

Remembering the Journey

by

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November 22, 2020

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. ¹⁶ 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.

Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹ Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, ²² I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

²³ I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. ²⁴ And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.

“The world is falling apart.” I have heard these five words repeated almost daily over the past several months. There is no shortage of examples available to justify the statement. It’s so pervasive that we wonder if the world will ever stop falling apart. Is there anything remaining that can impede the unraveling? Is there common ground on which our splintered society and anxious nation can stand? Better asked, “do we desire to be held together?” “Do we want to fall apart?” The world is falling apart; what happens next?

A quick review of history demonstrates that our question is not unique: the world has always been falling apart. We can quickly find too many examples of societal unrest, disputed elections, and vicious viruses. The truth of history is that over the duration of human existence, we have often chosen to be splintered apart rather than held together.

But even when we are not devoured by these monumental matters, we’re routinely required to shield ourselves against the dissolution of our personal worlds. We’re inundated by marriages that collapse, jobs that are eliminated, and diseases that steal our loved ones from us. In response we do our best to build a personal world insulated from these intrusions. We read more books, change our diet, readjust our daily schedule to incorporate meaningful moments, seek to avoid political discussions with our family and in our churches. Yet despite our best efforts, things still fall apart, and we continue to struggle.

Like us, the people to whom God is speaking through the prophet Ezekiel are struggling. They were a people called Israel, which literally means "Those who struggle with God," and their history is fraught with various struggles. They struggled for a home they were always trying to get into and hold onto. They struggled for food and water, for security and justice, and for a future for their children. Most of all, they struggled to believe and follow God. These struggles led the Israelites to follow false shepherds, who made grand promises but did not deliver. These false shepherds did not care for them or feed them or heal them or protect them.

In response, the Israelites turned to their own ideas and what they could control: they stopped sharing and started hoarding resources; those who were strong pushed aside those who were weak; the rich became richer, the poor, poorer. To support their actions, the Israelites crafted gods who endorsed these inclinations and justified their fears. Yet their tamable gods did nothing to tame their struggle. Instead, they fanned the flames of division and injustice which engulfed their entire community.

The instinctive response to our struggle against uncertainty, anxiety, and loss, is to form factions who share our particular fear and to agree to blame someone else. Those people are different; they are not like us. They are trying to take something away from us. They want to destroy our way of life. We have to stop them. Sometimes “they” are green new deal supporters or fracking defenders. Sometimes “they” are the liberal elite or rural voters. Sometimes “they” are Muslims, or the police, or protestors, or, or, or. As one minister said, “There is no limit of people to blame for dismantling our cherished understanding of how the world should be.”

Sometimes, this blaming may be deserved. There are people and groups in the world that do genuine harm to our world, country, and communal life together. The problem though is that even when we know who threatens us, labeling them as dangerous does not heal us. What we need is someone who can intervene in the world, who can reign over all other powers. We need the True Shepherd.

Ezekiel is effusive in his description of the True Shepherd. Through the one shepherd, all people shall be fed, healed, and welcomed into the flock. Whereas the following of false shepherds led to their division, the one shepherd will bring them all back together again. But benign unity is not where the True Shepherd stops. Ezekiel continues speaking God’s word, “But the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice...I will judge between sheep and sheep.” God promises to dismantle the diverse factions of the past and to exact justice

on those who caused them in the first place. Scholar Maryann McKibben Dana says, “Ezekiel is vivid here, but not vitriolic, his words are saturated with detail, but not outright disgust... God seems resolute but weary – and almost grieved at once again having to set people straight on the path of justice.”¹ For this is the true shepherd’s goal: to lead all people. Some need rescue; some need justice; all need to be included. This includes those who don’t know they are included and even those who don’t want to be included. Redemption and healing are possible for our fractured society and world; let at least us, the church, believe there is one True Shepherd who can lead us all.

Today is Christ the King, or Reign of Christ Sunday. It is the final Sunday of the Christian year as next Sunday will begin Advent and our journey to Bethlehem. On this Sunday we make the claim that amidst the rulers of the world and the demands of our lives, Christ reigns supreme over all. Our final memory of the year is the triumph and victory of the one True Shepherd.

In his book *Thinking, Fast & Slow*, Nobel winner Daniel Kahneman talks about the two selves people have: the experiencing self and the remembering self.² The terms are self-explanatory: the experiencing self is the self actively experiencing an action, while the part that is reliving it later is the remembering self.

The issue with the two selves, Kahneman says, is that the remembering self is the one that keeps score and is prone to biases. Kahneman conducted an experiment in which two patients experience pain across the exact same period of time. For patient A the pain came in two short bursts: one in the middle of the time period and then another short burst of pain at the end. For patient B there were various longer

¹ Maryann McKibben Dana, “Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24,” in *Feasting on the Word: Year A., Vol. 4, Season After Pentecost*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 316.

² Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast & Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 381-393.

bursts of pain throughout the duration, but the time period ended with the pain subsiding. When asked afterwards about their pain during the test, patient A reported having had a much worse experience than patient B. Even though patient A experienced significantly less pain than patient B, the fact that the session ended with a high amount of pain left them with an unpleasant memory of the entire experience. Patient B's experience was objectively worse, but because the session ended with less pain the remembering self reflected on the entire experience as not being too bad.

Kahneman comes to the conclusion that the remembering self tends to rate an entire experience based on its most severe moment and its final moment. When we look back on an event, Kahneman says, we tend to remember what was the worst moment, and how it ended. Even if we largely enjoyed the experience while it was happening, our memory will be defined by the worst part and the conclusion.

As we look back on the year, we tend to recall where we missed the mark. We remember the times of frustration, anger, and hurt, and those cause us to mis-remember the goodness along the way. We look back and think the world is falling apart and we must find some where to hide. We need some group or god who will respond since the True Shepherd seems silent.

When we live from this posture, hope is hard to find. The early church saint Augustine said, "we are so weak that we seek daylight in a lamp." Rather than trusting the sun to rise, trusting that God is faithful today just as God was yesterday, we make a lamp, form a god, and pretend it's as good as the real thing. We push down others to lift ourselves up. We forget the good, we remember the bad. We hunker down for safety, forgetting God's previous care for us.

When God looks at our story, though, God does not see just the worst moment or the last moment, God sees the entire tapestry, and God wants all of it. What's more, God expects us to use our entire story for the benefit of others, because all of us belong to the same shepherd, regardless of our chosen faction or group, no matter our past or choices. We are all lit by the sun, not by our individual lamps. To do this, we can begin by recognizing how we've been hurt, and how we've hurt others. We can then extend mercy to all. Author and activist and one of my personal heroes, Bryan Stevenson says that, "mercy is just when it is rooted in hopefulness and freely given. Mercy is most empowering, liberating, and transformative when it is directed at the undeserving. The people who haven't earned it, who haven't even sought it, are the most meaningful recipients of our compassion."³ We give mercy not because it is deserved but because it emanates from the True Shepherd who has also offered it to us.

As we end the Christian year, may we do so in the full light of God's reign. Even as we continue to struggle and navigate a divided world may we do so while following the True Shepherd. May our final experience of this year be the act of extending mercy to our neighbor, and to our self. May we resist the urge to hunker down with those just like us by remaining committed to the one True Shepherd. Things fall apart; they always do, but that is often merely one part of the story. It does not need to define our entire memory. Here at the end, the True Shepherd waits to carry us onward. May this truth be the light that shines over all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014), 314.