

Notes: Shabbat – December 19, 2020

Start: 10 AM

Order of service:

1. Meet and greet
2. Introduction
3. Announcements
4. Liturgy – Ma to vu, Sh'ma, Avenu
5. Music
6. Message
7. Time of prayer
8. Aaronic Blessing
9. Kiddush
10. Oneg

Title: The Danger of Being Shepherdless

At the time of Pew Research's last landscape survey whereby over 35,000 people were surveyed was 2014. To put this into context most polls done during this past Presidential election usually survey less than 2,000 people. So the breadth of this survey is rather expansive.

Back in 2014 their survey revealed a disturbing trend from their last landscape survey among one's belief in God.

In general, not factoring in one's religion, belief in God being absolutely certain went from 71% in 2007 to 63% in 2014. Thus less people over an approximately 7 year period believe in God. That number is higher among Evangelicals (88%), while among those surveyed who are Jewish was only 37%.

In Maine, the number of people who have an absolute belief in God is only 48%, well below the national result.

In Maine...

- Only 34% consider their “religion” to be very important.
- Only 22% attend a service each week while another 30% attend at least once a month
- Only 12% participate in prayer, bible study at least once a week

<https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/maine/>

This survey didn't attempt to put a number on the actual number of people who were Evangelical in 2014 as compared to 2007, but I believe the number identifying to be shrinking. Thus the number of Evangelicals having an absolute belief in God remains high as a percentage but is likely smaller in actual number. But the trend is heading in the wrong direction. More so this past year as the pandemic has exposed a stark reality. Given a reason, such as a lock down, social distancing or restricted attendance, some people are less inclined to remain within a congregation. We have experienced some attrition while at the same time have welcomed new people. Other congregations are likely experiencing greater challenges. I know my mother-in-law's church attendance is down substantially since the pandemic.

<https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>

We are approaching one year (January 31st) when the first action taken by President Trump restricting travel from China had taken place. It was in March, specifically the 28th that we as a congregation were prevented

from meeting due to the then 15 day stay at home order that morphed into an additional 30 days, ultimately expanding in Maine to the end of May. As with other businesses that serve the public such as restaurants and stores who experienced a detrimental impact of lost business, congregations have likely suffered in a loss of sheep.

Where did they go?

That is a question I cannot effectively answer for everyone. In the past 11 months I have heard:

“There is no point in me coming if there is a restriction on attendance”

I have witnessed concern if not fear from some people of being in public and thus being exposed to the virus.

We reluctantly started an online option through Webex in April in order to stay connected with you. Broadcasting online was something I had continually refrained from doing. As was proven, it is really no way for a congregation to function. It was a stopgap until we could meet again. Yet our Webex option still remains because there are still restrictions being imposed and thus I have come to realize any connection to the congregation is better than no connection.

A silver lining to this is we have people from other countries and other states join us.

What I have noticed from our start of Webex back in April until today there isn't much difference in the number of people attending a service online. Today it averages around 20, while back in April and May it was approximately 30.

As the trend that I shared with you earlier of a declining absolute belief in God has continued I believe there has been a further acceleration as a result of the pandemic. People have likely asked:

Why God?

Or the age old question justifying one's reason for not having an absolute belief in God...

Why are bad things happening to good people?

In a more recent Pew study, it was found that those attending “church” monthly or more went from 52% in 2007 to 45% in 2019 while the number of those who rarely attend is 54% in 2019, up from 47% in 2007.

Pre-pandemic the trend was a falling away.

Yet some justifications have been:

“I still believe but I don't believe in organized religion”

“I don't need a congregation to believe in God”

Yet it is “justifications” like these that cry out for a response.

There is another category mentioned in the Pew studies – that of the “nones” or the unaffiliated. These are people who have no affiliation with any congregation and their numbers have been growing. Since 2009 the number of Christians identifying as “none” has growing by 10% while one's identification as being a believer have fallen 12%. This in just the last 10 years.

<https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

<https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/maine/>

I provide you with all this background information for which many of you likely consider extremely boring...”there goes Rabbi again with his numbers” Yet it is this information whereby I point to a passage from Sha'ul, written to believers in Thessolinica regarding the return of Messiah...

