

**Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24**

For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, <sup>22</sup> I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. <sup>24</sup> And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken.

**Matthew 25:31-46**

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. <sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, <sup>33</sup> and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup> for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup> I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ <sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup> And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ <sup>40</sup> And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family,<sup>[a]</sup> you did it to me.’

Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; <sup>42</sup> for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ <sup>44</sup> Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ <sup>45</sup> Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did

not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’<sup>46</sup> And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” (741)

I had a professor of Old Testament, Hebrew Bible, in divinity school who wanted us to synthesize a week’s worth of reading into a one-page summary. He would then pick at random an essay from among those submitted to read aloud to the whole class. In this first lecture of the semester, he explained his pedagogy: “Because there’s nothing like the prospect of being humiliated in front of your peers to make you do your best work.”

This statement hit me in the bowels. I looked around the lecture hall—100 or so students, many of them doctoral candidates, many specializing in Hebrew Bible, many steeped in Biblical Hebrew. I was a master’s candidate, a pastoral candidate, which is to say someone with wholly other goals than academic perfection. I’d taken one other course in Hebrew Bible, and this second one would be my last. I didn’t know biblical Hebrew and had no intention of ever knowing it, much as I admire those who do. I am not a confident reader of scholarly works. I’m very dependent on learning in the context of relationship—in conversation with other students, in conversation with teachers. Most of all, the threat of negative consequences is never something that would have me succeed. It is always a condition that has me too scared to do my best, too scared sometimes even to think.

I went to the professor’s office hours and asked him if he had any hints or advice as to how to do this—synthesize a hundred pages of more of dense reading into a one-page summary. He told me, “I’m not going to hold you by the hand.” I was shocked at his response, and I think it showed on my face because his face changed at this, as if he’d actually just heard himself, and now, *he* seemed humiliated.

I thought of it a while ago when, following a shooting of the sort we’ve become used to—a young white man who shot up a mall or a park or a school or something—an acquaintance posted on Facebook about it. The post indicated that the cause for these terrible outbreaks of violence is the decline in popular thought of the reality of hell as a consequence for wickedness. He seemed to think the prospect of hell could motivate good behavior, or would at least disincentivize grossly bad behavior.

Maybe.

This, though: “For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. 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. I will feed them with good pasture, and... they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel.”

This, though: “I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down... 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... I will feed them with justice...”

That has real appeal. Like music pealing out, or church bells pealing out, love, care, someone to gather you in: that has real appeal, if you ask me.

There is one passage in all the New Testament that speaks of eternal punishment, this which has come to be thought of as hell—one passage, and this is it, coming at the end of the gospel of Matthew, coming at the end of Jesus’ life. This was when the corruption of the religious authorities was about to be fully revealed, as they turned Jesus over to be crucified because they feared displeasing the whipped-up crowd. This was when the brutality of the imperial authorities was soon (and again!) to be on full display, as they had centurions nail people to crosses and plant them in the ground. Strange trees bearing strange fruit. This was when none of the people who were actually in charge seemed in the least bit human, when none of the people who actually occupied positions of power seemed to be operating with any understanding of what it’s like to be alive right now. And all this corruption and brutality and mindlessness would come home most immediately and absolutely to Jesus—his life, his *body*, nailed to a cross two days hence.

It puts one in mind of what to do about it all.

It puts one in mind of what to do about the fact that some people are just bad, shockingly though reliably bad—cruel, corrupt, brutal, merciless, and unable ever to own up to any of that.

And sometimes these people rise to power.

Or is it that power makes this of people?

Or is it that such things were done to them, the only things they know—cruelty, brutality, humiliation?

It puts on in mind of what to do about it, how even to understand it. Are such people accursed and therefore they’re bad? Or are such people bad and therefore they’re cursed?

See, this is more of a parable that Jesus told than it first appears—because it presents questions as much as clarity.

Hell. There's one passage in all the New Testament that indicates a divinely ordained realm of eternal punishment, and this is it.

There are, on the other hand, “a remarkable number of passages in the New Testament... that appear instead to promise a final salvation of all persons and all things, and in the most unqualified terms.”

