

# Preaching to an age of pessimism: Ezekiel 34

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### An age of pessimism

I'd consider myself a realist, but in philosophical terms I'm what's called a pessimist.

With these words, Police Detective Rust Cohle on the HBO series *True Detective* begins to describe his worldview. Detective Cohle goes on to declare, "We are things that labor under the illusion of having a self, a secretion of sensory experience and feeling programmed with total assurance that we are each somebody, when in fact everybody's nobody." Sounding like Nietzsche on a really bad day, Cohle declares humanity should choose extinction and admits he would commit suicide but lacks the constitution for it. What does it say that in 2014 a TV series became a runaway hit which delves into the horrors of human violence and asks whether or not such horrors prove existence has no meaning?

When popular culture asks such weighty questions, religious leaders who wish to preach to their flocks each week should take note. The faithful and not-so-faithful gathered for the sermon may not operate with the same assumptions as their clergy regarding a well-ordered universe presided over by a benevolent deity. A discerning preacher will listen to the questions asked by culture and assume those same questions exist among her or his hearers. What does the preacher say to the audience who wonders if truths are "illusions of which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power?"<sup>1</sup>

At such a time of spiritual need in our culture, the church finds itself particularly ill-equipped to offer a meaningful answer to such pessimism. Almost daily news arrives containing a new poll

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1. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 46–47, as quoted in Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 91.

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detailing the increasing numbers of people who identify themselves as religiously unaffiliated—a group of people some pundits call the “nones,” as in “none of the above,” when it comes to religion. Given the never-ending scandals of clergy sexual abuse and the most visible representations of the church appearing intolerant, ignorant, and irrelevant, one can hardly blame the “nones” for their lack of interest. Nietzsche’s prophecies about the demise of Christendom and its symbols seem to be coming true.

## A church in exile

Before we travel too far down the road of despair, the twenty-first century church should consider its spiritual predecessors found in Scripture who have struggled with similar crises. God’s people have routinely discovered to their own chagrin the extent of their spiritual inadequacies when faced with a culture for which God is dead in terms of their identity and practice. For the people of Israel in the sixth century BCE, exile became their moment of self-realization regarding their failures to live up to their covenant with God. The Hebrew prophets explained that the consequences of such failures included judgment, destruction, defeat, and humiliation, all at the hands of foreign nations who did not recognize Yahweh as sovereign.

Yet even in the midst of such dark words, the prophets also offered hope. In western culture where the church once enjoyed preeminence as the foundation of cultural self-understanding, many authors see the western church as experiencing its own form of exile.<sup>2</sup> A Google search of the phrase “church in exile” results in thousands of hits and demonstrates a growing understanding on the part of the church regarding its relatively new status as a stranger in a strange land. Do the prophets offer any word for us (the twenty-first century western church in exile) about God’s hope for the world—a hope we must proclaim to a culture in desperate need of it?

## A word of judgment to the shepherds

The prophet Ezekiel addresses the exile “from scatter to gather,” detailing the scattering of the people of Israel at the hands of the major military powers of its day and then promising the restoration of those same people not only to their land but also to a proper covenant relationship with God.<sup>3</sup> The “scatter” section of Ezekiel comes in two parts. First, he offers oracles against Judah (chaps. 1–24) and then oracles largely against other nations (chaps. 25–32). The “gather” section of Ezekiel comes in chaps. 33–48, where the prophet envisions a restored people of Israel. Perhaps the twenty-first century western church should search the “scatter” sections for parallels with its own predicament, but in a climate of pessimism, both inside and outside the church, a message of “gathering” seems desirable.

Just such a message of hope comes in chap. 34, where Yahweh demonstrates concern for the people of Israel and declares they are Yahweh’s flock and Yahweh will be their good shepherd. The image of deity as good shepherd appears often in Hebrew and Christian Scriptures,<sup>4</sup> as well as in

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2. By “western church” I mean the church of North America and Europe, which has declined sharply in membership and cultural influence. As numerous commentators on the contemporary church have noted, the dramatic spread of Christianity in Africa, Latin America, and Asia stands in stark contrast to the situation of Europe and North America.
  3. Bruce C. Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence E. Fretheim and David L. Peterson, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 358.
  4. Gen 48:15; 49:24; Ps 23:1; 28:9; 80:1; Jer 31:10; Matt 25:32; 26:31; Mark 14:27; John 10:11–16; Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 2:25; 5:4; Rev 7:17; Sir 18:13; 2 Esdr 2:34.

ancient near eastern texts outside of Israel.<sup>5</sup> The image of the “good shepherd” has so pervaded western culture that even in our “exilic” days it still maintains its resonance. Most people in the west alive today have probably never encountered a live sheep much less a live shepherd, yet still the image of a shepherd caring for his or her sheep remains comprehensible. A pastor reading Psalm 23 at a graveside can no longer count on those assembled reciting the psalm along with her or him, but the images remain familiar enough to offer comfort to those with only passing familiarity of it. Speaking of God as shepherd still remains an option for preachers who wish to speak to and for a church in exile.

