

The Bad Shepherd

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[0:00] Then the angels showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb.

Then through the middle of the street of the city, also on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

Blessed are those who wash their robes so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters.

And everyone who loves and practices falsehood. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I invite you to pull out your pew Bibles and turn to Zechariah chapter 11, a couple of chapters before our assigned lectionary reading.

And because Zechariah is a tricky book to find in the Bible, it's on page 949. If something happens, I should drop my Bible and lose my place.

[1:17] You guys can remind me because it's not the quickest book in the Bible to find. In our Old Testament reading today, we find an interesting prophet.

The prophet Zechariah. He preaches towards the very end of the history of the Old Testament.

After the nation of Israel had returned from its exile in Babylon and Syria.

Something that happened because the nation had turned their heart away from the one true God and worshipped idols. Nevertheless, God had shown his grace and his mercy to his covenant children.

And under the leadership of men like Nehemiah and Ezra, brought members of the three of the tribes of Israel back into the land.

The land of promise. But the nation that had been called back to the land in order to worship the Lord became lukewarm in their efforts to rebuild the temple.

[2:25] And reinstitute the priestly worship. According to the timeline laid out in the prophets, the people laid a foundation for the new temple devoted to God. And then stopped construction for 14 years.

I have some renovations in my house that kind of work that way. They've started. And hopefully in 14 years they'll be completed. We hope.

But God raised up two prophets, Zechariah and Haggai, to call them back to return to their zeal for God.

And that's the mission of Zechariah. Zechariah is a long prophecy. It's actually called, some Bible scholars call it, the major minor prophet.

Because even though it's classified as a minor prophet, it is long. These two prophets were called to stir the people up again to good works. By restoring their faith in the promises that God had made to their patriarchs, the fathers.

[3:34] If a group of people do not have faith, they lose all hope in the future, and the present becomes an unbearable wasteland.

As we saw in the reading today, Zechariah has a lot of things to say about the future. Our future. And he goes into them in great detail.

We're not going to sweat all the details of the future. One Bible teacher said, called it, counting the hairs in the mane of the four horsemen. We're not going to go down to that level.

But we are going to see what Zechariah views as the foundation of his hope. Which is really the summation of all our hopes. The only path to the Father, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Now our Old Testament reading has made this sermon almost the unofficial kickoff of our children's day camp this year. Because Zechariah spends a lot of time talking about a shepherd.

[4:43] If you look, starting in verse 4, we're going to begin to see something very interesting. Old Testament prophets were a curious group.

They had a mission unlike anyone else. Many times they revealed the future as God gave them the words to say. But other times, they had to act out very strange object lessons.

Very weird object lessons. Caleb and I have had a discussion about one such strange object lesson recently. If you want to know what it is, you can talk to us during the picnic.

But he would send prophets into situations to act out these different roles. In order to teach lessons. And that lesson wasn't always about who God was.

Sometimes that lesson was about the wickedness of the people. So they would have to do strange and seemingly evil things as they proclaimed or almost held themselves up like a mirror in front of the nation.

[5:51] We will see the story of Zechariah being called to serve as a shepherd. And when we think of the word shepherd and we think of the Bible, of course, we think of the phrase good shepherd.

But Zechariah is called to be the opposite. He's called to be a bad shepherd. And this bad shepherd is a picture of the leaders of Israel.

And their wickedness and how they treated the people. And furthermore, how God would eventually turn the nation over to these leaders as these leaders almost became a form of judgment for the people.

Of course, I think it should go without saying that the sheep here are the nation of Israel. So let's look at this passage here. In verse 4.

Zechariah says to the Lord God, Become the shepherd of the flock doomed to slaughter. Those who buy them slaughter them and go unpunished.

[6:59] And those who sell them say, Blessed be the Lord, I have become rich. And their own shepherds have no pity on them. For I will no longer have pity on the inhabitants of this land, declares the Lord.

Behold, I will cause each of them to fall into the hand of his neighbor and each into the hand of his king. And they shall crush the land and I will deliver none from their hand.

Most of you know I travel from 50 miles north of here. And I don't want to make it sound like I live in another world completely different than Syracuse.

But in some ways I do. The issue of raising animals is very important to many people where I live. And I actually have a brother. I actually have a couple brothers and they're friends. And my father raised animals. It is a common thing.

[8:06] Don't judge me because this isn't me. This is them. You can judge them if you want. When people drive around and they see a herd of animals that is not cared for properly.

To comment and make fun of that person that's raising the animals. For example, there is a farm in our area that does not feed his animals properly.

