

WGUMC November 26, 2017 "Grace Actually"  
Ezekiel 34:1-6, 10, 15-16 and Ephesians 1:15-23

I was looking for some good news to read while spending Thanksgiving with my sister's family in Homewood. On the Huffington Post site there is a good news section, but all I could find were stories about dogs and cats. I guess they are better people than most people. What is wrong with the humans if we have to look to our pets to lift up our spirits at the end of a hard year?

That being said, the lectionary reading from Ezekiel seems especially timely this year when it seems as if the world is being run by a pack of wolves that prey on the sheep, and we are longing for a Good Shepherd. But if we think things are unusually bad now, Ezekiel reminds us that it's always been this way.

In our reading today, Ezekiel was complaining about the rulers of Israel because they were being lousy shepherds. They were not strengthening the weak; they were not healing the

sick; they were not taking care of the injured; they did not bring back the strayed nor did they seek out the lost. They were not feeding the sheep. As a matter of fact, they were feeding on the sheep. Sounds like a lot of world leaders today.

Luckily, there aren't any wolves in Tahoe. But there are plenty of coyotes. I'm always mindful of that when I go out running with the dogs. On Thursday morning, we were on the Rubicon Trail when all of a sudden, I heard a big commotion. The dogs had flushed out a stray rooster. Daisy, the yellow lab, had gotten a mouth full of tail feathers before I could intervene. I started shouting and tried to get between the rooster and the circling dogs. I managed to swoop up the chicken and hold it aloft while I yelled at the dogs to back off. Then I realized that I would have to set the rooster down in order to grab the dogs and get them home. Rooster rescued, but out there in coyote country, I knew it was not safe for long!

When my sister and I returned with the car, we went hunting for the bird and just about gave up when he walked right out on the road. Again, we managed to corner and catch him, put him in the car and deposit him in the garage with some bird seed until the next day when we delivered him to the Tahoe Humane Society.

With a keen sense of irony, we fed the chicken, after which, we ate the turkey. Later, we sat down to watch the ultimate feel-good movie, "Love Actually." I had seen it before, but this year, I listened wistfully to the opening words spoken by Hugh Grant, as the British Prime Minister:

*Whenever I get gloomy with the state of the world, I think about the arrivals at Heathrow Airport. General opinion's starting to make out that we live in a world of hatred and greed, but I don't see that. It seems to me that love is everywhere. Often, it's not particularly dignified or newsworthy, but it's always there—fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives, boyfriends, girlfriends, old friends. Then the planes hit the Twin Towers, as far as I know, none of the phone calls from the people on board were messages of hate or revenge—they*

*were all messages of love. If you look for it, I've got a sneaky feeling you'll find that love actually is all around.*

Can you think of a message that we need more this year?

As Lisa reminded us last week, in a lot of ways and for a lot of people, it's been a really horrible year. It has often felt like we are sheep without a shepherd or roosters crossing the Rubicon and we aren't sure what to do.

We could conclude that there isn't anything we can do about the wolves or the coyotes or the bad shepherds. We are the prey and it's fight or flight. In that case, all we can do is try to survive. But if that were true, who would want to?

On the other hand, we could comfort ourselves by saying that God is in charge. God will get rid of the bad shepherds and scare off the wolves and coyotes. All we have to do is sit and wait. God will fix everything. That sounds better, except that what we know about God from the Bible is that God usually uses people to get things done.

In fact, when God wanted to tackle the biggest problem of all, our sin and separation from God, God came to us as a human, lived and died for us as a Galilean. Because God prefers to use people to solve people problems, we can't just sit this out. We are part of the problem and so we must be part of the solution.

This is a third option where God is a good manager and delegates most of the work to us. If that seems too scary, we have to realize that God doesn't command us to do what God doesn't give us the grace to do.

The letter to the Christians in Ephesus reminds us of all the grace that God has given us to shepherd the world. First off, the author notes two gifts: their faith in the Lord Jesus and their love for each other. He rejoices because they are keeping the two great commandments: to love God and to love their neighbor. If they get this right, everything else falls into

place. All they need is a spirit of wisdom and revelation so that they can see it for themselves.

Once the eyes of their heart are enlightened, they will discover even more grace, grace that fills their past, present and future. The first of these gifts is "the hope to which God has called you." For people of faith, hope is a belief in a future that is better than the present. And this anticipation of blessing is what gives us a reason for living. You could say that hope is the shape of heaven that gives shape to our lives here on earth.

Hope is what Jodi and Mangala were called to when they got married almost a year ago, even though Mangala's immigration status was very uncertain. Now they are waiting for his son to be granted a visa to come to the United States. Whether he arrives by Christmas or they have to wait until next year, they give thanks for a blessing that is coming.

The second gift that the author mentions is "the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints." In the Bible, that inheritance is a promise made in the past to Abraham, to the prophets, to the disciples of Jesus that is now passed on to us: that God will make a home for us and with us, that we will be sons and daughters of God and members of God's family forever.

I give thanks that we made a commitment to extend that promise made to us with the LGBT community this year. Even though the promise was made deep in our past, it is still coming to us, and it won't be fully revealed until it is fully shared, until we see every person on the planet as a son or daughter of God, as a sister or brother in Christ.

So we have a hope about the future. We have an inheritance from the past. But we also have a gift that comes to us in the present. The third gift of grace Ephesians talks about is the immeasurable greatness of God's power for those

who believe. God put that power to work in Jesus Christ, raising him from the grave, giving him victory over death, and putting him in a place that is far above any princes or presidents or prime ministers.

In this day and age, we need to be reminded of that power. If we could only remember that Jesus is the Good Shepherd, we would not have to fear the bad shepherds. Whatever trouble they are causing, whatever evil there are doing, they will not prevail. Whatever pain we are having, whatever problem we are facing, whatever anxiety we are feeling, it will not last, because love wins in the end. And we can live like we believe it in the present moment because the same power that is at work in Christ is at work in those who love Christ. It is the power of love; it is called grace.

When I got home from Tahoe last night, I got the message that Janett Merrell had gone to the ER and probably didn't have much time left. I got back in the car and headed to



the hospital. It is such a sacred privilege to be with a believer who is ready to die because everything gets quiet and soft and you have a sense that they are already living in eternity. I went home with this picture in my head of one of Janett's daughters praying with her mother, professing her love and asking for her forgiveness, and I was thinking about how grace actually fills every moment of our life, including our death. If "Grace Actually" were a movie, this is how it might begin:

We glance back at this year and wonder: where is the grace? Where is the kindness? Where is the decency? Where is the mercy? Where is humility? And what is wrong with humanity? But then we take a better look around and it isn't hard to see. Grace is everywhere. You won't read about it in the newspapers, but it's there, in a million small things and some big things, too. The truth is that every single day we are being rescued. Every single day someone is dying to one life and being reborn in another. Just go to a hospital. Go to a homeless shelter. Go to the bathroom and look in the mirror. In every single moment, we are upheld by grace. And when things fall apart, grace is what glues us back together. So all the bad news this year has given God all the more opportunities to give us the good news and it has made us all the more ready to hear it and to share it. Despite all appearances, grace actually is all around us.