For preachers using the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), Ezekiel 34 and its declaration of Yahweh as shepherd shows up in Year A on Reign of Christ Sunday to close out the liturgical calendar. Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24 appears alongside the judgment of the sheep and the goats in Matt 25:31–46. Strangely, the RCL omits from its Ezekiel reading verse 17, which offers a similar image of judgment regarding sheep and goats (“As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats” NRSV), but the RCL reading does include verse 22 with its reference to judging between sheep (“I will judge between sheep and sheep” NRSV).

Both the Ezekiel and Matthew passages include judgment of God’s people based upon God’s standard of justice. In Ezekiel, Yahweh judges between the fat and the lean sheep and condemns the former for fattening themselves at the expense of the weaker members of the flock. The NRSV of verse 21 says, “Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide.” The “you” in this verse refers to the kings of Judah or “shepherds of Israel” who failed to lead Israel with justice. These shepherds chose not to feed the hungry, quench the thirst of the thirsty, heal the sick, or bind up the injured. Similarly, the goats seated on the left hand of the Son of Man refused to feed the hungry, offer a drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, or visit the prisoner. Surely a church in exile needs to hear these words, especially because the church’s critics, often with good reason, accuse it of presenting a Gospel promising heavenly reward without any earthly justice.

Although the RCL only contains one reading of Ezekiel 34 in its three-year cycle, preachers might consider substituting it in place of Psalm 23 on the Fourth Sunday of Easter in Year B in order to pair it with John 10:1–10. Any who choose to listen to the Scripture readings will note the stereo effect of both Yahweh and Jesus laying claim to the title of “Shepherd.” Both passages contrast the true shepherd with others who threaten the flock.

In Ezekiel, Yahweh stands over against the “shepherds of Israel” who have failed to lead their people with justice. Kathryn Pfisterer Darr notes the particular grammatical construction that lists the failures of the “shepherds of Israel.” In Hebrew, one expects a verb to precede its direct object but in v. 4 normal word order was reversed for emphasis:

- A. the weak you have not strengthened,
- B. the sick you have not healed,
- C. the injured you have not bound up,
- D. the strayed you have not brought back,
- E. the lost you have not sought.<sup>6</sup>

Darr goes on to explain how verse 16 “recasts” these negative statements about the “shepherds of Israel” into positive statements about Yahweh’s care for the flock. Unlike the unjust shepherds,

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5. Kathryn Pfisterer Darr, “The Book of Ezekiel: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. VI, ed. Leander E. Keek (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 1465–1466.

6. *Ibid.*, 1466.

Yahweh the shepherd will seek the lost and bring back the strays, bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak. Those who seek to be shepherds of God's people must do likewise.

In John 10:1–10, Jesus assumes the title of Shepherd and declares that all who came before him are “thieves” who “steal and kill and destroy.” Jesus alone is the gate of the sheepfold and only Jesus is the Good Shepherd. As with many passages in John, this one offers difficulties for our pluralistic age. A humble and wise preacher will take seriously the Fourth Gospel's place in the long and sad history of Christian anti-Semitism. The particular social location of the Johannine community and its broken relationship with late first century Judaism should lead a preacher to present the conflict between Jesus and “the Jews” as a family fight rather than a pogrom.<sup>7</sup> When the thieves of John 10 become a part of “us” rather than the demonized other, Jesus' words, like those of Yahweh in Ezekiel 34, can be read as a critique of the western church.

Both Ezekiel 34 and John 10 contrast the shepherding of the divine with that of leaders who do not know God's justice. If one asks any person in contemporary culture why she or he has opted for “none of the above” when it comes to Christianity, one is likely to hear a steady stream of examples of hypocrisy on the part of church leaders. Such examples might include sex scandals of televangelists, huckster preachers bilking their flocks promising a gospel of prosperity, Protestant and Catholic leaders covering up sexual abuse, the Westboro Baptist Church holding up signs at the funerals of soldiers declaring “God Hates Fags,” and a church hierarchy hostile to the equal personhood of women. Any effort to share the Good News of the Gospel with a culture critical of the church must begin with the bad news for shepherds of the church who traffic in judgment and oppression.

