

Our Great Shepherd
Easter 2011
Hebrews 13:20-21

After graduating from college, Brenda and I worked at King's Arrow Ranch in south Mississippi. One of the things that made the Ranch interesting was the odd collection of animals on the property. Of course we had horses down at the barn, but there were various dogs that people owned, a flock of geese that hung around the pond, a pen of rabbits, a couple goats, and one lone, sad sheep named Blue. Out of sheer loneliness, Blue hung out with the goats – who were rather unkind to her.

One family at the Ranch had a Chow named Bear with a rather aggressive disposition that they kept in a pen behind their house. One day Bear got loose and headed for Blue. She chased Blue down to the pond and out onto the pier. When Bear charged Blue, she jumped into the pond. Sheep aren't especially good swimmers to begin with, especially with a full fleece of wool. Blue was swimming as hard as she could toward the shore, but it wasn't at all clear that she would make it. And if she did, the dog would be there waiting for her. And so Mr. Z, our amazing maintenance man, jumped into the pond, swam out and rescued Blue.

That incident illustrates why the Bible makes the rather unflattering assertion that you and I are like sheep. Isaiah 53 says, "All of us like sheep have gone astray." Every single one of us has wandered away from God and His protection and into all sorts of dangers. We find ourselves vulnerable to any and every predator – both internal and external. We find ourselves at the mercy of our circumstances and at the mercy of destructive habits that we can't get past. If you have lived very long at all, you can probably think of a time when you've been right where Blue was: at the end of a pier with no good options.

What Blue really needed (long before finding herself at the end of that pier) was a shepherd. And what each of us really needs is a Shepherd – someone who will watch out for our souls, protect us, and nourish us in ways we can never nourish ourselves. The good news is that God has provided a good Shepherd in the person of Jesus Christ. We are talking about this on Easter morning because of what we read in Hebrews 13:20-21.

20 Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, 21 equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

If you've been at Faith very long, you may recognize these verses as one of the "benedictions" that we pronounce at the end of the service. These verses connect the resurrection of Jesus Christ with His ongoing role as "the great Shepherd of the sheep." If Jesus hadn't been raised from the dead, He really couldn't be our good Shepherd. But these verses emphasize that because He has been raised from the dead, He is able to shepherd us through this life in a way that nobody else ever could. Because He has been raised from the dead, we don't have to go through this life harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

This blessing is especially appropriate in light of the fact that this letter was written to people whose faith was wavering. Hebrews was written to Jewish believers who weren't quite sure anymore whether it was worth it to follow Jesus. In some ways if they renounced their faith in Christ and returned to Judaism, their lives would have been much easier. The author of Hebrews has argued long and hard that since Jesus was the fulfillment of everything that the Old Testament promised, they would be foolish to abandon their faith in Him.

At the very end of his letter, the author of Hebrews pronounces this blessing on his readers: ***The same God who resurrected the great Shepherd of the sheep is actively accomplishing His will in our lives.*** Whether your faith is wavering or strong, receive this blessing this morning.

This is really a mind-boggling proposition: the very same God who raised Jesus from the dead is actively working in our lives. Notice how God is described in verse 20.

20 Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord,

The author refers to God as “the God of peace.” The Hebrew word for peace is *shalom* – which has the connotation of wholeness or wellness. God has an unfailing commitment to establishing this type of *shalom* on earth. He does this as He brings wholeness to individual lives; ultimately He will bring *shalom* to the whole earth when His kingdom is fully established. Then everything will be at peace with everything else. What is incompatible with peace (strife, sin, death, etc.) will be banished forever.

This God of peace “brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep.” The NT is very consistent in saying that **God the Father** raised Jesus from the dead. The Father sent His Son to die for our sins; the Son willingly went to the cross; and then the Father resurrected the Son. Jesus wasn't merely resuscitated; a person who is resuscitated will eventually die again. Jesus was resurrected never to die again.

Jesus is called “the great Shepherd of the sheep.” Jesus said this of Himself in John 10:

11 "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. 12 "He who is a hireling, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, beholds the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep, and flees, and the wolf snatches them, and scatters *them*. 13 "He flees because he is a hireling, and is not concerned about the sheep. 14 "I am the good shepherd; and I know My own, and My own know Me, 15 even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep."

As sheep that had strayed far from God, our greatest enemy was sin. Sin is the predator that leaves us harassed and helpless. Our sin separates us from God and from a healthy Father/child relationship with Him. As the good Shepherd, Jesus laid down His life to deliver us from sin. He willingly went to the cross in order to pay the penalty for **our** sin.

Jesus is unique among all the “good shepherds” who have ever laid down their lives for their sheep because God raised Him from the dead. The same God who has an unfailing commitment

to establishing peace has resurrected Jesus, validating that His sacrifice on the cross paid for our sins and providing a great Shepherd for our souls.

The author says that God brought Jesus up from the dead “through the blood of the eternal covenant.” The book of Hebrews has much to say about blood and sacrifices and covenants. The old covenant given to Moses (the Law) was inferior because it was based on animal sacrifices which could never take away sin. By contrast, the new covenant was superior because it was based on sacrifice/blood of Jesus which took away sin for all of eternity. By raising Jesus up from the dead God confirmed that His blood enacted a superior covenant – one that will last through all eternity. We simply enter into this covenant/relationship through faith in Jesus.