2Th 2:1 But in connection with the coming of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah and our gathering together to meet him, we ask you, brothers,

2Th 2:2 not to be easily shaken in your thinking or anxious because of a spirit or a spoken message or a letter supposedly from us claiming that the Day of the Lord has already come.

2Th 2:3 Don't let anyone deceive you in any way. For the Day will not come until after the Apostasy has come and the man who separates himself from Torah has been revealed, the one destined for doom.

2Th 2:4 He will oppose himself to everything that people call a god or make an object of worship; he will put himself above them all, so that he will sit in the Temple of God and proclaim that he himself is God.

There have been teachings on “the Apostasy”, the great falling away of believers.

What is apostasy? It is the abandonment or renunciation of a religious or political belief.

I have heard teachings on the Apostasy, the great falling away whereby it was presented as being an event, a moment in time whereby there would be an enormous falling away of believers. For years I have tried to reconcile how this could occur in one event. I had considered the doctrine of the rapture and when the anti-messiah is revealed that because they were not raptured therefore their belief in God grew cold. “God had lied to them because they were still here and it was the tribulation.

Don't get me wrong, I still believe there is a potential for this scenario to materialize. However, the more important point I am trying to make is that the falling away is not a single event but a trend. We are seeing that trend happening today.

The very trend I have shared with you this morning is happening today.

Yet within any wave there is an undertow - a current of water below the surface and moving in a different direction from any surface current.

While we are watching the physical decline in absolute belief in God the first aspect to occur is the undertow of congregational attendance.

One's faith does not just disappear in a moment, but over time. Discouragement, disappointment, despair are yet another undertow of this Apostasy.

When one leaves a congregation, one becomes shepherdless.

I have heard the justification - “God is my shepherd I don't need a congregation or a Rabbi / Pastor. Yet this flies in the face of what Sha'ul conveyed to believers in Ephesus:

Eph 4:11 Furthermore, he gave some people as emissaries, some as prophets, some as proclaimers of the Good News, and some as shepherds and teachers.

Eph 4:12 Their task is to equip God's people for the work of service that builds the body of the Messiah,

Eph 4:13 until we all arrive at the unity implied by trusting and knowing the Son of God, at full manhood, at the standard of maturity set by the Messiah's perfection.

Eph 4:14 We will then no longer be infants tossed about by the waves and blown along by every wind of teaching, at the mercy of people clever in devising ways to deceive.

Yet the very ones leaving are the very ones in most need of shepherding.

Don't take my word for it...consider Yeshua's instruction to Kefa:

Joh 21:15 After breakfast, Yeshua said to Shim'on Kefa, "Shim'on Bar-Yochanan, do you love me more than these?" He replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I'm your friend." He said to him, "Feed my lambs."

Joh 21:16 A second time he said to him, "Shim'on Bar-Yochanan, do you love me?" He replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I'm your friend." He said to him, "Shepherd my sheep."

Joh 21:17 The third time he said to him, "Shim'on Bar-Yochanan, are you my friend?" Shim'on was hurt that he questioned him a third time: "Are you my friend?" So he replied, "Lord, you know everything! You know I'm your friend!" Yeshua said to him, "Feed my sheep!"

Yeshua tells Kefa to feed His sheep twice. We know through our study of Torah that something conveyed more than once is important. We are not talking of merely feeding Yeshua's sheep with food but with manna from heaven, the Word of Adonai...

Joh 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Joh 1:14 The Word became a human being and lived with us, and we saw his Sh'khinah, the Sh'khinah of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.

Joh 6:49 Your fathers ate the man in the desert; they died.

Joh 6:50 But the bread that comes down from heaven is such that a person may eat it and not die.

Joh 6:51 I am the living bread that has come down from heaven; if anyone eats this bread, he will live forever. Furthermore, the bread that I will give is my own flesh; and I will give it for the life of the world."

We are to be fed the Word of Adonai so that we will know His ways. No more is this seen than in the book of Acts, the synagogue, where all would gather – believer, non-believer, fence sitter, to hear the Word of Adonai but also to seek more...

Act 17:1 After passing through Amphipolis and Apollonia, Sha'ul and Sila came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue.

Act 17:2 According to his usual practice, Sha'ul went in; and on three Shabbats he gave them drashes from the Tanakh,

Act 17:3 explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and that "this Yeshua whom I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah."

