

If I were to ask you to conjure up an image of Jesus, more than likely many of you could offer up a lot of common descriptions. For example: we often picture Jesus as gentle, meek and mild; a friend of children; a carrier of cuddly lambs; a shepherd of a flock traversing green hills under a blue sky; a smiling, good-looking, muscular savior who looks like he should be on the cover of Men's Health Magazine.

Of course, some will focus on Jesus the virile, masculine macho man turning over the tables in the temple, railing against the Pharisees, or hanging bloody on a cross. Depending on your theological persuasion, there are many ways we can imagine the Son of God.

But I'm guessing most people would never picture Jesus as, say, a hulking giant who looks like he could stomp out a small town like a divine God-zilla. Most people, that is, who don't live in Swiebodzin, Poland, where the presence of a 170-foot concrete Jesus causes citizens to pray that he doesn't topple over and crush them while they're shopping for groceries at the Supermarket.

For more than 10 years, volunteers from the town, along with prisoners on day relief from the local jail, built what's been called the most audacious religious icon in all of Europe, if not the whole world. The statue of Jesus and his outstretched arms is even bigger than the famous statue of Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro -- a fact that the Brazilians dispute because the Polish Jesus is cheating by standing on a mound. I'll leave the "my Jesus is bigger than your Jesus" jokes to your imagination.

Father Sylwester Zawadzki, a Catholic priest, was the chief architect of the project, which is rumored to have cost nearly \$3 million dollars. When asked how he came up with the idea, he would often defer his answer to the super-sized Savior. "It was Jesus' idea," he says. "I was just the builder."

Apparently not everyone feels as upbeat and optimistic as Father Sylwester about having Jesus stand over the town like a mutant Messiah. Many of the locals see it as an embarrassment at best and as a waste of precious resources at worst. Tourists pull up in their cars and jump out to have their pictures taken as they mimic the concrete Christ's outstretched arms. Rarely do these visitors come into town to spend any money on the local economy; instead they often drive off to less odd destinations.

This begs the question, "is it better to have a kind of symbolic sphinx representing salvation and redemption dominating the landscape for all to see, or is it better to have a Jesus that is more gentle, hidden, nice, and less offensive? This week's Old and New Testament lessons tell us that neither image is the right one, and yet both have something to tell us about the real purpose of Jesus, the one who shepherds the flock with both gentle love and stand-alone power. The book of Ezekiel depicts Yahweh as a shepherd concerned for the flock and Matthew's Gospel reveals Jesus as a divine shepherd who cares for the sheep. In both cases the "shepherd" is willing to make the hard choice of separation and judgment in order to keep the flock safe, secure, and thriving.

The image of God as a shepherd permeates the whole Old Testament, most famously in Psalm 23, where the gentle shepherd Lord "makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul." A similar image is found in Isaiah 40:11, where the prophet proclaims that God will "feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs into his arms, and carry them in his bosom."

Gentle care is certainly one of the soft focus images that we have of Jesus in Scripture. But we always have to balance that image with the shepherd image of Ezekiel, who sees the shepherd God also as a judge who righteously culls the herd to keep it pure. Referring to the "sheep" of Judah who had been scattered by the

Babylonian exile, Ezekiel proclaims that God will "search for [his] sheep, and will seek them out I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness."

Understanding the context here is important as this passage connects to the earlier indictment of the "shepherds of Israel" in verses 1-10. While God is the good shepherd who gathers and cares for the sheep, the "bad" shepherds, which Ezekiel equates to the kings of Israel and Judah, fail to do even the basic tasks of caring for the "sheep" in their charge. The indictment is pretty clear: The bad shepherds slaughter and exploit the sheep, and fail to strengthen the weak ones, heal the sick and injured, and search for the lost. In short, the bad shepherd-kings had led "with force and harshness," which resulted in the sheep being "scattered over all the face of the earth" through the exile.

Remember, too, that Jesus had plenty to say about bad shepherds. These guys, he says, don't have personal ownership in the sheep, and when they see the wolf coming, they abandon the sheep and run like cowards "and the wolf snatches them and scatters them." And why does the bad shepherd run away? The bad shepherd "runs away because a [bad shepherd] does not care for the sheep." Then Jesus says, "I am not a bad shepherd. I am the good shepherd."

In Ezekiel, however, God looks like a Shepherd-with-a-Sword rather than a meek and mild herdsman. As a result of the failure of the shepherd-kings, God, the chief shepherd, is "against" them and will "demand" his sheep, rescuing them from the ones who would devour them. In other words, God is pretty torqued when shepherds feed themselves rather than the sheep they're supposed to be tending.

This brings us to our lessons this week, where God turns his attention from judging the shepherds of Israel to addressing the "flock," or the people themselves. As God will judge the shepherds for taking more than their fair share at the

expense of their sheep, God will also judge the sheep themselves for exploiting one another.

So, how will God do this? By providing "one shepherd" from the house of David who will judge between the sheep and feed the ones who need it most. This shepherd will be God's own representative and the ultimate shepherd-king. The descendant of King David who slew the giant Goliath will be a giant himself -- not in physical stature, but in the tall order of his justice.

Jesus, of course, takes on the role of God's own appointed shepherd in his own ministry, defending the weak and outcast and challenging the fat and content shepherds and sheep of first-century Israel. And the eschatological description of the final judgment in today's story from Matthew makes it pretty clear that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, will make good on God's promises in Ezekiel. He will separate the sheep and the goats based on whether or not they cared for the weakest and most vulnerable members of the flock.

A day approaches, Jesus warns, when we'll be knocking at heaven's door and the Lord of the manor will either admit us or turn us away--failing to recognize us. The caveat to this is our treatment of Christ the King himself. When he was hungry we fed him--or we didn't feed him. When he was thirsty we gave him water or didn't give him water. When he was naked, we gave him clothing--or didn't give him clothing. When he was sick, we took care of him--or didn't take care of him. When he was in prison, we visited him -- or didn't visit him.

Jesus, as God in the flesh, is the ultimate Shepherd-King and dominates the landscape with his care and concern for the whole flock. The colossal Christ of Swiebodzin looms over the town and, we imagine, the people feel his gaze everywhere they go. After all, if you're 170 feet tall, you won't miss much! Problem is, though, that building a stupendous statue of Jesus is really an exercise in missing the point. The real Jesus is anything but a tourist attraction. He's always

out with the flock -- not standing over them like some super-sized sentinel, but always among the people, listening, caring, feeding, challenging, and leading -- just like a good shepherd.

On this Sunday morning when we celebrate the lordship and reign of Christ, the true Shepherd-King, we should be asking ourselves the question, "What kind of shepherd are we to the weaker ones who depend on us for help?" As under-shepherds of the Good Shepherd, are we caring for the weaker ones around us, or are we exploiting them? Are we good stewards of the resources the Shepherd provides, or do we hoard them for ourselves at the expense of others? Are we getting fat because we overindulge in good things, or are we able to share with all the members of the flock? Are we building monuments to impress the world, or are we using our resources to help those who live in the world's shadows and back alleys?

Ezekiel and Matthew both make it clear that God will judge us less on having all of our beliefs in order, and more on whether or not we have cared for the least, the last, and the lost. Sure, a 170-foot Jesus may be intimidating, but that's nothing compared to the real Jesus, whose lordship requires us all to follow him in caring for the people around us! So, let's love others as Christ has loved us and with the Lord's help let's try our best to feed, water, clothe, care for, and visit any and all in need! Thanks be to God. Amen.