And his animals strip the bark on the trees because they don't have the proper nutrition. And that makes farmers who take care of their animals properly question the character, trustworthiness, and goodness of the person that has that flock.

Many of us wouldn't notice it. I actually wouldn't. But I can hear that complaint from the people that I know up in that region. We find here a flock doomed to slaughter.

That is not how you deal with sheep. Yes, you raise sheep for meat and sustenance. But you don't raise an entire flock and wipe it out.

[9:18] You seek to establish sustainability. This had become a characteristic of the Israelites at that time. They lost track of their future.

In order to make a quick buck, we're going to liquidate this flock of sheep. The oldest shepherd is not to wholesale slaughter of the animals that were in his care.

It's to keep a flock raised for generations upon generations. To make sure you maintain stability of the flock so that it can continue on for future years.

So God calls Zachariah to be the shepherd of one of these flocks that's headed to the stockyards to be slaughtered. And he calls him to be a bad shepherd.

Verse 7. So I became the shepherd of the flock doomed to be slaughtered by the sheep traders. And I took two staffs.

[10:17] One I named Favor and the other I named Union. And I tended the sheep. Now these two staffs, Favor and Union, are a sign of one of the covenants made with the nation Israel.

I want to be very clear here because we're going to see these staffs broken. He's not talking about the covenant made to Abraham to have a nation forever.

What he's talking about is this covenant found in Deuteronomy. He made a conditional covenant. In other words, there are terms for both parties. And he gave these covenants into the hands of the leaders of Israel.

Just like two staffs. They were tools. And it was this simple, guys. If you look at Deuteronomy, it's this. Worship the Lord your God with all your heart. And I will bless you in the land.

This staff in the hands of the leaders was a tool that they should have been able to use for great success. Verse 8. And the translation here is a little unfortunate because it probably isn't destroyed.

[11:27] Zechariah doesn't kill three people. He drives them off. But we'll go with the translation we're using today. In one single month, 30 days, I destroyed the three shepherds.

I drove them off. But I became impatient with them and they also detested or hated me. Let's get this straight. He's called to be a bad shepherd.

He's bad. He at least has three assistants. And he goes from bad to worse. He came in as a tyrant. And he just amped it up when he came in.

And he made the work conditions so insufferable that his employees couldn't even stay around. So the poorly managed flock fell into an even more desperate situation.

So I said, I will not be your shepherd to the flock. What is to die? Let it die.

[12:24] What is to be destroyed? Let it be destroyed. Let those who are left devour the flesh of one another. A completely abandoned flock breaking down within that pen.

Nothing to eat. Those who are sick not cared for. It becomes a desperate situation. And I took my staff favor and I broke it.

Annuling the covenant that I had made with all the peoples. So it was annulled on that day. And the sheep traders who were watching me knew that it was the word of the Lord.

And I said to them, If it seems good to you, give me my wages. But if not, keep them. Saying, kind of, you can see the attitude.

Has anybody had a bad employee or a bad co-worker? Calls in, storms in. And Jack has had or seen. I'm sure he's not been a bad employee.

[13:25] I don't care. Give me my wages or don't give me my wages. I don't care. Whatever it is. You don't like my job? Tough. And there's a very sarcastic word here in the translation he uses.

And he says here, at the end of verse 12, They weighed out, as my wages, 30 pieces of silver. Then the Lord said to me, Throw it to the potter.

And here it is. The Lordly price. It's a very sarcastic thing. That is a very low amount of wages for the amount of time that he served in his roles. So, I took the 30 pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord, the temple, to the potter.

Then I broke my second staff union, annulling the brotherhood between Judah and Israel. Then the Lord said to me, Take once more the equipment of a foolish shepherd.

For behold, I am raising up in the land a shepherd who does not care for those being destroyed, or seek the young, or heal the maimed, or nourish the healthy.

[14:47] But he devours the flesh of the fat ones, tearing off even their hooves. And when you talk about herd management, the caring for an animal's feet is a very important thing.

The fact that someone would abuse an animal to the point that the hooves were in shoddy condition or torn is just a terrible indictment of who this man was as a shepherd.

Why such a dark and morbid tale? The story of a wicked shepherd driving a flock to destruction, diminishing their value, their worth, and turning them into cannibalistic monsters.

The flock of Israel had seen bad shepherd after bad shepherd. They were beaten up, and they were broken down. Growing up under leadership who cared not for their well-being, and devoured their flesh, they suffered until they were broken, until even their hooves were torn.

Yet one day, to the children of Israel would come a new shepherd, the good shepherd. Zechariah's entire object lesson was meant to show what an evil shepherd looked like, so that when Jesus came, the contrast would be so crystal clear, no one would have any doubt whatsoever that the Messiah had come.