Act 17:4 Some of the Jews were persuaded and threw in their lot with Sha'ul and Sila, as did a great many of the Greek men who were "God-fearers," and not a few of the leading women.

Sha'ul and Sila were doing as was instructed by Yeshua to Kefa, feeding them with the Word of Adonai as it pertains to Yeshua.

Just as we require nourishment for our physical body on a regular basis, so too we require nourishment from the Word of Adonai on a regular basis.

The verdict of the talmidim regarding Gentiles coming to faith in Messiah was that they needed to be fed the Word of Adonai as their primary meal in order to have any understanding of Messiah and what life in Messiah would convey...

Act 15:21 For from the earliest times, Moshe has had in every city those who proclaim him, with his words being read in the synagogues every Shabbat."

Yet the shepherdless do not eat regularly.

The shepherd is responsible for where the sheep graze, making certain they have a sufficient supply so that they won't go hungry. It is the Shepherd's responsibility to provide the source but the shepherd cannot make them eat.

I have in my midst some hungry sheep.

Yeshua also tells Kefa to shepherd my sheep. In addition to one who tends to the needs of sheep, a shepherd also guides or directs in a particular direction. This can be seen in how people not only consume the Word of Adonai but come to understand its intended meaning. Over the years, I have shared many examples of those who have identified themselves as Yeshua being their only shepherd and thus have heard some of the strangest responses to Scripture.

One such example was a belief that circumcision was required for all believers in Yeshua because of what is conveyed in Torah yet ignoring the very example provided in Acts 15, pertaining to Gentiles coming to faith in Yeshua whereby the council at Jerusalem determined otherwise.

One who is shepherdless is one who is susceptible to "grazing" in any field of theology without any form of governance. Consider a child left home alone when their parents tells them what snack they can have. Yet without supervision, the child is free to choose whatever they want. This example rings true to the shepherdless believer. Many today will focus on the P'shat, what it says is what it means. The internet is a double edge sword, where you can obtain both good and deceptive teachings. How is one to know what is kosher and what isn't.

Sheep graze but cannot discern where to eat...this is the shepherd's responsibility.

Let me conclude with Ephesians 4:11, reiterating again verses 11 – 14:

Eph 4:11 Furthermore, he gave some people as emissaries, some as prophets, some as proclaimers of the Good News, and some as shepherds and teachers.

Eph 4:12 Their task is to equip God's people for the work of service that builds the body of the Messiah,

Eph 4:13 until we all arrive at the unity implied by trusting and knowing the Son of God, at full manhood, at the standard of maturity set by the Messiah's perfection.

Eph 4:14 We will then no longer be infants tossed about by the waves and blown along by every wind of teaching, at the mercy of people clever in devising ways to deceive.

There is an intention to this structure established through the inspiration of the Ruach ha Kodesh and conveyed by Sha'ul to believers in Ephesus...

Eph 4:15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in every respect grow up into him who is the head, the Messiah.

Eph 4:16 Under his control, the whole body is being fitted and held together by the support of every joint, with each part working to fulfill its function; this is how the body grows and builds itself up in love.

The shepherd is to promote and direct growth of Yeshua's sheep into a mature understanding grounded in Torah as we have learned again from Sha'ul in his letter to believers in Rome...

Rom 10:1 Brothers, my heart's deepest desire and my prayer to God for Isra'el is for their salvation;

Rom 10:2 for I can testify to their zeal for God. But it is not based on correct understanding;

Rom 10:3 for, since they are unaware of God's way of making people righteous and instead seek to set up their own, they have not submitted themselves to God's way of making people righteous.

Rom 10:4 For the goal at which the Torah aims is the Messiah, who offers righteousness to everyone who trusts.

Thus leading to a transformation...

The New Life

Eph 4:17 Therefore I say this—indeed, in union with the Lord I insist on it: do not live any longer as the pagans live, with their sterile ways of thinking.

This is a lifestyle absent of Adonai, absent of His Word, absent of Yeshua. A shepardless people are moving away from Adonai and towards the world, the pagan world, the world of anti-messiah.

Eph 4:18 Their intelligence has been shrouded in darkness, and they are estranged from the life of God, because of the ignorance in them, which in turn comes from resisting God's will.