A word from Ezekiel 34, Matthew 25, or John 10 may have powerful resonance not just for those outside the church but also for those struggling to remain within it. In every church sanctuary sit individuals abused emotionally, spiritually, and physically by the misuse of religion. Theologian Wendy Farley gives eloquent voice to these victims of abuse.

The world is full to overflowing with pain. It is a relentless source of dismay for a person of faith to struggle with the omnipresence of radical, destructive suffering. But for the source of suffering to come from the church and be justified by its Scripture and traditions is a kind of toxic, crushing pain that is hard to endure ... When the church itself speaks outsized lies about us, where do we go for truth? When the church withholds divine love, where can we go to learn our true name?<sup>8</sup>

Any list of the church's abuses must of course include the sexual abuse of children revealed in recent years—the ultimate example of shepherds coming as thieves to kill and destroy their sheep. Such a list must also include every time a woman called by God to be a shepherd is denied the opportunity on the basis of her gender; every time a gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender person is denied her or his full humanity; and every time a person's honest questions and doubts get buried under the manipulations of shame and fear. The suffering of this existence in and of itself proves difficult enough to endure at times without the church making things worse. A preacher who dares to proclaim (as well as to endure) the judgment of the shepherd Yahweh and the shepherd Jesus may offer a word of healing to her or his own people.

7. For a helpful and concise discussion of the issues involved in interpreting the Fourth Gospel's depiction of “the Jews,” see Gail O'Day, “The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. IX, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 647–651.

8. Wendy Farley, *Gathering Those Driven Away: A Theology of Incarnation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 5.

## A word of hope to the scattered

The question of whether or not existence has meaning appeared long before our present time, but in our current historical context the question seems more urgent than perhaps ever before. A 2014 public radio program devoted an episode to the thread of nihilism in popular culture. Nihilism and pessimism existed among the “lost generation” after World War I, when the horrors of the Holocaust became known and in response to threat of nuclear annihilation, yet this radio program asked if today’s dark outlook reached a new extreme?

When asked on the radio program whether today’s “nihilism” differs from “nihilisms of the past,” philosopher Simon Critchley replied without hesitation, “I say, ‘yes.’” Critchley bases his opinion on an experience he had teaching a seminar on mysticism. During a class about the Desert Fathers, the group discussed fourth century Alexandria and its place as the cultural center of the Roman Empire. Despite its sophistication people began leaving the refinements of the metropolis for the harsh reality of the desert. Young people sought the deprivations of the wilderness in order to experience the divine. Critchley, who is not a religious person, describes looking at his students as they considered the Desert Fathers and seeing a deep longing in their eyes. The students connected with the material “in a way that almost never happens in teaching.” The students found the mystics’ secession from society appealing but, instead of leaving ancient Alexandria, these students longed to leave behind an over-stimulated culture in which plugged-in young people are bombarded nearly every minute by the terrors of war and the promise of ecological disaster.<sup>9</sup>

The public radio program that provided Critchley’s account argued that the students’ pessimism and desire to withdraw from society found their source in an awareness of the impending disaster of human-caused climate change. For younger people today, the threat of the end of the world comes not from “mutually assured destruction” via nuclear war but rather from ecological disaster. Unlike during the Cold War, when western culture shared a common enemy in the Soviet threat, now no “other” exists to blame for the world’s pending demise. One need only look in the mirror in order to discover the culprit.<sup>10</sup>

Christian theologians might label such a sense of guilt mixed with helplessness as “lost-ness.” A recognition of one’s own destructive tendencies and their effects not only on oneself but also on one’s fellow human beings and all of the planet might have in an earlier age caused such a person to turn to Christianity for help. Yet, the contemporary western church stands not only exiled from its culture but exiled from creation itself.

Yet, for whatever complex reasons, Western Christianity became tone-deaf to the manifestation of Wisdom in nature. One finds traces of this awareness here and there, but Christianity for the most part forgot the divinity of nature. The cost of that forgetfulness is now taking on a terribly destructive form as the slow agony of nature writes itself in bold letters.<sup>11</sup>

In this time when climate change has made clear the destructive nature of humanity, the western church must respond neither with denial of ecological disaster nor by peddling tales of apocalyptic horror but with repentance if it wishes to gather in those who are lost to pessimism.

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9. Critchley’s account is taken from “In the Dust of This Planet,” an episode of the public radio show *Radiolab*, originally aired September 8, 2014, <http://www.radiolab.org/story/dust-planet/> (accessed September 28, 2014).

