"The Flock's Investigation: The Bad Shepherds"
Ezekiel 34:1-10

There are so many voices clamoring for our attention today. We hear warnings about artificial intelligence—reports predicting the end of humanity in just a few short years, quickly met by counter-arguments dismissing the threat entirely. Meanwhile, other voices tell us we must rush forward regardless, driven by the fear that if we don't push technological limits, other nations will surpass us. Who is right? How do we navigate a path forward when fear dictates the narrative?

This impulse to let fear control our response to the unknown plays out in our communities every day.

In Arapahoe, Wyoming, a local pastor publicly condemned the traditional Native American Sundance ceremony, calling it idol worship. Shaped by a rigid, exclusive theology, she labeled an entire culture's sacred heritage as false. When the local indigenous community voiced their pain and pushed back, she framed their response as "persecution."

Similarly, on a September 11 anniversary, a woman shared her dismay with me that New York City had elected a Muslim mayor years after the 9/11 attacks. She insisted that "we have to defeat Islam, especially in Iran, because all they want to do is kill us"—concluding with the tragic logic that we must destroy others before they destroy us.

These situations reveal a deep spiritual issue: **the illusion of human separateness**.

When we forget our fundamental connection to God and to one another, we fall prey to cruelty, injustice, manipulation, and indifference.

We see this pattern reflected even in popular culture. In the film *The Sheep Detectives*, fear of scarcity drives human behavior. Rather than caring for the flock after the murder of their shepherd, several characters view the sheep merely as commodities to exploit. Driven by self-preservation, figures like the shady former partner Caleb Merrow, the butcher Ham, and local self-serving leaders put their anxieties ahead of the community's well-being.

In contrast stands George, the good shepherd. Though possessed of material wealth, George does not allow money or fear to dictate his decisions. Instead, his wealth becomes a conduit for love, care, and protection.

The myth of scarcity has cast a long shadow over human history. We continue to carry primitive survival instincts into our everyday lives, acting out of self-interest as if generosity and sharing would mean our own annihilation.

This self-serving posture is precisely what God confronts in the Scriptures. In Ezekiel 34, the prophet issues a stern warning to leaders who manipulate and exploit others for personal gain.

To understand this warning, we have to look back at Ezekiel 33. Jerusalem had fallen, the temple was destroyed, and the people felt entirely hopeless. The prophet was not simply placing blame; he was calling the nation to sobering self-reflection. **Injustice leads to self-destruction.** We cannot mistreat or neglect our neighbors and expect our society to flourish.

The destruction of Jerusalem was not a sudden catastrophe—it was the natural consequence of internal spiritual decay. Ancient Israel was called to be a community grounded in justice, mercy, and mutual care. Yet over time, fear of scarcity took root. They abandoned their calling, becoming indistinguishable from the nations around them as their leaders focused solely on power and profit.

Ezekiel describes God's response in 34:1-10:

"The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel... 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 fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep.

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. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd...

Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: ... I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep... I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them." — God intervenes because the earthly leaders failed in their responsibility. As biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann notes: "Shepherd had long been a figure for 'king,' suggesting a regal responsibility for the royal subjects who are as vulnerable as sheep. In the prophetic oracle, Ezekiel begins with a condemnation of 'the shepherds' who have been negligent in their duty and have only engaged in self-serving indulgence."

When we lose sight of the Good Shepherd, we succumb to fear. Today, many voices claiming the name of Christ preach exclusion rather than grace. They divide the world neatly into "us" against "them," using judgment to maintain their own sense of purity. But beneath this posture is fear: fear of the stranger, fear of the world, and a misapprehension of God's nature.

We are invited into a very different story—the unfolding narrative of God's unconditional love. We are called to anchor our lives in that love and let it measure our actions.

Leaving the comfort zone of cultural fear requires courage. In the movie, *The Sheep Detectives,* two sheep who have spent their entire lives in the safe pasture step out to cross a road for the first time. To an outsider, crossing a road seems trivial; to them, it takes every ounce of bravery to step off the grass and navigate the unknown: https://youtu.be/aXPlhiV_url.

We, too, are called to step off the familiar grass of our biases, fears, and defensive posture.

Meditation & Reflection: Matthew 25:31–40
This brings us to the gospel context of Matthew 25:31–40, where Jesus offers a clear vision of what it means to follow the Good Shepherd:

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats...

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'"

In Ezekiel, God rebukes the leaders for ignoring the weak, the sick, the injured, and the lost. In Matthew 25, Jesus reveals where God is to be found: not in systems of exclusion or self-preservation, but in the vulnerable.

The judgment described here is not based on theoretical correctness, political power, or defensive isolation. It turns entirely on how we treat the neighbor in need. When fear tells us to guard our resources, build walls, or view the stranger as a threat, Matthew 25 reminds us that every act of compassion shown to "the least of these" is offered directly to Christ.

The voices of our world will continue to demand our attention, urging us to choose anxiety over generosity and division over community. But the gospel invites us to step out of the pasture of our fears. When we feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, and protect the vulnerable, we participate in God's love—discovering that in a world ruled by the myth of scarcity, God's grace remains abundantly sufficient.

A Guided Meditation

Let us take a deep breath together. Close your eyes if you feel comfortable doing so, and let go of the noisy voices of fear, division, and scarcity that have followed you into this room. Let your heart settle into the quiet presence of God.

Imagine standing before the Good Shepherd.

Notice how Christ looks at you—not with judgment or fear, but with unconditional love. Breathe in that love. Allow it to fill the places inside you that feel anxious or defensive.

Now, listen gently as the Lord speaks these words to your heart:

"I was hungry and you gave me food..."

Pause. Bring to mind someone in your life or community who is hungering—for bread, for dignity, or for connection. See their face clearly. Recognize that Christ is present in them.

"I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink..."

Consider those whose spirits are parched, dried out by hardship or isolation. Imagine reaching out to offer a cup of grace, comfort, or simple kindness.

"I was a stranger and you welcomed me..."

Think of the people you have been taught to fear or avoid—the ones across cultural, political, or religious divides. Imagine opening your heart, pulling back the barrier, and pulling up a chair for them.

"I was naked and you gave me clothing... I was sick and you took care of me... I was in prison and you visited me..."

Bring to mind those who feel exposed, broken, or trapped by circumstances beyond their control. Picture stepping past your own discomfort to sit beside them in their pain.

Silently ask God: "Lord, where are you calling me to step off the grass? Where are you calling me to meet you in 'the least of these'?" Amen.