

“God of the Underdog” GPPC 11-26-17  
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24, Matthew 25:31-46

Some of you may remember the TV series Superman. Meek and mild newspaperman Clark Kent was secretly Superman in disguise. And whenever injustice or trouble arose, Clark Kent would dash to a phone booth to change into his Superman outfit. (A phone booth was a metal and glass container. Had a telephone with a cord connected to it. You'd put money in the slot to talk on the phone. If you still don't know what a phone booth is, please see me after the service and I'll explain; and I'll tell you about 8-track players too.) At any rate, after changing clothes Superman would fly off to the rescue. A gathered crowd would see him flash across the sky and they'd shout (say it with me). “Look! Up in the sky. It's a bird. It's a plane. It's Superman!” Anybody remember?

Well, when I was a child there was a TV cartoon my sister and I used to watch. It was similar to Superman, and though we didn't know it at the time, it was probably a gentle parody. And at the end of each cartoon episode we'd see the caped crusader of the series flying through the skies and then we'd hear these words. “Look! Up in the sky. It's a

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plane. It's a bird. It's a frog. A frog? Not a plane, nor bird, nor even a frog. It's just little old me... Underdog."

Anybody remember Underdog? Underdog was a dog who wore round, thick eyeglasses. He was "humble and lovable," sometimes bumbling, but always kind, a force for good. And he liked to speak in rhyme. "There's no need to fear. Underdog is here." The irony was that Underdog was also the protector and helper of those who were in trouble, who were being victimized, underdogs themselves. Anybody remember Underdog?

Oddly enough the lectionary for this morning suggests we read not one but two passages about the underdog. It seems that God simply cannot forget the underdog.

Speaking through the Prophet Ezekiel, God is angry. But angry about what? God is angry about the behavior of the shepherds. And here a shepherd is actually a metaphor for a political leader, a king. God is furious about the self-serving behavior of Israel's leaders. As one Bible scholar puts it, "The rulers of Israel's history are the undershepherds of the Lord's flock, [God's] people. They have fed themselves on the flock

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instead of feeding them. So God is against them and will take the flock from them. [God, God's self] will do the shepherd's work." (James Luther Mays, *Ezekiel, Second Isaiah*, 44.)

Notice the description of God's shepherd work. God says, "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..." There is such tenderness in this picture. Imagine a little lost lamb, wandered away from the flock, scared, hurt, lying down, bleating for help. But the shepherd is listening. She hears. She searches. And at last the shepherd comes. She says, "What are you doing over here by yourself, you poor little lamb?" Then she bends down, binds the wounds, puts the lamb on her shoulders, and carries the lamb home.

The political leaders, God's undershepherds, have failed to care for the people as they should. So God, God's very self, will care for the hurting, broken, lost, and bring them home.

Yet coupled with this gentle picture there's still the anger of God not just toward the undershepherds but also toward "the fat and the strong" sheep. A professor says in verses 17-19, "God warns that there

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are sheep that are taking all the good pasture and even fouling the drinking water so that the rest of the sheep cannot drink.” (Robert R. Wilson, in *Harpers Bible Commentary*, 690.) In other words, not only are the leaders held accountable for their behavior, so are the people of Israel. And God says, “I will feed them with justice.”

We have this persistent pattern in the Bible; God holds political leaders, as well as the people, lovingly accountable. To borrow from one Bible expert, God holds responsible kings and “all related offices of public leadership—as a form of commitment and service for the benefit of others.” (Ronald E. Clements, *Ezekiel*, 156.) The holding of public leadership is not for the building up of ego, not for the accumulation of personal wealth, and not for the exercise of raw power. No. The undershepherds are meant to work for the benefit of others. And, of course, the strong sheep, (people in the community who also exercise power) are expected not to abuse their power over the weaker people in the community. So underdogs take heart.

Now pair Ezekiel with the reading from the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew’s gospel this morning. This entire chapter is divided into three

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sections, all devoted to warning the church to prepare for the second coming of Christ. First, in verses 1-13, there is the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids. Second, in verses 14-30, there's the parable of the master who goes on a journey and leaves his servants with talents to invest. And then, third, in verses 31-46, we have the reading for this morning. This section is not a parable. It's a description of judgment, Christ's judgment of the world. And on what basis is judgment made? Judgment is made based upon how we did or did not respond to human need. How did we respond to the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, and imprisoned? In other words, how did we respond to the underdog? And in our response or lack of response, we were actually responding to Christ, in the guise of the needy, the guise of the underdog.

In my mind, this is one of the more threatening, yet hopeful passages in all of scripture. Threatening, because we wonder if we've cared enough for the needy. Have we met some human need, yet missed others? Of course. And there's nothing here about God's grace, God's forgiveness of our sins and failures through Jesus Christ. That's not mentioned here.