This is David Bentley Hart writing in his book, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation*. A sharp-witted and sharp-tongued scholar of all things church, Hart is hardly a Beanie Baby of a man, a squishy wearer of Birkenstocks and tunics. He'd have made it through that Old Testament class just fine.

And so, it's with this sharpness and intolerance of personal need that he comes at the Christian clinging to the concept of hell in such a way as I trust: he has little tolerance for what personal ax-grinding a strong belief in hell gives way to, little tolerance moreover for what terrible thing it suggests about God. This is summed up in a blurb on the back of the book: “If everything and everyone are not finally restored, then God is not God.”

Indeed, the sort of god who would imagine, create, and operate such hell is not God.

The question, then, is, why is this here, in the gospel of Matthew, and how shall we read and understand it?

The larger question is how shall that restoration come? By what process? As a refiner's fire, burning impurities as from silver? As a fuller's harsh soap, as when washing impurities from wool? As a newborn baby who makes all other concerns fade, really focuses the mind and the heart?

Now, the question for us is how painful do we want our restoration to be? The question for us is how much do we want to commit to and accumulate in life that needs at the last to be burned off or scrubbed out or brought from protective darkness to true light? Or shall we go ahead and begin our practice now? Shall we begin with God in building the world restored so we live those blessings now, we live in the light now?

Otherwise, the shock of it: that could burn, might even feel punishing, though it is in truth restoring.

I remember as a teenager going to Florida in the middle of winter to visit my grandmother. Coming from New Hampshire, I'd hit the beach as soon as the sun came up, having not seen sun like that in months. Those sunburns hurt the most. Blisters. Sleeplessness.

Here is Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "truth."

And if sun comes  
How shall we greet him?  
Shall we not dread him,  
Shall we not fear him  
After so lengthy a  
Session with shade?

Though we have wept for him,  
Though we have prayed  
All through the night-years—  
What if we wake one shimmering morning to  
Hear the fierce hammering  
Of his firm knuckles  
Hard on the door?

Shall we not shudder?—  
Shall we not flee  
Into the shelter, the dear thick shelter  
Of the familiar  
Propitious haze?

Sweet is it, sweet is it  
To sleep in the coolness  
Of snug unawareness.

The dark hangs heavily  
Over the eyes.

Hart explains that, according to the whole corpus of the New Testament, there seem to be two eschatological horizons, two aims at the end of all things. The closer horizon is of historical judgment, "where the good and evil in all of us are brought to light and (by whatever means necessary) separated." Here is removed that which acts acrimoniously from that which acts more peaceably. Here, it seems, is separated out that which acts as goats, butting each other for no apparent reason, from that which acts as sheep, meandering in the simple search for good grass. (A flock of wooly stupidity is preferred, apparently, to horned head-butting, goats being cute and

funny notwithstanding.) But this process of separation or purification is here alone supposed as done with the aim of eternal punishment. It is here alone supposed that punishment, and not restoration, is the point. It is everywhere else supposed as in relation to a “more remote horizon of an eternity where a final peace awaits us all, beyond everything that ever had the power to divide souls from each other...”

I think that allows for us to weigh this as far as importance, weigh it against all the other biblical imagining as far as what God intends for God’s creation in eternity, a realm where justice is realized, the truth, in all its tragedy and evil and glory, is brought out, mercy pours forth, love is the rule, and Christ the Crucified One is king.

Today is the final Sunday of the church year. Next week we begin anew, following Mark in his telling of the life and passion of Jesus. Matthew’s a challenging gospel; Mark has its challenges as well, but they’re ones I tend to enjoy more.

This is good because we’ve got challenge enough in our lived lives. This winter will be dark in more ways than one. The holidays coming up, if we’re wise and mindful of others, will be unlike any we’ve ever lived. So, there’s perhaps reason now more than ever to walk with the church through the liturgical year, keeping time in this ancient and sacred way, allowing yourself to be gathered in by care and love.

Strange to say, perhaps: we have much to look forward to.

Thanks be to God.