10. Ibid.

11. Farley, *Gathering Those Driven Away*, 126.

In this time of ecological disaster, Ezekiel 34 “speaks with a piercing relevance the prophet could not have imagined.”<sup>12</sup> Yahweh castigates the former rulers of Judah for exploiting the resources that make for a healthy flock:

Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture,  
but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture?  
When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet?  
And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet,  
and drink what you have fouled with your feet? (vv 18–19 NRSV)

Despite the western church’s complicity in environmental exploitation, a preacher wishing to speak to those concerned about climate change can draw from the deep well of tradition in the Hebrew Bible, such as Ezekiel 34, demonstrating Yahweh’s concern for “responsible ecological stewardship.”<sup>13</sup>

To be sure, invoking Scripture does not prove that one cares more for the environment than a person who chooses not to align with Christianity or any other religion. As if we did not already know that religious people stand as no more moral or immoral than non-religious persons, streams of social scientific research in recent years validate this sad truth. Yet, drawing upon Scripture such as Ezekiel 34 may perhaps offer a response to the criticism that organized religion in general, and Christianity in particular, remains tone-deaf to the crisis of climate change.

## The church is burning

“Your church is on fire.”

Hearing these words, the protagonist of the 2014 film *Calvary*, an Irish priest named Father James, turns in horror to watch the small church where he serves as priest engulf in flames. The townspeople who alerts Father James to the conflagration does not share the priest’s horror but instead offers his words with a jaded bemusement. In fact, no one in the small coastal Irish village, except for Father James, seems upset about the loss of their church. On the contrary, they make crude jokes while it burns. One bystander taunts the priest, “Your time has gone, and you don’t even realize it!” This scene presents in miniature the state of the western church.

*Calvary* offers a moving meditation on the limits of forgiveness and chooses as its setting contemporary Ireland where clergy sexual abuse scandals have deeply wounded the psyche of the culture. In this small Irish town, the villagers offer varied responses to despair from cynicism to masochism. Even Father James’ own daughter from his previous life before becoming a priest shows up with fresh scars from a recent suicide attempt.

To set the stage for this tale of existential angst, the film begins with a quotation from Augustine—a quotation referenced in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*.<sup>14</sup> Many of the characters of the film have given up awaiting the divine to offer salvation from pessimism, and the audience also must wonder if a shepherd for these lost sheep will ever appear. The movie’s final scene leaves open the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation, but such hope seems fragile indeed.

12. Darr, “The Book of Ezekiel,” 1469.

13. Ibid.

14. Glenn Kenny, “Calvary,” posted August 1, 2014, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/calvary-2014> (accessed September 28, 2014).

Like the burning church in *Calvary*, the church in exile seems ill-equipped for this age of pessimism. One reviewer's description of the world of the film seems an apt description of our times:

This is a world that has lost God. It is crying out for meaning, for faith, for a passionately presented Christian message. The ghastly obstacle to that is of course the church's own crisis.<sup>15</sup>

As the western church metaphorically burns, what will its sheep and shepherds do? Railing against the depravity of a secular age seems like screaming into the wind. Furthermore, blaming those outside the church for their unbelief deflects attention away from the church's inability to proclaim a message of hope and justice. Thankfully, the church has not been left to its own devices; a divine shepherd exists to tend the scattered flock.

If it will offer the people of this pessimistic time the divine shepherd seeking to gather and care for scattered sheep rather than a caricature of God reflecting its own defensiveness and hypocrisy, the church may rediscover the breadth of God's love. The church in exile may find not a culture divided between believer and unbeliever, Christian and heathen, but rather a generation of people alienated from the institutionalized church—some of whom still bother to attend worship on Sundays.

Perhaps the divine shepherd might reveal to the church the fallacy of dividing the world into "us" and "them." Instead, those of us watching the church as we have known it burn, might realize that we are all of one flock and all in need of our shepherd to gather us together. Wendy Farley describes the inclusive nature of such good news:

The witness of Christianity's rejected and despised is essential to the Gospel ... We can be grateful that the institutional churches have what is required to carry Christianity forward through history. But the institution, ingenious in its mimicking of regimes of domination, is not what makes the church the body of Christ. Christ's own body was poor, brutalized, murdered. He describes the bodies of prisoners, of sick people, of the naked and hungry as his own body. Without those driven away, Christianity cannot be the body of Christ.<sup>16</sup>

Only when the church understands that both those mourning and those mocking the burning church belong to the same flock can it experience the ingathering by its shepherd. Like the people of Israel in exile so long ago, the church in exile must hear anew the declaration, "'You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God,' declares the Sovereign Lord" (Ezek 34:31).

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15. Philip Jenkins, "Priest Under Threat," *Christian Century*, posted September 4, 2014, <http://www.christiancentury.org/reviews/2014-08/priest-under-threat> (accessed September 28, 2014).

16. Farley, *Gathering Those Driven Away*, 5–6.



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