"The Last Word"
Sermon for December 27, 2015
Text: Ezekiel 34

Over the past few weeks, a passage in Ezekiel has been haunting me and it has to do with leadership, biblical leadership. It came up in jail when we talked about what makes a man godly. It came up in reflecting on Proverbs 31. Godly men avoid evil (drunkenness, fornication, lewd talk, coarse jesting) and take on speaking up for others: first for the mute (who cannot), for anyone limited or impaired, handicapped, mentally or physically, in the course of this life—especially advocate the weak, elderly, the poor or oppressed, the hungry, or naked, homeless or in jail. *It would be fair to say that the cause of justice is never in danger when there are real, godly men around!* Safety, liberty, protection and opportunity all thrive where men are men and as men play their role in private and public life <u>whether they are single or married</u>.

Be that as it may, Ezekiel takes this concern for manly leadership a step further. He speaks to the shepherds, the ruler, governors, magistrates and kings! We have a word for that cluster of persons; they are the leaders, *the establishment.* If the establishment is filled with good and godly persons, everyone in the nation is blessed. And if the contrary circumstance is upon us, the righteous languish; everyone suffers. So, it is well that we close out this year thinking about these things, about the biblical standards for leadership. We are in an presidential electoral year. And things are widely perceived to not be well with the establishment—not well with either party establishment and not well with the governmental establishment and not well with the regulatory establishment that we have saddled ourselves with. (Yes, in spite of believing that we are a democratic republic we have arrived at the point where regulatory agencies are making, imposing and creating the "laws" that govern much of our national life.) There is widespread corruption and, when it comes to reform, massive inertia—resistance, bureaucratic stonewalling. Special interests appear to have dislodged the citizenry—way too much gets addressed in Washington and way too few are involved in shaping the outcomes.

Does America have a privileged class? Does our president take a 3.7 million dollar annual vacation to Hawaii while the grief-stricken folks of San Bernadino are hanging up their coats from the unanticipated funerals of their loved ones—the most recent terror victims to date? Coal companies, their owners and workers are, over the same vacation looking at loss of jobs for the sake of a global cause that Americans will shoulder the cost—beginning with them. Maybe a leader who cared would forgo the 3.7 million vacation and put those taxpayer dollars to work helping this worker transition to a new trade? I am not sure that our President doesn't deserve a break; but I am persuaded that an exorbitant vacation like this is arrogant, ostentatious and selfish! What if he had to go on <u>gofundme.com</u> and raise his own money for a family vacation *like most other Americans*?

Maybe that same amount could be restored to the Social Security Fund that was just raided again (the latest budget bill—again too humongous to be read carefully in two months(!) and, you guessed, passed unread)depleted by another

150 billion! It is no wonder that Social Security is projected to tank—a spend-thrift federal government, aided and abetted by a spineless Congress misappropriated the hard-earned and taxed investments of retiring Americans. There was no rider addressing repayment of this lawless loan. I could go on . . . but you catch my drift. *What you may not have known, until you heard this morning's reading, is that God confronted the exact same nonsense through His prophet Ezekiel in 6th century (593) BC Israel.* Now, to be clear, the Israel in view here is the former Northern Kingdom which the ten tribes occupied. The remaining two tribes made up the Southern Kingdom. The former had been carried off by the Assyrians (721), and the latter would follow suit (597, 124 years later) when they would be exiled by the Babylonians. Both of these captivities were judgments of God on the false shepherds, the corrupt establishments of leaders from whom God clearly expected better! Ezekiel had seen it all before which made the fate of Judah all the more pointless.

Here's what's chilling: neither the leaders of the Northern Kingdom, nor the leaders of the Southern Kingdom were willing to repent of their sinful ways. They would rather the whole country be destroyed than to repent of self-serving, corrupt and oppressive ways. They would have their own and the rest be damned. They would sail away with their ill-gotten gain, stolen wealth to their luxury get-aways on some Mediterranean island (or Hawaiian island, perhaps). The elite may escape the exile, *but they will not elude the scrutiny of, or judgments of God.*

Here's the fourfold indictment. 1. The leadership practiced religious abuse. They took for themselves the best parts of the peoples' sacrifices (even those parts prescribed for the priests and Levites). And, before the sheep were placed in the fire (as required by a whole offering) the best of them would be sheared, or fleeced and that part of the sacrifice was also siphoned off so that the powerful could dress themselves in that wool. *In brief, they were working the sacrificial system for personal gain. They were greedy to exploit the offerings, even to* <u>*robbing God.*</u> What the penitent brought for God, to pay for atonement *as required by law* never got to the intended beneficiary. This is a diversion of wealth as well as theft. ***God neither missed this, nor found it amusing.*** In Jesus' day similar practices had been re-instituted with the improvement that penitents couldn't bring their own animals but had to buy them in Jerusalem, paying in temple currency, inflated and hefty prices. The Sadducees not only controlled the market they profited off the taxes of the poor and pious. (They didn't believe in all that God-stuff—too bright for that!—but the temple was profitable. And they did believe in making money—to be clear, I am indicting the leaders of a particular group at a particular time and place.) 2. Rather than look after the well-being of the people, they oppressed them; they neglected justice, took advantage of people in court, threw they weight around because they could! Because they were influential, rich, famous, had social standing; they were the people that count (like the elite in academia, in the entertainment industry, in Washington). They did not lead self-sacrificially and God called it "slaughter." 3. The leadership did not protect the community, they neglected public safety. When people were harmed, harassed by government regulations or interest groups that wanted their land, their place, their wealth, *the wicked leadership lets it happen*! Or worse, they join in. So the people were scattered. Some of these people are the homeless.

The urban poor, parentless children, the victims of drug use and abuse . . .ignorant, illiterate, aliens. And no one sought them out to be a blessing; no one gathered them in. They were too busy increasing the helpings on their social plates! They weren't racist, just equal opportunity exploiters of any poor, weak or vulnerable. 4. The leadership didn't protect the people from foreign enemies. They neglected the garrisons, failed to raise troops and would not defend the boundaries. So violent men pillages from with and raiders crossed the border to have their way, and help themselves to whomever, and whatever they wanted. If this sounds familiar, don't be surprised. *For this is what happens where men refuse to be men, and when leaders fail to lead!*

I've discussed what godly leadership is and what it isn't. God has promised four things: He will oppose these false shepherds, treacherous leaders; He will hold them accountable for wickedness; He will remove them from leadership and He will personally appear and rescue, heal and shepherd in their stead. He will do tis through His Son. The Son will gather, not scatter. He will call them to Himself and, because they trust Him, they will come. He will provide for them a place, streams of pure (and unpolluted waters), fertile land and bounty and rest. The people of Israel will remember the grant of a grateful Pharaoh who settled Joseph and his people in the best land of Egypt, even Goshen. God will not only destroy the fat, strong tyrants and His judgment will reach from top to bottom. Even sheep who butt, bully and tyrannize their neighbors will be stayed from harming further. God will deal with the internal threat as well as the external one. Peace will reign and strife will be exiled. There will be no famine, and the insults and abuse will stop. God will take up residence in their midst from whence He will be their God.