

SOUGHT IN EXILE

Ezekiel was a priest and prophet during the Babylonian exile. His ministry unfolded between 593 to possibly about 563 BCE during which time the capture and destruction of Jerusalem occurred. Living in exile with those from Judah he shared their disorienting experience. You may recall that he had a number of rather extraordinary visions including an almost indescribable throne chariot, wheel thing with four living creatures who each had four faces (Ezekiel 1:4f), as well as a later vision about a valley of dry bones which come to life. Some have speculated that the “anguish of witnessing wholesale death and cultural decimation, along with the extraordinary stress of involuntary dislocation” pushed Ezekiel to the breaking point, and that some of his behavior may even be seen as symptomatic of catatonia (Carolyn Sharp, Yale Divinity School). Others have suspected he may have been suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Whatever the case, Ezekiel is a powerful witness to God’s relentless pursuit of God’s people, even in exile.

To more fully grasp the context of this morning’s passage we need to back up a bit and hear the opening verses of the chapter:

The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, 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. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.

Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: As I live, says the Lord God, because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, since there was no shepherd; and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep; therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: Thus says the Lord God, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them. (Ezekiel 34:1-10)

“I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them.” As Ezekiel, through the words of God, describes the situation, the very people who should be looking out for and caring for God’s people in exile – the shepherds – which can be seen as religious and/or political leaders, are doing exactly the opposite – they are exploiting the people. Poet Robert West puts it very succinctly:

What sort of souls would follow such an unrepentant sinner?
They take him for their savior, but he's saving them for dinner. (The Bad Shepherd)

Into this topsy turvy world of exile God promises to intervene. The underlying Hebrew text is remarkable in how God's response precisely mirrors what the "bad shepherds" have been up to:

the weak you have not strengthened
 the sick you have not healed
 the injured you have not bound up
 the strayed you have not brought back
 the lost you have not sought

And then God's response:

the lost I will seek
 the strayed I will bring back
 the injured I will bind up
 the sick I will strengthen

As Margaret Odell, Professor of Religion at St. Olaf College states:

It's worth noting that God's care is both implicitly and explicitly associated with justice...Justice and care are kept in balance, as if they were two sides of the same coin... Justice and care belong together because the shepherd metaphor was always first and foremost a political metaphor...Ezekiel [34] identifies injustice and oppression as a primary cause of the fragmentation of any community, not least God's people.

Clearly, this not just an ancient problem. Injustice and oppression are alive and well even today. Our present pandemic has only served to emphasize that with black and brown people being disproportionately affected by the virus at far greater rates given the enormous disparities in healthcare that undermine treatment. Our leaders have not done a good job of attending to the most vulnerable in our society and this lack of care is systemic being deeply ingrained in national and state policies and procedures. Racial, economic, and educational inequalities don't occur by happenstance; they are baked into the system.

A possible upside of the pandemic, if one dare to speak in such terms, is that it is granting those of us in more privileged positions at least a taste of what political failure feels like. While Ezekiel insists that the exile was an integral part of God's plan, I'm not sure I want to say the same about the present pandemic, but at least it has gotten our attention, broken down our defenses, punctured our self-assurance and self-reliance, and upended some of our national arrogance, as daily the number of our citizens infected with the virus rises and our national approach is revealed is for what it is: wholly inadequate.

All of us are now in exile. Confined to our homes which in a perverse way has at times made where we live, where we sleep at night, less "homey." For many, where we live is no longer a place we come home to but a place where we are captive. The line between where one's job ends and when one's home life begins is blurry. Tethered to our screens one Zoom call after another we try to stay connected while we are reminded of our separation. We are exiled from family - parents, grandparents, children, grandchildren we cannot see in person - a Thanksgiving table

with just one or two place settings. We are exiled from co-workers and all the informal moments throughout the day where we maintain relationships and a spirit of camaraderie. We are exiled from friends and neighbors - anyone who isn't in our "bubble." We are exiled from our worship and fellowship spaces - holy ground that we associate with connecting with God and our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are exiled from communal activities: sporting events, team sports, birthday parties, weddings, funerals, potlucks, picnics, concerts, open mic events. We are exiled from caring for loved ones in hospitals and nursing home; exiled from physical touch, hugs and kisses, the passing caress on the shoulder. We are politically exiled: What in the world is going on with our country?! We are facing multiple threat, most of which existed pre-COVID: an economic mess, messed up politics, a pandemic, ongoing racial injustice. We have been living in political exile - in a strange land - for quite some time. Like the Israelites, we have been dispersed - granted, largely to our homes - but none the less scattered and separated from each other.

Into this time of exile the words of the prophet Ezekiel resonate with us because they express a deep longing – a longing for solace, for community, for a return to a sense of home we once knew. Out of our places of separation, estrangement, and isolation comes news, as one author has put it, of a “search and rescue mission.” God, the Good Shepherd, has not forsaken those who are scattered in the gloom and darkness of exile, but is searching them out. God will rescue them and bring them home. God will make them to lie down in green pastures and will be their caring Shepherd. And they will be fed with justice. It makes a great deal of difference, when you are lost to know that there is a search operation going on! Author, activist, and community organizer Lisa Sharon Harper puts it this way:

Evidence of the presence of the Kingdom of God is thick wherever and whenever people stand on the promise of God that there is more to this world—more to this life—than what we see. There is more than the getting over, getting by, or getting mine. There is more than the brokenness, the destruction, and the despair that threaten to wash over us like the waters of the deep. There is a vision of a world where God cuts through the chaos, where God speaks and there is light. There is a vision where there is protection and where love is binding every relationship together.

The challenge is before us. God is stillspeaking. It is not entirely up to us but we do have a role to play. This morning's passage from Ezekiel is coupled with the lesson from the Gospel of Matthew in which Jesus describes the Great Judgment. And just as there is a sorting amongst sheep in Ezekiel there is a sorting between sheep and goats: “just as you did it to one of the east of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Franciscan spiritual author Richard Rohr helpfully notes:

It is almost impossible to turn away from what seems like the only game in town (political, economic, or religious), unless we have glimpsed a more attractive alternative. It is hard to imagine it, much less imitate it, unless we see someone else do it first. Jesus is that icon of the more attractive alternative, a living parable. Jesus has forever changed our human imagination, and we are now both burdened and gladdened by the new possibility. There is good news to counter the deadening bad news, but one first has to be turned away from a conventional way of understanding.

In the verse that immediately follows the conclusion of this morning's lesson God states, "I will make with them a covenant of peace." The word "peace" is the Hebrew word "shalom." In our places of exile as we contemplate God's promise and assurance this morning, let us do so in the knowledge that the telos, the end, the goal to which God is gathering and propelling towards is peace. Let us then hear the final words of Ezekiel chapter 34 as a prayer and blessing not only for Ezekiel's time but for our time – for all time:

I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild animals from the land, so that they may live in the wild and sleep in the woods securely. I will make them and the region around my hill a blessing; and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. The trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase. They shall be secure on their soil; and they shall know that I am the Lord, when I break the bars of their yoke, and save them from the hands of those who enslaved them. They shall no more be plunder for the nations, nor shall the animals of the land devour them; they shall live in safety, and no one shall make them afraid. I will provide for them splendid vegetation, so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the insults of the nations. They shall know that I, the Lord their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, says the Lord God. You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, says the Lord God. (Ezekiel 34:25-31)

AMEN.