

This transcript was exported on Nov 18, 2023.

Music: <introductory music>

Rebecca: Hello and welcome to Mind the Gap, a commentary podcast about all those verses that get left out of the readings in the Revised Common Lectionary. I am one of your hosts, Becca. My pronouns are she/her. I'm a Lutheran pastor in Michigan, and I've been serving in parish ministry for five years.

Annemarie: And I'm your other host, Annemarie. My pronouns are she/her. I'm a Lutheran pastor in New Jersey, and I've been serving in parish ministry in the ELCA for 15 years.

Rebecca: You know how the lectionary pericopes occasionally skip over a handful of verses in the middle of a passage? We are putting those pieces back into the readings so that we can hear them in their entirety and give ourselves a chance to explore what they mean altogether...

Annemarie: ...how the exclusion of those verses does or doesn't change things, and what (if any) wisdom we can gain for our preaching by minding that gap.

Music: <introductory music>

Rebecca: Before we continue with the rest of the episode, we want to say thank you to everyone who has supported us on our Ko-Fi and Patreon platforms. That's Lee and Kim, Weta, David, Jennifer, Jerry, Melissa, and Liz. Thank you so much for all of the support you've given us and all the things that you make possible. Annemarie, it's been a week, but here we are. What's on your mind?

Annemarie: Today, I am giving thanks for the ways in which we are connected to one another through generations. Tim and I, my husband and I have been watching Finding Your Roots on PBS TV with Henry Louis Gates Jr. And the fun celebrities that he explores the past with and tries to give them some answers as to who their ancestors are and how those relationships they've had with their parents or the people that they're connected to might give them a clearer picture of who they are. And what's interesting about watching that show is the ways in which people discover that assumptions they might have made about their own heritage are wrong. And that the reality of the ways in which the decisions of our ancestors have affected us and our bloodlines and the ways that all looks has impact and watching that happen kind of live on someone's face as they discover this about their ancestors.

But it reminded me while watching this, it always reminds me of when we talk about the generations of people in scripture and the ways in which we talk about generation after generation of those that are either suffering because of where they come from and how they've been oppressed by other groups or the ways they've had hope through those generations because of what God has been promising them. But that sometimes I think it feels other to us when we read it in scripture like it happens to somebody else and we don't necessarily understand that we have generations behind us as well. And so it was just one of those kind of visceral reminders of the ways that we can actually trace back what those generations were, learn from that history beyond just in history books and appreciate not only where we are now, but what we can teach and learn from those generations before. Yeah, I wish he did regular people like me so I could sit with Henry

Louis Gates and get a book of my life and a big old map of my genealogy. But yeah, that's what's been on my mind a little bit recently. Rebecca, what is on your mind?

Rebecca: Well kind of connected to that, just the fact that I have been recording the pod in a public library for a while. What you were talking about made me think of that. And it's something I'm doing while I'm still in between housing situations and I am renting a room in a shared Airbnb, so I don't have a lot of privacy or quiet there. And I've been scheduling and reserving a private study room at our public library. So I just am myself giving thanks for those resources, for the fact that it's a space available to me and to just the whole public. I mean, this is a place that really exists for us that we don't have to pay money to sit in and use. You go to a cafe or something to do work and you're expected to patronize it in a financial way and everything else. And libraries are just so cool and librarians are just so awesome. So I am grateful for them.

Annemarie: That's awesome.

Rebecca: And that's how I get to look at Jerome along with you because there's a Jerome copy here. This is our episode for the texts on Christ the King Sunday, also known as Reign of Christ Sunday, also known as The Sovereignty of Christ Sunday. And let's go get started.

Annemarie: I would say also known as the final Sunday of the church year.

Rebecca: Final Sunday! New Year's Eve in its own way.

Music: <piano music>

Annemarie: The first reading for Christ the King Sunday in Year A is Ezekiel 34:11-16, and 20-24...

Rebecca: ...meaning the gap we are exploring is Ezekiel 34:17-19. I will be reading the assigned verses...

Annemarie: ...and I will be reading the verses that are left out of the lectionary.

Rebecca: <sup>11</sup>For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. <sup>12</sup>As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. <sup>15</sup>I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. <sup>16</sup>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.

Annemarie: <sup>17</sup>As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats: <sup>18</sup>Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water,

must you foul the rest with your feet? <sup>19</sup>And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?

Rebecca: <sup>20</sup>Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. <sup>21</sup>Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, <sup>22</sup>I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. <sup>23</sup>I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. <sup>24</sup>And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken.