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But grace is mentioned over and over in scripture, and we read scripture as a whole, not simply by lifting one text out of biblical and historical context. Grace, not good works, is the bedrock of our faith. But we do good works, acts of justice and mercy, *because* we have faith, as one essential way of living out our faith. And once again, our special care is to be for the underdog. In fact, a few years ago, a group of Catholic bishops coined a memorable phrase. They said God has “a preferential option for the poor.” We might even say God has “a preferential option” for anybody who is hurting, such as those on the list in Matthew’s gospel or the wounded, scattered sheep in the Book of Ezekiel.

On the other hand, maybe we say, “Wait a minute! I thought God loved everybody equally. How can God have a preferential option for anybody, yet love all people equally?”

This past spring I met with a group of pastors who are preaching on these two texts this morning, and who are also going to speak about how these texts lead us in thinking about the vexing conflict in Israel and Palestine. One of the pastors in the group helped us understand God’s

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preferential option for the poor, God's preferential option for those who suffer. He said there is a well-known theology professor at a seminary. The professor has two children, a son and a daughter. He loves both children equally, but his daughter is much smaller than his son. So when his son and daughter have a physical confrontation, the father intervenes to protect his daughter from harm. The father still loves both children equally, but he intervenes (and keeps on intervening) until his daughter is safe and justice has been restored—a preferential option for his daughter who is vulnerable.

In the same way, God loves all people equally. But God has a preferential option for people who are in need, people who are suffering, people whose rights are being denied.

And that brings us at last to think for a moment about the ongoing conflict in Israel and Palestine. My understanding of this conflict has changed dramatically over the last five years or so. In 2012, my wife, Beth, and I took part in an interfaith trip to the Holy Land. We enjoyed the trip, learned a lot, and we were grateful for the opportunity to go. But I have come to believe that the trip did not present a balanced look at all

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sides in the conflict. And since my return, I've had long conversations with people who see the conflict differently than what was presented to us on the trip and differently from what I assumed. I've done a lot more reading about the conflict. My mind has changed.

Like many Americans, in my much younger days I assumed that at its modern founding in 1948 the State of Israel was given unoccupied land in a more or less orderly and fair process. Besides, this was the land promised to Israel by God, as we read in the Bible. It was a practically miraculous return to *their* land.

Now I know that the land was not unoccupied and the creation of the State of Israel was not orderly or fair. Modern Israel's formation was similar to our own country's acquisition of America from the Native Americans by force.

But in the U.S. media we do not hear much about the Palestinian side of the conflict. We are not reminded that when the modern state of Israel was formed Palestinians were driven off their land. Their villages were bombed and bulldozed. Israel with its superior forces and weaponry has more often been the aggressor in this conflict. And human

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losses on the Palestinian side have been much higher. And as the world's preeminent Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggemann points out, it is inappropriate to make the simplistic argument that ancient Israel and the modern political state of Israel are identical. They are not.

As our book study group here at the church has explored Bruggemann's book, *Chosen?: Reading the Bible Amid the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, we have rejected anti-Semitism, reaffirmed our love for the Jewish people (and the Palestinians), and our belief that the Jewish people are God's special chosen people.

At the same time, we've made a distinction between the modern State of Israel and the Jewish people. Like those unfit undershepherds in the Book of Ezekiel, we cannot affirm many of the decisions that the State of Israel makes. In fact, because of its vast military power (supported in large part by billions of dollars of military aid from the U.S.) the government of Israel is committing human rights violations against the Palestinians on a large scale. These violations include confiscation and destruction of Palestinian land, restrictions on travel and water, torture of men, women, and children, and even executions.

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This is documented by well-respected, nonpartisan organizations such as Amnesty International. Former President Jimmy Carter and Archbishop Desmond Tutu have referred to Israel as practicing apartheid because of its discriminatory laws and human rights violations as well. At the same time, we do not excuse or justify terrorist activity by Palestinians.

Though we continue to hear about a possible two-state solution, such a solution seems more and more unlikely as Israel continues to build more settlements on land it does not own. Maybe a single-state solution could be achieved, but that seems impossible too. The whole situation is complex, frustrating, and tragic.

So where does this leave us as Christians who love all people and who are called by God to care especially for the underdog?

It leaves us with the same calling that we have always had, to do our best to learn and understand what is happening, to speak the truth in love, to love all parties in the conflict, and especially to care for the underdog.

Like that bumbling cartoon superhero character Underdog, the church will not get it right all the time. But we must do our best, and

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trust God for the rest. Ultimately, we believe that God's love in Christ for the world will prevail. One day God, God's very self, will shepherd all God's people. God, God's very self, will usher in God's perfect peace, shalom, salaam. Because, you see, God cannot forget the underdog. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal

For further reading:

Brueggemann, Walter. *Chosen? Reading the Bible Amid the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

Chacour, Elias. *Blood Brothers*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2013.