

Lamb and shepherd (Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Matthew 25:31-46)

I once cared for a sick and vulnerable lamb.

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When I was in elementary school my family kept a lamb as a pet. Inside the house. For reasons that are probably obvious, we named the lamb Puddles.

Puddles came to us because she was sick. In technical terms, she suffered from "failure to thrive." I don't recall the reason. It could have been that her siblings hogged all the food. Or perhaps she was ill from a parasite. Or she was simply too weak and muddled to flourish.

In any case, the rancher to whom she belonged knew that the lamb needed extra attention. So he asked us to take care of her for a while.

My father handled Puddles' veterinary needs. For our part, we children doted on her. We piled blankets in the corner of the room to give her a soft place to sleep. We nursed her from a bottle until she was able to eat on her own.

As Puddles grew stronger and more mobile, we followed her around the house and yard. Everywhere that Puddles went, we were sure to go. We claimed to be keeping her out of trouble, but in truth we simply wanted to be with her. Through caring for her, we had grown to love her. Or maybe it was the other way around: we loved her, and so we wanted to care for and be with her. In any case, within a couple of weeks Puddles was strong enough to rejoin the other sheep back at the ranch.

Beyond our short stint as Puddles' family, I know almost nothing about sheep. But that brief experience of caring for a sick and vulnerable lamb puts flesh onto the words of the prophet Ezekiel.

Ezekiel reveals God's intention to rescue God's own. Earthly rulers—against whom Ezekiel speaks prior to the assigned passage—are like bad shepherds who do not care for their sheep. They look out only for their own benefit. They seek wealth for themselves, and rule with force and harshness (34:4).

In contrast, God is a good shepherd: "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."

Even people who have never laid eyes on a sheep can hear the comfort in Ezekiel's words. Spoken to a people in exile, his prophecy weaves a tapestry of compassion and care, a pastoral image of security for all who suffer from weakness, hunger, exile, or abandonment. There is hope, Ezekiel says. Hold on.

They will be God's sheep and God will be their shepherd.

The message is clear. God does not abandon God's people. Or, as Jesus says elsewhere, *I am with you always*.

Ezekiel's prophetic tapestry hangs as a backdrop for Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats. In a scene from the heavenly throne room, all the nations are gathered before the Son of Humanity, who separates them as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. This is the work of the good shepherd, the same one known to Ezekiel. He has sought out the lost, brought back the strayed, bound up the injured, and strengthened the weak.

As for those who have been loved by the shepherd, have they shown themselves to be his people by doing the same for others?