
It's Personal

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-16

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, November 26, 2017,
by the Rev. Dr. Carol Gregg

Once upon a time, long, long ago, humans used to turn a very small knob on a petite device. It was usually a daily task, lasting less than a minute. Surreptitiously they would longingly glance at the small device located on their left wrist and silently wonder, “Will this class, this meeting, this sermon ever end?” (Yes, actually, this sermon does have an end – sometime before next week!) Mechanical wristwatches, which were developed in the late 1800’s,¹ are powered by fingers turning a knob. Once wound they ran for a day or so, keeping reasonably accurate time. These watches, were first replaced by battery operated wristwatches, which themselves are now being replaced by the all-purpose mobile device - the phone, clock, camera, notepad, and movie theater all in one. Phones are great, but how do you sneak a glance at the time when you have to fish it out of your purse or pocket and tap it to turn in on?

Lord Edward Herbert, who lived from the late 1500’s to the mid 1600’s, would have been familiar with pocket watches, the predecessors to wristwatches. Herbert is credited with laying the groundwork for deism,² the view that God created the world, but does not interfere with it. In this view, God is compared to a watchmaker. God made the world, intricate like a watch with a variety of mechanisms and laws, such as those of physics, chemistry, and biology. Then, God wound it up and released it. In this view, the world operates according to natural principles, and natural principles alone. There is no divine intervention. According to the deists, God is detached, uninvolved, and, presumably, unmoved. God creates the watch, winds it up, and lets go.

Even if he had seen a watch, Ezekiel would not understand this conception of God. According to the prophet, it’s personal.

The beautiful reading for today from Ezekiel 34 needs context. The opening verses of the chapter, just prior to our reading will suffice; unfortunately, they are not quite as comforting as what you have just heard. According to Ezekiel, the Lord is in the midst of a serious rant. The Lord is complaining bitterly about the shepherds of Israel. I imagine a finger pointing as the prophet speaks for the Lord saying: “You [shepherds] have not strengthened the weak [sheep], you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.” (Ezek. 34:4) Oh -- in so many ways the shepherds have failed in their work.

Note if you would that as this passage speaks about shepherds, the meaning points to much more than the individuals in the hills who are caring for bleating animals. “A shepherd” was a well-established metaphor in the ancient Near East for the leaders of the people -- for the kings, rulers,

¹ <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/first-wristwatch/> and <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/05/history-wristwatch-apple-watch/391424/>

² *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Religion*, Anthony C. Thiselton

priests.³ The Lord's complaint, then, is with the leadership, the rulers, who while not priests, had both religious and political authority. They were the shepherds, who were not merely failing in their responsibilities by neglect; they were also actively abusing the sheep - slaughtering the fatlings and clothing themselves with wool.

In this powerful indictment, the Lord refers multiple times to "*the* sheep", then in the midst of the tirade the language changes to "*my* sheep". This is not some random group for whom the Divine has generic concern; no, this is the Lord's people. My sheep. Because of you, the Lord says, *my* sheep were scattered, *my* sheep became prey, *my* sheep have become food for the wild animals. (Ezek. 34: 6, 8) The prophet declares, "Thus says the Lord God, I am against the shepherds." (Ezek. 34:10) Well, I guess so.

If God's anger was not clear earlier, it certainly is now. The Lord takes this matter very personally. Apparently, God does not like it when we abuse that which belongs to God. And is there anything that does not belong to God?

Ezekiel's prophecy comes in the era of the exile. Jerusalem is destroyed. The people are scattered; many were carried off to Babylon. The prophet considered this just punishment for the failures of the leadership. The rulers of the day were corrupt and abusive. As a result, the nation fell.

In many respects, this is a story that continues to repeat itself many times over. Corrupt leadership leads to the failings of a nation. This past week, we have heard news of turmoil in Zimbabwe. In 1980, when the country was freed from British rule, the people celebrated Robert Mugabe's leadership. Now 37 years later, his violent and oppressive leadership has wreaked havoc on the country. Last spring, I had the privilege of visiting children the Congregation supports in Zimbabwe. Our travel group saw how many fields and people were idle, leading to poverty and hunger, in a country that was once called "the breadbasket of Africa." The idleness was not a lack of desire to work; it was because of what the government has confiscated from the people.⁴ As we began our visit, we were told clearly and repeatedly to avoid conversation about politics, because those who complain about Mugabe have been prone to arrest and worse. For this reason, it is remarkable to see the people take to the streets. Now Mugabe is gone, without ensuring that his much younger wife is his successor. Maybe this is a turning point.

I do not want to say that God punishes nations that suffer from corrupt leadership. The corruption itself leads to plenty of suffering. I can imagine, however, that God still views such situations personally, directing anger at greedy leaders saying, "I entrusted you with my sheep, and you abused them".

The Lord's solution is to get more personal. Our reading for today begins with the beautiful statement, "For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out." (Ezek. 34:11) Later the Lord says, "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep." (Ezek. 34:15) Twice we see this emphasis. "I myself". The Lord God is so invested in the people, that God says, "I myself will search for the sheep." The Lord is not going to ignore the situation or delegate

³ Ezekiel, Ronald Clements, p. 155

⁴ Forbes: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/timworstall/2017/03/05/congratulations-to-robert-mugabe-zimbabwes-unemployment-rate-now-95/#73b840be244c>

responsibility for it. No, the Creator of the universe, the Eternal One, God of us all, will be the one to rescue the sheep. The Lord will intervene. God is not a hands-off watchmaker simply observing the world as it runs its course. Our God promises to enter into the difficulties of the day and rescue those who are abused.

