

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/DH3FOrYx2jk?t=1359>

Today's lectionary of readings has a common thread. See if you can find it.

In 598 BC, the Babylonian empire, under King Nebuchadnezzar, quashed a rebellion led by King Jehoiakim of Judah – Drat. One year later, he returned to ransack the palace & the temple, taking everything of value, including a select group of Jerusalem's leading officials & citizens as exiles to Babylon. Dang!! Among them was a young priest, Ezekiel, who in the 5th year of exile, had a vision of GOD on a chariot-like throne. In this vision, Ezekiel was commissioned by GOD as a prophet and thus called to speak the word of the LORD to the people of Israel, both those living in exile and those still in Judah. At first Ezekiel's message was one of imminent judgment and exile, but after these came to pass, his message became one of forgiveness and restoration. Hmmm??

Much of the blame for the exile is attributed to the failure of Israel's leaders who served their own interests instead of those of the people they were supposed to serve, resulting in the "scattering of the sheep" and being conquered by other nations. But Israel's leaders were not the only ones to blame for the exile as there were within Israel people who practiced injustice and inequity, satisfying their own cravings at the expense of the needs of others. Hmmm... sound familiar?

In today's Old Testament reading, the LORD announces that he will take over as Shepherd of his sheep, searching for the lost ones and returning them to the rich pastures and good grazing of the hills of their homeland. Yet as the Shepherd of Israel, the LORD also promises to judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Hmmm...

In New Testament time, Paul writes a letter to the church in Ephesus acknowledging the faith and love they show. He prays for them that they be granted the wisdom to know and understand fully the hope, inheritance, and power of GOD into which they have been called, indeed in which they already participate. The wisdom to know and understand Hmmm? Like when Jesus recognizes his sheep and they recognize Him? . . .they will know the hope, inheritance, and power of GOD?? and understand it fully???

OH HAPPY DAY!!!

In Matthew, Jesus paints a parable picture of the day of judgement when the Son of Man will return to judge all the peoples of the world as . a . shepherd . separates . the . sheep . from . the . ^{aka, fat sheep} goats. . . . ??? aka, fat sheep

But then, instead of the usual story of how the shepherd cares for his sheep, we hear about how the sheep and goats have & have not taken care of the needs of the Shepherd when he "was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, and in prison." Interestingly, both the

sheep and the goats are surprised to learn of those times when they were, or were not, taking care of their LORD. Do we always know whether we're being sheep or goats?

So, summarizing, - and pay attention because there's gonna be a test! - the greedy leaders of Israel were taken as exiles to Babylon. A young priest, Ezekiel, was commissioned by GOD to be a prophet and called to speak the word of the LORD to the people of Israel. [*Hold on to that thought for a bit.*] At first Ezekiel's prophecies were of imminent judgment and exile, but later his message became one of forgiveness and restoration. Hmmm??? Is this sounding familiar too?

Then in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul prays that the faithful and loving people be granted the wisdom to know and understand fully the hope, inheritance, and power of GOD into which they have been called to act.

Hmmm. Any relation to the message of forgiveness and restoration. ???

And in the Gospel we heard about the Day of Judgment, when the sheep will be blessed, and the goats will be cursed; and how can we tell which we are at any given moment?... ("whenever you do this for the least of these ...")

Oh, that string tied on your finger? It's my chance to tell you something about deacons. Prophets like Ezekiel usually fore-told something important. Deacons are also called to speak/preach prophetically, not fore-telling, but forth-telling, "making Christ and his redemptive love known, by word and example," speaking and preaching in ways that call listeners out of themselves and into that which GOD has planned for them since before they were born, helping them see something right in front of them they may not be seeing on their own.

OK, now let's put it all together and see how it applies to us, today.

The greedy leaders of [put your word here] were taken as exiles to [some faraway place]. A prophet was called to speak the word of the LORD to the people of the land. At first the message was about the approaching danger of [put your word here], but later it became one of [hmm, how will your messenger's message change over time?] After Jesus was resurrected and the Holy Spirit had come to guide us on earth, another messenger prayed that the people to whom s/he was speaking/writing be granted the wisdom to know and understand fully the hope, inheritance, and power of GOD into which they are called to act. And on the Day of Judgment, the lean sheep will be separated from the goats. Am I always sure which I am on any given day? Can we even imagine a day when we have "the wisdom to know and fully understand the hope, inheritance, and power of GOD?" Won't

that be AWE-SOME!! “.. into which we are called to act” through the awe-some power of GOD!! Gives me chill-bumps just to think about it!!!

The lesson is that the extent to which we take care of the needs of our neighbors – and who are our neighbors? [wait for answers] - especially the needy, is the extent to which we take care of our Shepherd, Jesus our LORD, actions near and dear to my deacon’s heart as I will vow at my ordination next June “in the Name of Jesus Christ and directly under [my] bishop, to serve all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely,” “the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, in prison.” The love of GOD does not exist apart from the love of neighbor; indeed, it is in loving our neighbor that we love GOD. Loving GOD through loving our neighbor is the work of the Kingdom that we have been given to do while we await the return of the Shepherd. And the sheep in this parable give us an example of what a life of vigilance and preparedness looks like: “Whenever you do this for the least of these my brethren, you do it to me.”

Whew! Test over. :)

I have been here at St. Alban’s long enough now to know that this is a place of great love and generosity. I have no doubt that you have served the Shepherd many times “unawares” because taking care of your neighbors is just what you do! I am also sure that hearing about the victims of various kinds of violence breaks your hearts, as it does mine. The good news today is that I am announcing the 2024 Epiphany Service Project *and* its recipient.

The SAFE Children’s Shelter, a subsidiary of The SAFE Alliance, provides shelter for abused and neglected children in Austin and Travis County and has gained the reputation over the past 39 years as one of the best agencies in Texas for providing high quality care for children in crisis.

There are many things going on in our world that we can do little about. Sometimes we don’t see Jesus in need right in front of us; and it’s not our job to sit in judgment; we can’t even be sure sometimes whether we are sheep or goats! But we do know that there are people in every time and place in need. As much as we wish there was no evil in the world in our time, we know it’s there; we feel its urgency. And our job is to decide what to do about what we can do. This is why I think you will agree that the SAFE Children’s Shelter is a perfect recipient for our Epiphany Service Project. Please watch the enews for more information each week.

Psalm 95:1-7

6 Come, let us bow down, and bend the knee, *

and kneel before the LORD our Maker.

7 For he is our GOD,

and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.*

O that today we would harken to his voice!

Amen.