



“NOW WHY?”

**SCRIPTURE: EZEKIEL 34: 11-16, 20-24; MATTHEW 25: 31-46
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**

November 26, 2017

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Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

34:11 For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.

34:12 As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

34:13 I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land.

34:14 I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel.

34:15 I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD.

34:16 I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

34:20 Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep.

34:21 Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide,

34:22 I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

34:23 I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.

34:24 And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.

Matthew 25:31-46

25:31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.

25:32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,

25:33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

25:34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;

25:35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,

25:36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

25:37 Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?

25:38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?

25:39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

25:40 And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

25:41 Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels;

25:42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,

25:43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'

25:44 Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?'

25:45 Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'

25:46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

The Word of the Lord
Thanks be to God

There's nothing like a biblical passage about eternal damnation to round out our Thanksgiving holiday.

So much for all this Table Fellowship togetherness we idealize this time of year—the gospel writer of Matthew rounds out Jesus' six vexing parables about being ready for the Kingdom of God with this apocalyptic vision about the Second Coming of Christ.

Matthew's apocalyptic moment is unique to this gospel—and it is a Bible passage that can leave a bad taste in our mouths. But, Matthew is clear: any who doubt the importance of Jesus' teaching, any who dismiss the parables as crazy talk, or, worse yet, any of those who fail to see Jesus' power and authority, your very soul is in peril.

And so this Christ the King Sunday, the lectionary feeds us what can taste like a bitter pill, this vision of the compassionate being spirited off to eternal life, and of the callous being carted off to eternal damnation.

The Prophet Ezekiel and Matthew's Gospel both call on us to be careful readers of scripture. These passages have a powerful message for us today, brothers and sisters in Christ, but it will take some doing for us to hear it.

We have to get past hell first.

Hell has been out of style for a while now in churches like ours. Some of you may not be aware of how the doctrine of hell plays a role in the history of Grace Covenant.

Bob Busey, the second installed Pastor/Head of Staff at GCPC, almost did not get voted in by this presbytery when he was called to be the Pastor here. When asked on the floor of presbytery whether he believed in hell as an actual place with licking flames and the devil with a pitchfork, Bob said, "No, I do not." He was voted in by only two votes after that answer.

Now lest we too quickly bid hell good riddance, we must pay it its due. It was an effective tool for church growth in its day. And if I ever feel a bit of nostalgia for it, it is probably when stewardship campaigns are in their final stages and stewardship

committees and finance councils are having to remind the faithful over and over again to get your pledge in so we can make a budget for next year.

Back in the day, the specter of hell streamlined things to say the least. Fear is a powerful motivator—and what more potent fear-inducement than eternal damnation?

We have to be much more honest and creative these days in church. Just in case you were wondering, generous giving isn't your ticket out of hell. It's something much more life-giving: it's our way of elevating our life together to a healing opportunity—not just for us, but for a larger world that we choose to love instead of loath.

Hell is the ultimate chimera of the Christian faith—an imaginary monster with parts that just don't fit.

But before we breathe a sigh of relief about the death of hell as a fiery destination, we must open our eyes to hell as a way of being in the world.

I've seen hell on earth—ravaged bodies, tortured souls, insurmountable pain and injustice, suffering that is utterly destructive, places that seem God-forsaken, hearts that seem irredeemably hardened—I've seen all those excruciating things. Maybe you have, too.

Maybe you've been there—the shadowy pit where connections to anything alive feel like nothing but a distant memory. So, hell is as real as suffering, as violence, as torture, as a mosque becoming a war zone, as a child having no place on earth to be safe, as a family torn apart by addiction.

So, don't tell me hell is not real, is not a lived reality.

But neither can you convince me that hell is God's intention for any of us.

As clear as Matthew's vision of the last judgment is here in these few verses, scripture contradicts itself over and over again on the existence of hell. There are, in fact, more passages in the Bible that seem to suggest universal salvation than there are that assert selective damnation. Scripture is an inconclusive source for settling this theological problem of eternal punishment or universal salvation.

John Calvin himself, as stern and uncompromising as he may have become, felt we humans needed to stand down from trying to figure out who is damned and who is saved. His whole conversation about predestination was a pastoral one—please stop trying to play God, he cajoled—God is the one who knows and who has the power to mete out salvation and damnation—it is not our job to try to do that on

God's behalf. Calvin's doctrine of predestination was a theological line in the sand, not between the saved and damned, but between humanity and God.

Let God be God. And let humanity get to work being the people God is calling us to be.

There are a few things scripture is not ambiguous about—anywhere—and they revolve around the way we orient ourselves to power—to God's power, to our own power, to the power of others, especially to those with less power. But these unequivocal messages about power are not often the things that humanity arms itself with in the harsh challenges of life on earth.

The Good Shepherd is the one who saves us from ourselves—not a domineering King, not one who hoards power, not one who abuses power, or Lords power over the rest of us. But the one we can trust to be with us in a way that does not harm, the one who heals, who redeems.