Music: <piano music>

Rebecca: Let's give thanks for the lay people that will end up reading this because it's not an easy one to wrap your tongue around.

Annemarie: Nope. So let's just name that the gospel text for this day for Christ the King in year A is the final parable from Matthew about the sheep and the goats. So the Jesus talking about separating the sheep from the goats. And so one of the reasons we have this text from Ezekiel with that is to match that same language of separating the fat sheep and the lean sheep. This judgment piece, right? There's this sense of justice. And so this gap that we have is just the three verses that really give us a glimpse into why these sheep are what the actual crimes they have committed were. And so this is in my mind, these three verses. You could leave them in or pull them out, and I think you still get the idea of what the text is saying, but you get this real image of God kind of pulling them aside and saying, what is it about you that is making you be this mean and petty, right?

I'm giving you all of this land for pasture and instead of just taking it and moving all along, you have to trample it all down with your hooves why. And throughout this text you have this reminder of this is God's voice. You have this reminder of the thus says the Lord. And at the end, the Lord have spoken, Ezekiel is being really clear that this is not Ezekiel's word, this is God's word. And in all of this you need to hear the judgment and even the justice for those who have been trampled, those who have been pushed aside, those who have been told they are not welcome. But the context of having it alongside this Matthew passage, I think helps. I think it helps bring out a really tough text from Matthew that I think is hard for preachers to wrap their minds around sometimes.

Rebecca: I actually feel like the gap expands on that in a way that you don't get very much of if you take it out. You do have a little bit in verse 21 of the point of this all being because of how the sheep are treating each other right? Because you pushed with flank and shoulder and butted at the weak animals, you scattered them and so on. But the gap in 17, 18 and 19 is the only other expansion of that. I feel like most of what we get is talking about what God has done for the sheep in providing the plenty and the goodness and everything. And the gap is really the meat of the part where we have to face how we have contributed to the suffering, the hardship, the injustice and everything that at the root of it all, this is about how we treat each other. Because those contexts or those situations or the fact that some sheep have more than other sheep isn't just, oh, that's how it goes. No, it's been created and built up because of the way they behave among one another. And I do feel like that gets lost when you take the gap out here.

Annemarie: I agree. I agree. I think that, again, it's only three verses, so I don't see why you take out this text when it really does enumerate even more clearly, not only what Ezekiel is saying, but what Jesus is saying in Matthew as well. And I think it also helps see the clearness of God's justice, what God's justice looks like as opposed to what our justice looks like because our justice is that of the sheep of the bullies and the pushing shoulders and that capitalistic, the biggest person gets the best or the one with the most toys wins. And I don't care about anyone else. I just care about myself. I mean, that's a very relatable mindset I think for us, or at least it's a relatable mindset that we can see in others. We have a harder time seeing it in ourselves. And so I think that what Ezekiel is doing here is really not only naming a day of judgment, a time of judgment, but also naming this new way of God's interaction with God's people. And at this time at Christ the King, we're on the verge of a new year where we've talked before about how we're really already in advent.

There's lots of reasons why we can already talk about the ways in which advent prepares us, or at least demands us we stay awake, that we are more wide-eyed about the kinds of justice that God is seeking among God's people. And the mention of David again here, I think does that gives us a little bit of a glimpse of that too. Because what happens here, so David is already dead by the time this happens, this is not about raising David from the dead. This is about bringing about the line about. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, this is in verse 23, and he shall feed them, he shall feed them and be their shepherd. This is about the line of David. It's not necessarily about David himself. And this is actually a bit of a demotion for David. This is God saying, I'm going to be the one who makes the covenant and the line of David will be the ones who are the princes who are moving things along according to what my covenant is with my people. We have this connection to what we are looking forward to when we get to advent. And this already but not yet kind of moment with the line of David, but we also have the reconciling of what the world tells us is important versus what God tells us is important.

Rebecca: And I think there's an interesting tension for us to hold here looking not just past Advent, but even to Christmas when we have the story of the shepherds themselves coming to visit the Christ child. And we speak so often at that point about the lowliness of the shepherds and what it meant for them to receive the angelic host and the message to visit this newborn king. And yet we have this theme in scripture of shepherd being an image of God and being a royal image that complication. And like you were saying, that question of what do we look at as a vision of how life is meant to be lived in a way that honors God's intentions for us and for God's creation. I think that if you want to do a little looking ahead, I think there's room in this for that just leading into the season thematically, it confronts us with those pieces of how we fall short again, of the way we treat one another and how even though we know God's abundance has been given to us, God's grace has been given to us, mercy and forgiveness and everything else, we still struggle to live like that's true and to share it with one another and to offer one another the same that has first been given to us.

