

November 26, 2023
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Christ the King
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“Performance Review”

“I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God.”

One year during my time in the New Jersey Synod, an announcement was sent out by the synod office that the bishop’s staff would be unavailable for one day due to their annual “performance review.” Since one of the assistants to the bishop was a member of my congregation, I asked him the next Sunday if he was looking forward to this event. The reaction on his face made it clear that this was not something that he was anticipating with any degree of eagerness – it was more a look of dread and foreboding than of hopeful waiting. He pulled me aside and whispered that the performance review had been mandated by the Synod Council and could be a most unpleasant experience as the Personnel Committee met with each member of the staff and would often drill them on the previous year’s activities and if they were living up to the expectations in their job descriptions. Even the bishop could expect detailed questions and challenges on specific aspects of the previous year’s performance. While no one had been terminated after a performance review, it was a day no one looked upon with any degree of optimism; the best they could say about it was that they would be glad when the day was over.

While performance reviews may not be high on anyone’s list of favourite things, they are a regular part of the evaluation process of many businesses and professions. According to one business expert, *“a performance review is a formal, regulated assessment mechanism in which managers and other key stakeholders evaluate an employee’s performance. The purpose is to learn more about their strengths and weaknesses, offer constructive feedback for skill development in the future, and assist in goal setting.”* (Aaron Carpenter). While performance reviews can have positive outcomes, leading to pay raises or promotions, they can also be a source of great stress and in some cases may even result in terminations. While it can be helpful to receive feedback about one’s job performance or having a clear understanding of job roles, for most employees the performance review is an ordeal to endure, not an occasion that one anticipates with any degree of enthusiasm. We have no way of knowing if performance reviews existed in the ancient world, but the way in which the Lord reviews the performance of the kings of Judah have some of the elements of modern performance reviews – especially negative reviews

that result in termination of employment. Ezekiel is one of the “major prophets” of the Old Testament, along with Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel. Introduced at the beginning of the book that bears his name as “*the priest Ezekiel son of Buzi*” (1:2), Ezekiel was one of the exiles who was carried to Babylonia in the first captivity “*in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar.*” This is noteworthy, for it was King Nebuchadnezzar’s design to take away the cream of the Judean population, leaving behind only the poorest people (“*He carried away all Jerusalem, all the officials, all the warriors, ten thousand captives, all the artisans and the smiths; no one remained, except the poorest people of the land.*” – 2 Kings 24:14). As a priest, Ezekiel may have belonged to the aristocracy of Jerusalem, descendant of Zadok the High Priest who was installed by Solomon (“*The king put Benaiah son of Jehoiada over the army in his place, and the king put the priest Zadok in the place of Abiathar.*” – 1 Kings 2:35). Ezekiel received his call to prophecy five years after his deportation, c. 593 BC. The date given for his last prophecy was c. 573 BC; his twenty-year career spans the period before and after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. As a prophet to the exile community of which he is a member. Ezekiel addresses the difficult questions about why God would allow God’s people to be removed from Jerusalem and the temple to be destroyed. The prophet’s response is to remind the people of their previous unfaithfulness to the Lord and God’s covenant, and that the exile is the Lord’s just judgment of the people’s unholiness. These unholy actions include contamination of the Lord’s temple and the violence of its rulers and people:

- “Then [the LORD] said to me, ‘Have you seen this, O mortal? Is it not bad enough that the house of Judah commits the abominations done here? Must they fill the land with violence, and provoke my anger still further? See, they are putting the branch to their nose! Therefore I will act in wrath; my eye will not spare, nor will I have pity; and though they cry in my hearing with a loud voice, I will not listen to them.’” – 8:17-18.

