudes in Luke which pairs the blessing of the poor and hungry with the woes of those who ignore their plight.

And, in the Gospel passage I picked to go with this today, it's Jesus connecting the shepherds and the sheep after his resurrection as Peter graduates from sheep to shepherd in John 21. "Do you love me?" Jesus asks of Peter. "Feed my sheep"—the question repeated three times to counter the three times Peter had denied him just a few days earlier.

And that was the understanding I came to as I prayed about the message God gave me while watching the struggling sheep on Iona. Sure, it's a message to pastors, and kings, and leaders; but it's also a message to every one of us.

We come first as sheep...not sure where to go or what to do or how to find good food. But when we meet Jesus and decide to embark on a path to become his disciple, we have entered shepherd school. We are learning to be like the Good Shepherd himself. We are learning how to feed the sheep, how to find lost sheep, how to tend to foot rot and matted wool, how to fend off the wolves and lions, how to identify green pastures and still waters and to lead other sheep to safety there.

Where are the shepherds? We are in churches across the globe, both in the pulpit and in the pews, so busy with our own concerns and the managing of the sheepfold that we have failed to notice the condition of the sheep. We opened the gate...isn't that enough? They can come in any Sunday that they choose. We're not stopping them. No, and we're not helping them either. "It is not that they don't want the good pasture." God said to me. "It is not that they don't know where it is. They are lame. They are diseased and hurt. They cannot get there. They need shepherds."

Where are the shepherds? We are the shepherds. And God's message was and is, "Tell the shepherds to care for the sheep." Not to spend all our time catering to the other shepherds...not to keep beautifying the sheepfold...not to keep the pasture mowed and trimmed...tell the shepherds to care for the sheep.

Do you love me? asks Jesus. "Feed my sheep." Amen.