I tried to spend a little bit of time kind of thinking about, I liked what you said about we have trouble thinking about that for ourselves also, I kind of heard in those gap verses where it says, is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you have to tread down with your feet the rest of the pasture. Is it not enough to have the abundance? You have to spoil it for the others too. I kind of even heard shades of arguments about

things like student loans that I just really struggle with hearing people who have been able to pay them off or who didn't have them because they worked or got scholarships or financial aid being faced with this conversation about what it would mean to forgive all that debt. And I hear a modern echo of those verses would be something like, is it not enough for you to pay off your student loans? You have to make sure that others drown in debt for decades too. Just trying to put it in a setting that makes sense for us. I think if we spend some time with it, we can find ways to write our own parable if we want to use the parable language again, how do we throw this alongside our own experiences?

Annemarie: I think that's really powerful and I think that that's right on when we're trying to consider that the kinds of economic justice that so many are crying out for and that others think is just not fair because they didn't have that same struggle. They can't relate to what it's like to have student debt the way that we do. And at the same time, you couldn't not have student debt because in order to get a job that would give you a livelihood that would allow you to succeed and move forward in the world, you had to get a degree to do it. So many times when you think about previous generations and we give such great thanks for those who took a risk, who came to a new country with not a lot in their pocket, we honor and lift those kinds of stories up as something to aspire to. And when you have the later generations living in a world that now has way more people in it and the dynamics of our economic system are a lot different than they were, but then the struggle when we see others struggle for it, we can't, can't equate that with what we were appreciating about the previous generations.

Rebecca: I wonder if there's even a conversation to be had about the fact that in these texts, and we can start with the Ezekiel, but even go into the Matthew, so often there's pushback about bringing politics or economics into church or using examples that are going to be seen as political or any of this. But it seems to me like for an agrarian society that this Ezekiel text would've come out of, this is a policy discussion almost! Or it's using the economics and the real nitty gritty of life to make the point it's making. Like talking about a shepherd, culling the flock or judging between sheep, that's as policy-driven as you get for a lot of people's lives. Or if we look at the Matthew with what's essentially a courtroom scene—if Jesus can use parables set in a courtroom or if scripture stories can take place in a courtroom, why can't we talk about the justice system now? At what point did it become too political? Because here it is in scripture and no, that's not the same as saying vote yes or no on this or vote for this candidate and not that candidate or anything. But if those realms of our life were important enough at the time to show up in scripture, they have to still be important enough to talk about in faith-based settings and among faith-based communities.

Annemarie: I totally agree, and I think you are exactly right about Ezekiel. As I go back to Jerome, my buddy—

Rebecca: Oh, our buddy Jerome!

Annemarie: —Our buddy Jerome, they discuss how, so if you go just one verse ahead, so verse 10, this pericope starts at verse 11, but in verse 10 it says that the verse 10 condemns leadership that preys on those they are leading, that there's this very political, that's the condemnation that's happening here, right? These shepherds that are actually shepherding and they're shepherding the sheep right into the river, right into their own demise, and they're preying upon those, they are called to lead. And so this is a really,

the allegory here between the sheep and what God is going to do to the sheep really is about the leaders and what God is going to do to bring God's people back together. And so I think that this is one of those moments where preachers shouldn't be political is what I hear all the time. And I want to say, I don't know how not scripture, I don't know if I think we need to broaden our understanding of what the word politics means, but that scripture is almost always political and that it deals with relationships between groups of people or even just individuals.

Ezekiel is speaking into a moment here. He's speaking into a situation that needs God's word. We have continual reminders from prophets that are even more modern than this, reminding us what God asks and demands of us for the sake of our neighbor, for the sake of our relationship with God, and that our God has already done for us the thing we can't do for ourselves, that thing we can't do, which is to save ourselves from ourselves, our God, our shepherd is the one who doesn't lead us into death, but leads us into life. So that if God is going to lead us into life, surely there'll be enough life for everybody.

Music: <outro music>

Rebecca: Thank you so much for listening to our conversation this week. We hope that by minding the gap, you heard something that gave you a new insight, appreciation, or question about scripture.

Annemarie: Now, your job is to find us @MindtheGapRCL on Instagram. Visit our website, [mindthegaprcl.com](http://mindthegaprcl.com), and if you really love us, support us using Ko-fi or Patreon. Share us with all your friends and colleagues.

Rebecca: Blessings on your preaching friends. And may the word of God dwell in you richly.

Music: <outro music>