The Prophet Ezekiel pivots toward a future restored and regenerated in God's sovereign care. Ezekiel's turn away from warning and judgment toward redemption is potent because he casts the vision with the memory of bad shepherds, rulers who abused their power, kings who were cruel and unjust, fresh in people's minds.

Shepherds were common metaphors for kings in Ancient Near East. Kings were expected to be just, to tend the flock in a trustworthy way, especially to take care of those most vulnerable. But, Ezekiel refers to former shepherds who violated this sacred trust. They did not know the people, they did not know their pain, their fears, their needs.

When God takes control, the flock will experience the opposite from what they have experienced under the bad shepherds of the past.

For both Matthew and Ezekiel the burning issue is not who is saved and who is damned. This burning question is about power and humanity's willingness to live into the truth about power.

How do we treat the least of these? God's healing power is our guide. How do we embody righteousness when we encounter life's most extreme forms of vulnerability? Jesus shows us the way.

The fat sheep have eaten too much. They have butted the other sheep out of the way and taken more than their share. They have trampled the pasture. The rams have fed on the best pasture, and drank the clearest water.

The Good Shepherd notices these things. The Good Shepherd makes sure no sheep go hungry and that the fat sheep and the rams are removed when they need to be so that everyone gets what they need.

Sheep graze low to the ground on grass; goats browse branches and foliage up high. They can be good grazing partners, but in rut (mating season) they need to be separated. Sheep and goats do not interbreed with success—their offspring are most often still born.

The sheep and the goats can coexist, but the Good Shepherd knows when and why they must be separated.

The Good Shepherd can separate the sheep and goats with just whistles and sounds, and gentle movements. The sheep and the goats know how to move to each side when the Good Shepherd tells them it is time. Within minutes they will be separated.

The Good Shepherd is able to separate the sheep from the goats, from the fat sheep who have been eating more than their share, the rams who have been throwing their weight around and butting the weaker out of the way.

Matthew's metaphor amplifies the ease with which Christ will know who knows him, those who have lived a life of love—just as easily as the Good Shepherd can separate his herd when the right time has come.

GCPC's resident Good Shepherd, Anthony Cole:

We humans have had a partner relationship with sheep for about 10,000 years. And that relationship provided us with meat, milk, and fiber from an animal that thrived in conditions that other animals would literally starve. Over those centuries, some traits were lost by selection and breeding, other traits were amplified. The sheep became domesticated.

In fact, with exception of your dog, the sheep is the most domesticated animal on the planet. Unlike their wild cousins who are solitary, domesticated sheep have an intense flocking instinct. This was so they would be together for management and safety. Predators would come and might get one or two, but with the flock together, most would survive. Sheep also totally lost their ability to protect themselves. They have no fight instinct but only flight. They run if danger is imminent.

If they lie down on a walnut or rock and think they can't get up, they will literally lie there and die. If they get caught in thorny roses or fence, they will literally stand there and die unless help arrives. Hence the job of the shepherd. The shepherd keeps the sheep together, protects them, cares for them. They do know who that shepherd is, both by sight and sound. ~Anthony Cole

God knows us—and knows our hearts—it's as simple and clear, and as fraught and complicated, and as life affirming and ennobling—as the way a good shepherd knows and cares for his sheep.

I can walk by the barn, or on the hill, in total darkness, where they are bedded down and they will not get up and run. I will speak or baa at them and they will baa back. All have different sounds in their voices and I know who the bass and baritones are.

Yet, they can see someone or a dog they do not know at a distance and will come running to the barn or the shepherd. There is a trust they exhibit because they know who cares for them. They also know, and remember those who are not kind. ~Anthony Cole

That sacred trust is what we surrender to as our lives unfold—we can never anticipate the twists and turns. Christ calls us to trust him in the midst of it all.

There are more important things to do, brothers and sisters, than to sit and pontificate about things that are not ours to know. Whatever frees you from that delusion, that mistaken impulse to think it is the church's job to separate the herd; let it free you up to do the work that Jesus calls us to do.

Jesus is the now what and the now why.

Jesus is the King who teaches us how to stop weaponizing our power, our privilege, and our social position.

Jesus is the King who says, come to me, all you with heavy burdens and I will give you rest.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who is there for us in our times of trial—who does no harm, who abides with us with a healing power that we can trust:

I've been in the lamb barn/lot in the middle of the night when it was so quiet that you could hear a mouse sneeze with ewes at birthing. Just the shepherd and the sheep with the miracle of creation. The ewes are usually fine on their own..they've been doing it for a few thousand years.... but if they need help, they

will look at you and often allow intervention...knowing no ill will is coming to them from their shepherd. It's a special thing. Sheep do know their shepherd.
~Anthony Cole

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is the One who harrows the bowels of hell to set the captives, the likes of us, free.

“And the world is turning in the body of Jesus and the future is possible.” –Lucille Clifton

Thanks be to God.