[16 : 22] Instead of a leader who destroyed people for his own gain, he came to offer up his own body that they might have life. As John proclaims, here's the good shepherd who lays his life down for the sheep.

The sheep in Zechariah's pen cringed in fear whenever they heard their shepherd's voice, fearing a beating or the butcher's knife.

Yet Jesus' sheep hear his voice, and he knows them, and they follow him. And unto them he gives them eternal life. The security found in God's covenant with his people had been thrown away because of the wickedness of Israel's rulers.

Yet the righteousness of Jesus ushered in a new era, one not marked by temporary wealth, health, or security, but eternal pastures and the greatest wealth imaginable, living forever in the presence of God.

His covenant is not remembered in the carrying of two staffs, but he instead gave us his own self as a regular reminder. He tells us weekly, take, eat, this is my body which is given for you, and drink this, all of you, for this is the blood of my new covenant which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.

[17 : 53] And I will let you in on a great mystery. When we as sheep approach the communion table, Jesus, our shepherd, meets us there to feed us and to guide us.

So what was Israel's reaction to such a great shepherd? Did they cherish him? Did they honor him? Did they celebrate him? No, they rejected him.

And they did it with Zachariah's wages. Listen closely. We cannot miss this. Judas Iscariot received 30 pieces of silver for betraying Christ to the religious rulers of Judea.

The same amount of money paid to Zachariah. Those religious leaders were actually the bad shepherds of Jesus' time.

And in Judas' guilt, he went to that temple and he cast it down on the floor too. Just as Zachariah had done centuries before.

[19 : 07] Judas was clearly stating in his betrayal of Christ that he thought Jesus was a bad shepherd. that he thought Jesus was not the Christ, that Jesus was not leading them to life eternal, but instead to destruction.

And in that way, Judas acted as a representation of a nation who had rejected their Messiah. But the good shepherd conquered death and found flocks in other Gentile nations and joined them to his Hebrew flock.

At this point, you might be asking yourself, why did we spend all this time in the shepherd account in Zachariah?

It wasn't even in our assigned lectionary reading. Well, our reading today was a presentation of the good shepherd that came only after Zachariah had done such an excellent job of playing a monster. And if we're being really honest with ourselves, as we leave today, I pray in joy because of a glorious Sabbath together worshiping, we need to remember that Monday comes tomorrow and we leave to face the crumminess of life that we endure in the world.

[20 : 36] And as we go out today, we will carry with us the words of Jesus from Luke, take up your cross and follow me. And as I look out at this parish, I know many of your trials.

And I know that for every one I know, there are probably a dozen secret pains that you hide away. And if we were completely truthful with each other, if we dropped the polite front we put up to tell each other that I'm okay and you're okay, we would admit that we are nothing but hurt and confused sheep.

And sometimes in our darkest places and the storms of this life, we even wonder if Jesus is a good shepherd. And this is why it is important for us to come together as a community, as a parish, as a church, and through the week to listen to the living word of our God.

Because we get so disoriented out in the storm that we need to hear our shepherd's voice and like sheep, desperately follow it to safety.

Because our shepherd told us that we must lose our lives in order to find it. If it is in this life only we have hope, then we are of all people to be most pitied.

[22 : 08] Our shepherd leads us out of the pen of slaughter into the kingdom of heaven. His mission was not to make the pen of slaughter a nicer place to hang out.

If we think that the gospel is about making the here and now a more comfortable or nicer place, then we are acting more like the wicked kings of Israel who wanted to sell out their future for

temporary comfort.

The Lord will return and he will set things right, leading his sheep with him into a new world. To do that, he must banish all evil, casting it into the outer darkness.

And as we will graze in green pastures by still waters, we will no longer be corrupted by the dreadful weed of sin. Our enemy will no longer lurk like a lion to destroy our souls.

And our nature will no longer be to destroy each other because of fleshly passions and desires. And for this is where Zachariah comes.

[23 : 16] He looks forward to the only good and true shepherd and sees the work he will accomplish. the Lord will give salvation to the tents of Judah first, that the glory of the house of David and the glory of the inhabitants of Jerusalem may not surpass that of Judah.

On that day, the Lord will protect the inhabitants of Jerusalem so that the feeblest among them on that day shall be like David and the house of David shall be like God, like the angels of the Lord going before them.

And on that day, I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem. And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy so that when they look on me, on him who they have pierced, they shall mourn for him.

As one mourns for an only child and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over her firstborn. And on that day, there shall be a fountain open for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.