Point by point, the Lord counters the failings of the shepherds.

- The Lord declares: You have not strengthened the weak. I will strengthen the weak.
- You have not bound up the injured. I will bind up the injured.
- You have not brought back the strayed. I will bring back the strayed.
- You have not sought the lost. I will seek the lost. (Ezek. 34:4, 16)

In each instance, all the things the shepherds were supposed to do, the Lord will do. The failings of the human leaders, the abuses of the rulers of the day, will all be addressed not by a new set of human leaders and rulers, but by the One who rules over all. The Lord is the shepherd, the One who can be trusted to rescue the sheep. This Good Shepherd will gather the sheep that have been scattered and feed them in rich pasture. The Lord God will not leave the vulnerable, wounded, sick, and scattered people on their own. The Lord will come.

Sometimes, it is hard to believe that God will rescue those who are abused. Often we are impatient with God's timing, preferring an obvious and speedy rescue. In such times, we may be tempted to think that such a rescue is work that we need to do. Philip Gulley in his book, *Living the Quaker Way*, asserts that if peace is going to come to this world, it must come through people. He writes, "My Quaker morality will not permit me to assign to God the work of peace that rightly belongs to us....It is tempting to think peace will happen *for* us or *to* us, but it must happen *through* us and *because*⁵ of us." He does not expect divine intervention. I understand the Quaker theology that the light of Christ is within each and every human being, and that inner light is what must lead to peace and justice. I affirm the conviction that God dwells within each of us, but I am also Presbyterian enough to believe that sin taints every aspect of our lives. I am not convinced that we are good enough or holy enough to undo the abuses and corruption of this world. We work on it, certainly; we strive to do what is right and good. We are called to live faithfully as God's people. And yet, ultimately, I long for God's personal intervention in our world. God will work through human beings because we are the material available to God, but the holy good that comes to this world is God's doing. I give thanks that God chooses to be personally involved.

Edward Herbert, whom I mentioned earlier, was a wealthy, well-educated man, with title and position in 17th century England. His views were consistent with the rationalism of his day. He affirmed the existence of God, the need to worship, and the call to live an ethical life. He had little emphasis on divine revelation or intervention. His views helped lay the philosophical groundwork for the deism of his day, and the picture of an impersonal, detached deity. Lord Herbert of Cherbury is not often remembered today.

His younger brother, George Herbert⁶, traveled a different path. While George had the same advantages of upbringing, as did his brother, ill health and financial concerns plagued him for much of his adult life. He was a poet, who spent years as the rector of a small, rural church. His poems, which are deeply religious and devotional, reflect a very personal, and sometimes conflicted,

⁵ Philip Gulley, *Living the Quaker Way*, p. 93

⁶ Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/george-herbert>

relationship with God. His poem, “The Collar”, referring to a clerical collar, concludes with these lines:⁷

But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild
At every word,
Methought I heard one calling, *Child!*
And I replied *My Lord.*

Notice the language of “Child” and “My Lord”. It is personal, direct, even intimate. It reflects a lively interaction between God and the poet. There is nothing distant or detached here, but instead a reflection of the reality that God has intervened in his life. Interesting that the writings of Edward Herbert are largely forgotten, while the writings of George Herbert are still admired.

George Herbert knew what we too can and do know. God does not choose to remain aloof and distant. Instead, when God sees the brokenness, abuse, and neglect of beloved people, God says, “I, myself, will gather, feed, and tend the beloved.” The Lord does not send a second, third, or fourth substitute, nor does the Lord avoid the messiness of our world. God promises to come as a Good Shepherd to gather and tend all of the sheep.

This means that we have every reason for hope in our lives. We can trust that God will gather us in from the wilderness of addiction and from the dispersion of conflict. The Shepherd will look for us behind the rock of fear and untangle us from the thickets of poverty. Our Lord will lift us from the pit of illness and bind up our brokenness. God will save us that we may no longer be ravaged, and the Lord will feed us justice. There will come a day when this Good Shepherd gathers not a few, but all.

So the next time you think God has given up on our world, remember these promises and give thanks. When you are tempted to believe that God does not care about abusive and destructive leaders or systems, be assured that God cares deeply and have hope. If it looks as if the wounded and oppressed are scattered, rest in the certainty that the Lord will search for each one. And when God seems absent in your own life, hear the Lord speak of my sheep, my people, and rejoice.

God’s investment in our world is not yet complete. Today, we know that the sheep, the people of God, are not all safely gathered in. Too many false shepherds still rule and abuse. Because God takes this suffering personally, we can be sure that God himself, God herself, God the Creator of all, is the one who will gather in the sheep and tend to the people. It is the Lord God who will come.

As we stand on the cusp of the Advent and Christmas season, we know we will soon be celebrating just how personal God’s investment really is.

As for today, this Thanksgiving weekend, we have many reasons for gratitude. Perhaps the most significant is that God takes us and this world personally.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁷ Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44360/the-collar>