Proper 20 • Ezekiel 34:11–16; 20–24 • November 23, 2014

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known to the hearers of old if lost to us today) notes the very specific and real nature of this destruction and may be defining the boundaries of the city. No one can escape the searchlights; more profound and penetrating than Diogenes’s quest it would be! (v. 12).

No one escapes the judgment, from the priests and participants in false worship (v. 4), to the royal house (v. 8), to the merchants (v. 11), and to the general atheists and agnostics who say, “God is irrelevant” (v. 12).

Homiletical Application

Biblical theology takes sin and judgment seriously, because it also understands grace and new life so profoundly. The final days of the church year bring this to culmination and then lead round once more to the advent solution: Christ has come, died, risen, and will come again.

This is not a cry to “shape up” or even “repent,” but to recognize the inevitability of the great day of Yahweh against all fallen creation, focused on his special creature, humanity, represented by his chosen people, Israel and now only Judah. There is no escape.

But, if Judah becomes central, even as a sacrifice for the nations, central to is the goal that a renewed Judah, embodied in the Son of Abraham and Son of David, “reduced to One,” will rise from the death of judgment to establish the new creation and resurrection life that is ours in Christ, who has taken this cosmic and personal judgment onto himself.

To take Jesus’s sacrifice seriously and completely, we first take God’s judgment fully and completely, which he has done for us.

Andrew Bartelt

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God Protects and Heals His Flock

When faced with the fall of Jerusalem, Ezekiel describes the judgment on those shepherds responsible and the reasons for the fall. In our passage he declares that God will provide new shepherds who will care for the flock and will tend to them properly. In the intervening verses, he then warns the people about panicked and shortsighted selfishness in the face of crisis, as well as indicating that judgment is coming and God will send one righteous Lord from the line of David to care more deeply for the flock.

Preceding Context

In chapter 33 Ezekiel speaks of the consequences of not warning sinners of their evil acts and judges those responsible for such warnings that they will face the same consequences if they do not warn the wicked. Ezekiel then announces that it was because of the wickedness of the city and because of its defilement that God has judged Jerusalem. The beginning of chapter 34 is a diatribe against the rapacious shep-
herds who have only been concerned with their own gain and not with the good of the city and the kingdom. God will rescue his flock from such rapacious men.

Following Context

God will restore the city and beat down the chaos caused by its abandonment. The savage beasts probably indicate foreign threats (as opposed to the fat sheep, who are an internal, domestic threat, see below). This makes sense as the next chapter deals with the fall of Edom.

Problem with the Pericopal Selection

I wish the committee selecting the passage would have left the passage alone and not have excised verses 17–19. The passage as edited eliminates some clear statements of law and the original text makes a superior presentation to the redacted version. As a preacher, I would modify the reading to include the redacted verses. In this contribution I will use the full text.

Points of Interest

God will restore his flock by gathering the scattered among them, as the text describes in some detail. Furthermore, he will richly feed his flock on the mountains of Israel. This means that the entire land will be at peace. God will search for the lost, restoring them. God will destroy the sleek and the strong, and he gives the reasons why in the passage not included. They have not only had enough for themselves but have selfishly taken more than they needed and have also ruined the environs for the other sheep so that they starved. This point represents significant law for a culture of greed and narcissism. God will therefore judge the strong, bullying, selfish, fat sheep, and he will protect and feed the weak sheep. He will do this through the “David” he has appointed, the Christ. And God will, through this Christ, usher in a kingdom of peace and righteousness.

Law and Gospel

There are three axes of law in this text: the first is law against the shepherds who have neglected their duties, the second is against the sheep who have brutalized their own people, and the third is against those foreign powers who would take advantage of the situation (the wild beasts). The main issue of law here is selfishness under duress where love for the neighbor is required.

The gospel is found in God’s restoration of his kingdom through the work of the Christ, the new David who is to come. It is found in the provision of a gracious and just Lord, who will bind up and care for the weak and injured and make them to lie down in those green pastures. Here Psalm 23 would be appropriate as a supporting text. Although there are tie-ins with the gospel reading for today, I would consider using the John 10 text on the good Shepherd and his sheep. The feeding of the five thousand in John 6 would also work well as it specifically says, “Jesus said, ‘Have the people sit down.’ There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down . . .’” (Jn 6:10).
It is more difficult on the basis of this passage alone to make direct tie-ins to the cross and resurrection, but there is no reason that these matters cannot be brought in as support for what and how Jesus gives us his body and blood as “grass.”

**Two Kinds of Righteousness**

For those who would preach using the two kinds of righteousness as a paradigm, one could begin with a briefer presentation of the matters of law and gospel above treating how God brings his righteousness to us through the new David and then discuss how we can also love our neighbor in times of hardship and trouble. To me, this text lends itself more easily to a law-gospel presentation.

The church journeys into Advent, anticipating renewal in the vital proclamation of Jesus’s incarnation—embodied grace in the embryo of a woman’s womb. The church becomes that vessel of incarnate grace where we are saturated in baptismal living waters that have claimed, redeemed, and forgiven us. The Church remains an eternal community gathered around the table of Eucharist grace—where, by faith, we receive the real, incarnate, inseparable, incredible forgiveness food of Jesus’s own body and blood in bread and wine. Abundant grace is revealed, proclaimed, and preached in the word. Abundant grace soaks, nourishes, recreates, and feeds us in the sacraments. Abundant grace in life and death strives and thrives for God’s believing and broken people!

Paul’s inaugural greeting infuses grace language into the Corinthian church. This is intentional. This is profound. Christian invocation and benediction decrees grace to the faith-filled keeping us connected and inseparable from the name of the Holy Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is our liturgical ritual, the grammar of our dialog in worship and community. Grace repeatedly forms us as Christians. We receive book-ended grace; it initiates us into the Christian faith, it sustains us and finishes our paradoxical oscillating journey between rebellion and redemption, rebellion and redemption, rebellion and redemption, over and over again. Without God’s intervening grace in Christ Jesus, life would end only in death—a mortal finish line!

Rend the heavens and come down is an incipit of an Advent collect that hints at the enormity of God’s intervention! Advent is not just anticipatory of a saccharin-sweet nativity story, but bona fide bitter judgment against sin! Heaven and earth collide and are mingled in Jesus! God and man! Jesus is wrapped in human flesh; the world is wrapped in divine grace . . . a God-given shield and armor defending us against overt satanic assault and evil’s subtle, deceptive influence. God grace is sufficient to safeguard us. God grace is steadfast through life. God grace keeps us buoyant until that final day of judgment, the resurrection of flesh, and eternity’s unrivaled revelation—our immortal un-finish line!