Eph 4:19 They have lost all feeling, so they have abandoned themselves to sensuality, practicing any kind of impurity and always greedy for more.

His protection has been denied, His shepherds have been muted and ignored.

Eph 4:20 But this is not the lesson you learned from the Messiah!

The one who is our CHIEF SHEPHERD.

Eph 4:21 If you really listened to him and were instructed about him, then you learned that since what is in Yeshua is truth,

Eph 4:22 then, so far as your former way of life is concerned, you must strip off your old nature, because your old nature is thoroughly rotted by its deceptive desires;

Eph 4:23 and you must let your spirits and minds keep being renewed,

Eph 4:24 and clothe yourselves with the new nature created to be godly, which expresses itself in the righteousness and holiness that flow from the truth.

How is this done but through the renewing of your mind by the Word of Adonai as Sha'ul once again informs us in his letter to Roman believers.

Rom 12:1 I exhort you, therefore, brothers, in view of God's mercies, to offer yourselves as a sacrifice, living and set apart for God. This will please him; it is the logical "Temple worship" for you.

Rom 12:2 In other words, do not let yourselves be conformed to the standards of the `olam hazeh. Instead, keep letting yourselves be transformed by the renewing of your minds; so that you will know what God wants and will agree that what he wants is good, satisfying and able to succeed.

A foundational aspect presented throughout his letter.

Through a shepherd's guidance, there is protection from deception and falsehoods, so long as the shepherd is not also deceived.

Eph 4:25 Therefore, stripping off falsehood, let everyone speak truth with his neighbor, because we are intimately related to each other as parts of a body.

Eph 4:26 Be angry, but don't sin—don't let the sun go down before you have dealt with the cause of your anger;

Eph 4:27 otherwise you leave room for the Adversary.

Eph 4:28 The thief must stop stealing; instead, he should make an honest living by his own efforts. This way he will be able to share with those in need.

Eph 4:29 Let no harmful language come from your mouth, only good words that are helpful in meeting the need, words that will benefit those who hear them.

Eph 4:30 Don't cause grief to God's Ruach HaKodesh, for he has stamped you as his property until the day of final redemption.

Eph 4:31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, violent assertiveness and slander, along with all spitefulness.

Eph 4:32 Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted; and forgive each other, just as in the Messiah God has also forgiven you.

The shepherd is not to take the place of the CHIEF SHEPHERD but to do as He has instructed us to do. We are to ultimately protect His sheep. Consider Kefa's inspired words...

1Pe 5:1 Therefore, I urge the congregation leaders among you, as a fellow-leader and witness to the Messiah's sufferings, as well as a sharer in the glory to be revealed:

1Pe 5:2 shepherd the flock of God that is in your care, exercising oversight not out of constraint, but willingly, as God wants; and not out of a desire for dishonest gain, but with enthusiasm;

1Pe 5:3 also not as machers domineering over those in your care, but as people who become examples to the flock.

1Pe 5:4 Then, when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive glory as your unfading crown.

1Pe 5:5 Likewise, you who are less experienced, submit to leaders. Further, all of you should clothe yourselves in humility toward one another, because God opposes the arrogant, but to the humble he gives grace.

1Pe 5:6 Therefore, humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, so that at the right time he may lift you up.

1Pe 5:7 Throw all your anxieties upon him, because he cares about you.

1Pe 5:8 Stay sober, stay alert! Your enemy, the Adversary, stalks about like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

1Pe 5:9 Stand against him, firm in your trust, knowing that your brothers throughout the world are going through the same kinds of suffering.

I urge you not to become a “none” for it is a certain path that leads to their destruction.

Remember the 37% of Jewish people who have an absolute belief in God? This means that 63% don't. Many have no opinion whatsoever. I was once one of that 63%. Thus speaking from experience, Jewish “nones” can be convinced. I don't believe I was alone but the Ruach ha Kodesh opened my eyes to see and my heart to embrace His truth and this should be our initial prayer.

So, as this time becomes even more challenging, and it will, remain tethered, anchored, attached to your shepherd. Don't be like those who think they are still safe yet are now protectionless from the subtle deceptions of the adversary. There is no shepherd to feed them or protect them.