

Ezekiel 34:11-24  
November 23, 2008

South Plains  
Christ the King Sunday

### Our Need and Our Hope

As I prepared for Christ the King Sunday, I realized again how much of scripture, especially the Old Testament, is addressed to the need for good government. We find this theme in the giving of the law, in the prophetic writings, and in the psalms. So, I decided to write an open letter to our President-Elect based on Ezekiel 34.

### An Open Letter to President-Elect Obama

Dear Brother Obama:

I write to assure you of our prayers as Christian brothers and sisters. Although I am certain you are getting plenty of advice and prayers from religious groups of all sorts, I thought you would like to know about Presbyterian prayers on your behalf for the needs and hopes of our nation. Presbyterians stand in a long line of people who pray for national leaders, a tradition that goes back at least to the psalms and the prophets.

First of all and especially this week, we will offer prayers of thanksgiving. Although some give thanks for your election and others do not, we thank God today for the United States of America, a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. We are

blessed with a government of laws. We voted for a president and for lawmakers at the beginning of this month. Many races were strongly contested and a few are still not decided. And yet, the candidates are accepting the will of the voters. You and John McCain have set a tone of cordiality. We look forward to a peaceful transition of power. The changes that some anticipate eagerly and some anticipate with dread are nevertheless changes that will be implemented according to the rule of law. We're very thankful that we live in the United States.

Second, we pray that the United States will reflect the Christian values that we share with other great religions of the world. The Bible does not tell us what form of government is best. However, because we Presbyterians insist that we have a biblical text for our faith convictions, I am looking for help today at a chapter from the book of Ezekiel where the prophet reminds the people and their leaders of the ideals of a good government. Scripture for the most part assumes there will be either a king or an emperor, so the language is couched in terms of what God expects of Israel's king. God expects the king to be a good shepherd. At its best, a government cares for its people the way a shepherd cares for a flock of sheep.

Ezekiel does not attempt to write a constitution. Instead he paints a picture, an image of the ideal king that is based on a way of describing God's own self. It's the image of a good shepherd leading his flock. One

important way Israel affirmed its faith was when they sang, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." The ideal king would also be a good shepherd.

Ezekiel spoke to a people divided in their loyalties and decimated in their economy. They were scattered like sheep without a flock. Their problems were even worse than those facing our nation today. He describes God's salvation for them as the guidance of a shepherd. Toward the end of this 34<sup>th</sup> chapter, the prophet changes gears and describes the king shepherding the nation after the example of Israel's great King David. When Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd," he takes his place as the fulfillment of a long line of prophecies looking forward to the kind of world God intended from the beginning.

You are not a king; and we pray you will avoid the temptation to think royally of yourself. Perhaps you are an under-shepherd. One hope that many share for your leadership is that your international background will open up dialogue with other nations who do not share the strong Christian heritage of the United States. The values of a responsible shepherd caring for a flock of sheep might provide common ground for the kind of values shared by other peoples. Good government will lead the flock toward good pasture and clean water, commodities all of us need.

Ezekiel almost anticipates some of our environmental challenges. The Lord complains that

some of the flock has trampled the grass so others go without, and some have fouled the water so others are thirsty. Our government needs to tend the created world so that all can be fed and nourished adequately.

We pray in the third place that two specific Christian values will be reflected in our government's policies: justice and love. A shepherd has to balance several jobs at the same time. Ezekiel points out that a good shepherd will gather the flock when they have been scattered. You have some gathering to do. Our people are divided, not only in our political loyalties, but in our cultural loyalties as well. We need to remember that we are not just individuals, each one looking out for herself or himself. We are families and communities and a nation, a veritable flock, but a divided flock.

As you gather us together, we pray you will do all that you can as President to ensure that all are treated fairly. Your experience in community organizing for justice should help you. In the Bible, justice means more than ensuring each has the same opportunity. Justice in the Old Testament means protecting widows, orphans and resident aliens. That's right, resident aliens get special mention in the Old Testament. See Exodus 22:21-24 where the Ten Commandments receive some elaboration. We pray for our resident aliens and all our citizens to be treated with justice. In Ezekiel's prophecy, this means that the stronger sheep are condemned; and I quote, "because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and I butted all the weak animals until you scattered them far

and wide (34:21).” Just government defends the weak and treats all with fairness.

Of course you know that it was the Old Testament prophet’s desire for justice that got your pastor, Jeremiah Wright, at cross purposes with you. So we pray carefully, but diligently for justice for all.

A good shepherd does more than protect and defend the flock. In the words of the prophet, the shepherd feeds the hungry sheep, binds up the injured and strengthens the weak. Some believe that kind of love is only the job of individuals and private enterprise. We pray with Ezekiel and the other prophets that the king or in our case the government will accept the responsibility for caring along with religious and private organizations.

We realize that our prayers will not be answered by you, but by God’s grace working through you and all of us. We are indeed a government of, by and for the people. In a real sense, our prayers are for ourselves, that we will be grateful; that we will reflect in our lives and in our votes the values of our Christian faith; and especially that we will work for justice and love in this great nation.

We do pray specifically for you and for your family. The pressures and temptations of leadership are enormous. The expectations of a hurting nation are outlandish. And, the time demands on your official family

will seem to never end. Therefore we pray for wisdom in the performance of your duties and the humility to recognize your limitations. Most of all we ask that you and your family will know everyday the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the peace of the Holy Spirit. Amen.