While Ezekiel reminds all his fellow exiles that it was because of their sinfulness and evil deeds that they now find themselves exiles from the land of promise, he reserves his harshest criticism for the rulers of the people. The kings of Judah were more than mere political or military leaders of a nation; they were entrusted with being faithful stewards of God’s holy people, the descendants of Abraham through whom “*all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*” (Genesis 12:3). They are the “shepherds” of God’s people, charged with caring for them as a good shepherd lovingly tends their sheep, to the point of laying down their lives for the flock. But the history of the kings of Judah (and of the northern kingdom of Israel that had been conquered by Assyria in 721 BC) was one of a seemingly endless series of kings who were corrupt, incompetent, greedy, evil, and selfish; with few exceptions, the

kings of God's people were bad shepherds. So, in chapter 34, Ezekiel proclaims God's word of judgment against these wicked shepherds who have not lived up to God's expectations for rulers of God's people. This "performance review" marks a genuine turning point in the prophet's ministry; "*henceforth, he will speak frequently of Yahweh's future rescue of Israel, of its restoration to the homeland, and of the conditions that will pertain there*" (Katheryn Pfisterer Darr). The prophet draws upon a rich array of Israel's religious imagery, traditions, and motifs, including that of a king as a shepherd. But instead of presenting the kings as faithful shepherds of the people, Ezekiel proclaims God's judgment upon these false shepherds who have exploited their flocks instead of caring for the sheep of God's pasture:

- "Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fattlings; but you do not feed the sheep ... 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." – 34:2-6.

Considering such a poor performance review, the Lord announces his judgment upon these wicked shepherds who have thought only about themselves while neglecting the welfare of the sheep that the Lord has entrusted to them:

- "Thus says the Lord God: I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them." – 34:10-11.

Having terminated these incompetent shepherds as a result of this terrible performance review, the Lord makes a surprising announcement: instead of replacing the incompetent shepherds with new personnel who will hopefully be more faithful and competent, God announces that the Lord will now take their place as the shepherd of God's people: "*For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.*" (34:11). In contrast to the exploitative and irresponsible bad shepherds of Judah's past, the Lord God of Israel will be the "Good Shepherd" who goes out to seek for sheep that are lost, crippled, or strayed, to restore them to their home pasture. The Lord's tending of the flock "*is the antithesis of the kings' former, irresponsible shepherding*" (Darr). The metaphor of God as shepherd appears frequently in the Old Testament, drawing upon a familiar sight in Judah of shepherds leading their flocks to good pastureland and protecting them from predators:

- “Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us!” – Psalm 80:1-2.
- “He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.” – Isaiah 40:11
- “Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply.” – Jeremiah 23:3.

Following the traditional messenger formula, the Lord speaks with emphatic determination: “*I myself*” (34:11, reminiscent of Jesus’ “I am” (*ego eimi*) statements in John’s Gospel). God will not withdraw from the sheep but will actively search them out and examine them. While “*the previous shepherds’ actions led to exile and catastrophe, now God is needed to repair the calamity*” (Tyler Mayfield). As a shepherd examines his scattered flock when at last they have been found, so the Lord will examine “*my sheep*” after rescuing them from all the places to which they have been scattered “*on a day of clouds and thick darkness*” (34:12). This latter phrase stirs thoughts of God’s appearance before Moses and the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai (... *you approached and stood at the foot of the mountain while the mountain was blazing up to the very heavens, shrouded in dark clouds.*” – Deuteronomy 4:11) as well as the “day of the LORD” motif in the books of prophecy (“*That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness.*” – Zephaniah 1:15). In this context, it refers to the recent destruction of Jerusalem, which Ezekiel understands as the Lord’s just punishment for Israel’s long-lived history of sin.

But while the people of Judah have received God’s punishment for their sinfulness that has resulted in their exile, the Lord’s message proclaimed by Ezekiel is one of salvation, of a good shepherd who will lead them back to the land of promise as the Lord through Moses led the Israelites out of their previous bondage in Egypt back to the land the Lord gave to their ancestor Abraham. In describing God’s future salvific activity, Ezekiel draws upon the vocabulary rooted in Israel’s exodus from Egypt and entrance into Canaan: “*I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land*” (34:13). Under the poor stewardship of the bad shepherds, the flock was scattered and wandered (“*my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them*” – 34:6). Now, under the direct care of the Shepherd God, the Israelites will undertake a new exodus; this Good Shepherd will gather them from out of all peoples and nations. The declaration that “*I myself will*

be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God” (34:15) speaks of rest and security for the flocks that have experienced so much unrest and insecurity at the hands of the faithless shepherds; it is the message of hope that because *“the LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”* (Psalm 23:1-3). The negative statements about the bad shepherds’ neglect of the flock (*“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 over them”* – 34:4) are now recast into positive statements concerning the Lord’s shepherding of the flock: *“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”* (34:16). The Good Shepherd will *“feed them with justice,”* the antithesis of the bad shepherds’ ruling by force and harshness.

