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this way forward

A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF JESUS: WOULD YOU DIE FOR A CHICKEN?

Ezekiel 34:1-3,11-6; John 10:11-18

April 22, 2018

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Jesus' self-understanding as the "good shepherd" gives us a tremendous insight into the type of savior he believes himself to be. He is protecting, loving, and compassionate. We love this sweet image of the Lord. But first, we must remember this image is not all gentleness, not nearly. The shepherd also establishes clear boundaries, beyond which the rod and the staff will be brought to bear to return us to the center. The staff hooks us, gently guiding us into right paths but the shepherd is also willing to use the rod, a more forceful, redirecting of our energies. Jesus uses that rod when the Spirit pricks our conscious for things we have done wrong or failed to do at all.

It might be a time you disobeyed your mother, yelled at your spouse, or left something out of the offering plate you felt you owed to God. But it weighed on you. You couldn't sleep at night. You rationalized your actions but the guilt never left. You tried to ignore it for days, maybe weeks, maybe months, or even years. Though you convinced yourself you had moved on, it was still there as a pit in your stomach or an uneasiness in your mind. That is the rod of God. It seeks to redirect us to right paths and mere time never makes it go away.

CS Lewis wrote,

We have a strange illusion that mere time cancels sin. I have heard others, and I have heard myself, recounting cruelties and falsehoods committed in boyhood as if they were no concern of the present speaker's, and even with laughter. But mere time does nothing either to the fact or to the guilt of a sin. The guilt is washed out not by time but by repentance and the blood of Christ: if we have repented these early sins we should remember the price of our forgiveness and be humble.

In this way, the rod of God is harsher than a parent's switch, the pain of which lasts only a few

moments. But ultimately the burden of guilt is not meant to make us miserable, but to lead us to turn back to God and walk in his ways. That is why the Psalmist's surprising claim that the rod offers comfort rings true. Once we deal with the burden of guilt, through repentance, we feel at peace. We feel whole.

Beyond these obvious attributes of the Shepherd, Jesus gives us several more in our passage this morning: the good shepherd lays his life down for the sheep; he has sheep of another fold; he gathers them in.

The good shepherd lays his life down for the sheep

The good shepherd's self-sacrifice for his sheep adds depth and power to the Old Testament vision of a Shepherd God. The theme of Shepherd is an ancient one for God, most famously developed in the 23rd Psalm. That Psalm offers a rather idyllic view that warms our heart. But Ezekiel's vision adds insight into God's intentions.

In Ezekiel's version, much to God's dismay, the current shepherds have been eating the sheep. A curious accusation since, ultimately, that is precisely the point to raising the sheep. Mutton was a regular part of anyone's diet who could afford it.

But God pledges to replace the current shepherds, or rather to strike them down, to destroy them, and feed them with justice. This is a powerful metaphor, if we spend only a moment to consider it.

As far as the shepherd is concerned, the sheep exist solely for the benefit of the shepherd. He cares for them and protects them in order to keep the benefits of the sheep for himself. Namely to keep the wolves from eating the sheep, so he can either obtain the wool or eat the sheep himself.

The notion of a shepherd laying his life down for the sheep is ludicrous. Sheep are dumb, ornery creatures. The sheep were not people; not even beloved pets. The sheep only existed for the shepherd, so why would he risk his life for them. He wouldn't!

Consider another animal closer to our own culture – the chicken. Would you lay your life down for a chicken? Of course not – and neither would I! It is an absolutely, unimaginable act. Chickens are little more than a sandwich with legs. Jesus' act is infinitely more preposterous than if you or I died for a chicken.

But, no less than three times, Jesus declares his willingness to lay his life down for the sheep. This is the Savior we have! Willing to die for a chicken – no not even that, willing to lay down his life for a rat! A sloth! A weasel of a creature!! And he does it willingly. That is the vastness of his love; the insanity of his care; the depth of his love for his creation! Since we have heard this sweet, warm metaphor since we were children, we have a hard time hearing how crazy it sounds. But don't take my word for it.

In fact, right after Jesus finishes this analogy in verse 20 they literally accuse him of being insane saying, "He has a demon and is out of his mind! Why listen to him!" Why indeed! Would you listen to anyone who told you they were going to die for a chicken! No! But this image goes another step further in Ezekiel.

Right after God wipes out the wayward shepherds (who, after all, were only doing what anyone ultimately did with the sheep), God promises to feed the sheep with good pasture and cool water on the high mountain. In other words, God sets up this ignorant, obdurate animal in paradise itself! Suddenly, the sheep no longer exist for the good pleasure of the shepherd, but have a lofty place in the kingdom!

This is the shockingly good news we have received in Jesus' resurrection. It is love beyond comprehension!

He has sheep of another fold

Next, Jesus indicates that he has sheep of another fold. We presume he is referring to Gentiles. This must have been a head scratcher for the disciples, since Jesus never reached out to them.

But, since Gentiles form a predominance of those who confess Christ, we must ask ourselves to whom is Jesus referring today? The sheep of another flock, even then, could be identified by certain markers that Jesus uses to describe his sheep in general.

He calls them true sheep and they are those who listen to his voice, follow him, and know him. This suggests that Jesus is not so much looking for people to be a member of a club that we call "Christian" as he is looking for those who have been captured by his essence, his spirit, his way of living in the world.

Thus, the sheep of another fold in today's world would be those who live out his mandate in this world. Jesus told us what it was, "To bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and set the prisoner free." When we see another person offering the same type of love and grace that Jesus did, whether they know it or not, they are his sheep.

He gathers them in

Furthermore, Jesus is not waiting for them to come to him, not any of us. He says, "I must bring them also." This word "*bring*" indicates an active gathering. He is not waiting for their arrival; he is seeking them out. Like the parable of the wedding banquet, he is combing the highways and the byways, finding the people the world has forgotten, and giving them a privileged place at the Wedding Feast of Heaven and verdant pastures in the Gardens of God.

Perhaps this is the best news of all. For, as scripture tells us, "... all we like sheep have gone astray!" We have all wandered, like these

dimwitted animals and, though the pen of God may be feet away, we can't find the gate.

The summer of my 9th grade year was spent in rural Colorado with my father and three brothers. We were there, as I have shared with you before, to teach VBS and lead summer work groups. I remember the expansive views in which you could spot a thunderstorm from 20 miles away and the jackrabbits which raced our car along the highway.

There were a fair number of ranches. One day we visited a ranch with several sheep and I remember being confounded at how utterly incapable this one sheep was at entering the gate.

It was comical. I watched him for some 20 minutes, butt his head up against the fence, searching out a way in. All he had to do was turn to the left three feet! There was plenty of grass on the other side, but he never would have found it. I am convinced he would have starved to death had not a dog come by, yelping down the way and shooin' him along!

The Good News of the Gospel is this: Jesus came into the world to find the lost, to pound the pavements looking in every dark alley to bring us home by hook or by crook (or rather by rod or by staff!) into the good pastures that, together, we might enjoy the care, love, and friendship of the Good Shepherd God!