And so verse 20 tells us that the God of peace resurrected the great Shepherd of our souls through the blood of the eternal covenant. What can we expect a God like *that* to do in our lives? Would we expect that a God like that would sit back and watch us flail around in this life without direction? Or would we expect that a God like that would be actively engaged in bringing us to maturity? You’re right: the God who resurrected the Shepherd of our souls is actively committed to refining us and giving us everything we need to thrive in our relationship with Him. That’s the essence of the second half of this blessing in verse 21.

21 equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

God is actively equipping us to do everything He’s called us to do. He is actively working in us those things that are pleasing in His sight. God uses anything and everything to accomplish His will in our lives. Nothing is off limits to God. Of course He uses His Word to shape and mold our thinking and our desires. But He also uses circumstances, other people, conversations, and whatever else we might experience in our lives.

And He does this “through Jesus Christ” – the great Shepherd of the sheep. Other Scriptures tell us that it’s *also* accurate to say that God does all of this through the person of the Holy Spirit; the three persons of the Trinity always work together in unity. But the emphasis here is upon God working through Jesus our Shepherd.

The author concludes by saying of Jesus “to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.” His conviction was that Jesus’ reputation would grow and grow through all eternity. One reason this will happen is because of Jesus’ ministry as the great Shepherd of the sheep, equipping us to do God will and working in us that which is pleasing in God’s sight.

Of course God’s commitment to accomplishing His will in our lives doesn’t imply that we’re passive or uninvolved in the process. Scripture makes it very clear that our wills are to be fully engaged in pursuing God. But our pursuit of Him is a response to His pursuit of us. In Philippians 2:12-13 Paul wrote, “. . . work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.” The only reason we can pursue a life of obedience is because He is already at work in us – giving us the ability and the desire to please Him. The author of Hebrews is emphasizing God’s commitment to working in our lives. And so he pronounces this blessing on his readers.

I suspect that most of us can agree with all of this “in theory”; but in reality we sometimes have a hard time believing, “God is actively accomplishing His will in *me*.” Sometimes I have a hard time receiving this blessing because I know my own weaknesses, sins, and inconsistencies. Because I know I’m not worthy of God’s blessing, I have a hard time believing that Jesus would really want to shepherd me through this life. But the author of Hebrews suggests that His commitment to refining me is a function of who *God* is, not who I am.

In his book *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, Brennan Manning recounts an experience that can help us understand Jesus’ unfailing affection for us as our resurrected, good Shepherd. Manning once had the opportunity to spend an afternoon with an Amish family in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Allow me to read a portion of his account of what happened that afternoon.

Jonas Zook is an eighty-two-year-old widower. He and his children raise piglets for their livelihood. The oldest, Barbara, fifty-seven, manages the household. The three younger children, Rachel, fifty-three, Elam, forty-seven, and Sam, forty-five, are all severely retarded. When I arrived at noon with two friends, little Elam – about four feet tall, heavy-set, thickly bearded, and wearing the black Amish outfit with the circular hat – was coming out of the barn some fifty yards away, pitch-fork in hand. He had never laid eyes on me in his life; yet, when he saw me step out of the car. . . he dropped the pitchfork and ran lickety-split in my direction. Two feet away, he flung himself at me, wrapped his arms around my neck, his legs around my waist, and kissed me on the lips with fierce intensity for a full thirty seconds.

Well, I was temporarily stunned and terribly self-conscious. But in the twinkle of an eye, Jesus set me free from propriety. I buried my lips into Elam’s and returned his kiss with the same enthusiasm. Then he jumped down, wrapped both his hands around my right arm, and led me on a tour of the farm.

A half hour later, Elam sat next to me at lunch. Midway through the meal I turned around to say something. Inadvertently, my right elbow slammed into Elam’s rib cage. He didn’t wince, he didn’t groan. He wept like a two-year-old child. His next move undid me.

Elam came over to my chair, planted himself on my lap, and kissed me even harder on the lips. Then he kissed my eyes, nose, forehead, and cheeks.

And there was Brennan, dazed, dumbstruck, weeping, and suddenly *seized by the power of a great affection*. In his utter simplicity little Elam Zook was an icon of Jesus Christ. Why? Because at that moment his love for me did not stem from any attractiveness or lovability of mine. It was not conditioned by any response on my part. Elam loved me whether I was kind or unkind, pleasant or nasty. His love arose from a source outside of himself and myself.

(*Ragamuffin Gospel*, p. 189-190)

As Manning said, this man embodied the “great affection” that Jesus has for us. Jesus knows that we are sheep. He isn’t shocked that we tend to wander away into all sorts of dangers. He knows that we aren’t too bright. He knows that we are just like Blue (the sheep I mentioned at the first of this message); we sometimes find ourselves at the end of a pier with no good options. Because is the good Shepherd, He loves us anyway. In Matthew 9 we read that when Jesus saw the people of Jerusalem, “He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd.” God raised Jesus from the dead so that He could live out His role as the good Shepherd in your life.

The question that you and I have to answer is simply, “Will I allow Jesus to be my good Shepherd?” Will we turn to Him in faith and will we follow Him in faith, allowing Him to accomplish His good purposes in our lives? Spiritual maturity isn’t a matter of becoming so competent and self-sufficient that you no longer need a Shepherd. Spirit maturity involves coming to the place where you are convinced, “I am a sheep. I will always be a sheep. In Jesus I have found a Shepherd for my soul.”