

TAKE HOLD OF MY HANDS WHEN I CAN'T HOLD MUCH LONGER¹

Isaiah 53: 4-12

A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens

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***All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way,
and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.***

Those words, in their majestic King James cadences, roll easily off our tongues, not least because they are so familiar from Handel's use of them in *Messiah*. Handel devoted three entire choruses and an alto solo to the words from this chapter of Isaiah—that is 20 pages in my edition. In addition, this chapter of Isaiah is the most quoted in the New Testament. It was precisely what the Ethiopian Eunuch was reading when in Acts 8 we read that Philip began to speak, *and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.*²

Clearly, this chapter of Isaiah has an illustrious history.

But what in the world can it mean for us?

I

We can start by saying that the imagery of sheep and a shepherd is a long way from our contemporary lives: *All we like sheep have gone astray.*

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² Acts 8: 35.

Andre Dubus has written an essay about his experience with sheep. He had the opportunity to rent a house in New Hampshire that included eight sheep out in the barn. The landlord asked him to take care of the sheep in exchange for low rent. Dubus thought that was a great deal.

The house was furnished, had seven fireplaces, and a swimming pool in the back. There was also a rose garden, and the landlord's wife wanted those roses to be there when they returned a year later. Andre Dubus said that his image of sheep came from pictures of Jesus holding a sheep in his arms. His face was tender and loving, and he grew up thinking of sheep as sweet and lovable.

But after a few weeks in that house trying to keep those sheep out of the rose bushes and within their designated and fenced-in pasture, he got a whole new understanding of Christ's analogy of us as sheep. He concluded that what Jesus must have meant is that "we are helpless brutes, and without constant watching we would foolishly destroy ourselves."³

My friend Steve Shoemaker, pastor of a church in Charlotte, NC, tells about a *New Yorker* cartoon that pictures a slender, bespectacled man standing before a flock of sheep. He is dressed in a cap, windbreaker, slacks

³ Andre Dubus, "Out Like a Lamb," in *Broken Vessels* (Jaffrey, NH: David R. Godine, Publishers, Inc., 1991), pp. 3-4.

and shoes ill suited to the task, and carries a briefcase. He says, “Your shepherd Louis has retired. I’m Mr. Smathers. I will be your grazing-resource coordinator and flock welfare and security manager.”

We are told in the gospel of Mark that Jesus once saw a great crowd, *and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd....*⁴ Long before that, Isaiah said, *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way....* Another way to say that in contemporary terms is to say that many people are in it solely for ourselves. There is no concern for the common good; it is all about me. As long as I have what I need; as long as my family is cared for; as long as I have an income, health insurance, and a decent pension, there is no concern about anyone else. *We have all turned to our own way.*

The Bible pictures God’s attitude toward people who have embraced this approach to life. Jesus told a story about a younger son who took his inheritance and squandered it. One day the son *came to himself* and returned to his father’s house, not in the hope of being restored as a son, but wanting only to be a hired servant. But his father saw him coming and *had compassion* on him. Before his son could sputter out his prepared speech of repentance,

⁴ Mark 6: 34.

his father had placed a ring on his finger and a robe over his shoulders and called for a homecoming feast.

This is God's attitude toward sheep who have gone astray.

II

It is not hard to interpret the image of sheep going astray. We can know what that is like. But the second part of this text is more difficult: *...and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.* This imagery comes out of an ancient ceremony that reaches far back into antiquity. Many ancient cultures had some form of a ceremony of atonement, in which an animal like a sheep or a goat took on the ritual sins of the whole community, and was sent out into the wilderness carrying those sins. This is a very primitive ceremony, but from it comes our word "scapegoat."

We all know that a scapegoat is someone who is selected to bear the blame for any calamity. A scapegoat can be a person or a group of people. Nazi propaganda held that the Jews were responsible for all of Germany's political and economic woes after World War I. Throughout history a variety of groups have been used as scapegoats: people of different religions, different skin color, different sexual orientation, different political parties, and people of different traditions. The easiest way to deal with a problem is to create a scapegoat. The Southern Poverty Law Center, which keeps close tabs

on hate groups, claims that in the last decade the number of organized hate groups in this country has increased by 40%. They are all quick to scapegoat immigrants or racial minorities or the government itself for all their problems.⁵ We are very aware of the tendency to scapegoat.

Out of the context of that familiar ceremony of atonement, the early Christians interpreted the death of the innocent Christ. They looked to these words from Isaiah: *Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases...he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed....*

If we in our culture tried to put words to give meaning to the innocent death of Jesus, we might choose other imagery. But they chose that imagery out of their experience. To them, Jesus was like the ancient scapegoat who took on the sins of the whole community. But now they spoke of Jesus as taking on the sins of the whole world, of giving the whole world a new lease on life, of taking from them the burden of their own failures.

We might choose other imagery, but God knows that the essential elements are the same. We all know the tragic results of going our own way, of treating other human beings as statistics, of living life just for ourselves.

⁵ See "SPLC Report: Return of the Militias," at www.splcenter.org.

We also know that following the way of Christ brings with it a whole new perspective, a sense of release from a past that has burdened us, and a caring for others that is expressed in a thousand ways.

How do we put words to that? How do we put words to a sunrise? How do we wrap words around an essentially divine event? When the early Christians thought of the death of Christ, they thought in terms of a scapegoat. They couldn't help it! It was part of their heritage. Jesus did indeed seem to be dying with the sins of the whole world on his shoulders. No wonder they described it as darkness and an earthquake—the whole world rumbled with the sin of humanity converging on Calvary.

III

What drew you to church today? It certainly was not social pressure. It wasn't any advantage you could get in business or the social world. Perhaps there is something deep inside that resonates with an ancient scripture like the one we have considered today. Perhaps deep calls unto deep, and something deep inside allows you to know a need for forgiveness and fellowship, praise and prayer. And if you search deep enough in your own soul, you will find a need for God.

A young boy walked with his parents through a dark basement room in a large church building. The boy was afraid, so he took hold of his parents'

fingers, each of his hands holding on to the forefinger of a parent. But in his fear, the boy's hands became sweaty, and they began to slip from the fingers of his parents. He said, "You can take my hands now; I can't hold on anymore."

That's the way some of us feel as we come to church. We have been holding on to our great ideals, holding on to our faith, holding on for dear life to belief in God...and our hands are slipping. But here, in this holy place, we can look to God (who is both mother and father to us), and say, "God, you'll have to take hold of my hands now; I can't hold on much longer."