- “The people will go from lack of food to the food of justice. After what happened to them under previous leadership, they need just relations and treatment. God will set things right as the new shepherd.” – Mayfield.

In the section that is omitted from today’s lectionary, God pronounces judgment against the strong sheep who physically abuse the weak ones (*“Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of the pasture ... And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?”* – 34:18-19). The Lord pronounces intervention on behalf of the lean sheep who have been victimized by the bullying of the strong sheep, promising that *“I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep”* (34:20). The Good Shepherd will be the one who will *“save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep”* (34:22). Consequently, they will no longer be ravaged; the strong sheep will not continue to bully the weak.

The Lord who promises to be the Good Shepherd over God’s people promises to raise up over them a single human shepherd, *“my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd”* (34:23). Jewish tradition remembered David as Israel’s king *par excellence*, the ruler for whom God established an unconditional, everlasting covenant (*“Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.”* – 2 Samuel 7:16). Ezekiel insists that its only legitimate dynasty will be reinstated in Israel’s future. A future Davidic shepherd will tend God’s flock as did King David of old, God’s shepherd ruler. Unlike Israel’s past shepherds, who helped themselves

to the best of the Lord's flock, this Davidic shepherd will tend the sheep on behalf of their true owner. The people have the assurance that "*I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.*" (34:24), echoing both the traditional Sinai covenant formula along with the echoes of the covenant with David.

- "When Yahweh, the good shepherd, reclaims the sheep, their every need will be met: the flock's fat and abusive members will no longer ravage the other sheep or the environment; the good old days of David's rule will return; the blessings of God's unconditional covenant of peace will make possible life that, if not Edenic, is certainly idyllic." – Darr.

The devastating "performance review" that marked the end of the bad shepherd's reign of incompetence and abuse of their flocks also announces the good news that the people need no longer rely on untrustworthy leaders who rarely had their best interests at heart, for now it is the Lord who will be the Good Shepherd of God's people. On this day when we consider what it means for us that Christ is our "*King of Kings and Lord of Lords,*" we rejoice that our Lord is not a king who rules from on high, filling his subjects with fear and uncertainty. Christ the King is the one who comes to us as the Good Shepherd, the one who seeks out the lost and feeds the hungry, the one who will lay down his life on behalf of the flock entrusted to him. As Ezekiel calls upon his fellow exiles to place their trust in the Lord as their Good Shepherd, we are called in our time to look to our Lord Jesus Christ as our Good Shepherd, the one whose words and deeds prove that he is the true shepherd who will "*lead us in paths of righteousness for God's sake.*" When John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask Jesus "*are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*" (Matthew 11:2), Jesus answers in the form of a performance review, pointing to his deeds as proof of the authenticity of his identity and the fulfillment of his call as God's Anointed One: "*Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them*" (11:4-6). By the performance of his deeds of power and lovingkindness, Jesus proves that he is the one who as Son of David will fulfill God's Will and lead God's people to the land of promise so that as "*surely as goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life ... I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*" (Psalm 23:6).

While the New Jersey Synod staff did not relish dealing with their annual performance review, it proved to be a valuable tool in assessing their faithfulness to their call to serve God's people. As our Lord proves that he is our Good Shepherd by the performance of his deeds, we prove that we are "*the sheep of his pasture*"

when we endeavor to be faithful to our calling to “*serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.*” (ELW Affirmation of Baptism). As we place our trust not in bad shepherds who have only their selfish interests at heart but in our Lord who as Good Shepherd proves his love for us in both word and deed, may we strive to be faithful to our Lord’s call to share this good news of God’s love with others, so that in our performance review it may be said that “*they will know we are Christians by our love.*”

Amen.