

Feeling Sheepish

November 22, 2020

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

As a little kid, I loved to go swimming. My parents had a membership at a country club on island so that my brothers and I could go swimming in the summer time. We went there often enough. When we did go swimming, I never saw a person drown, and I always wanted to see a person get saved. So, I came up with a plan: at least once every visit, I would pretend like I was drowning, just so see what would happen. The lifeguards never fell for it, luckily, because I realize now how much trouble I would have been in if I did fool them. Perhaps this desire of mine had something to do with my love of superheroes. They always saved the day. They did the right thing. No matter the obstacle, the city was always saved from certain destruction by who-knows-which of a hundred different supervillains. Hence the reason, when I was a child, I wanted to be superhero when I grew up. I wanted to save people, like Superman or Batman. I am not alone in this aspiration, though.

Many children, when asked what they want to be, list off a whole host of jobs from doctors and nurses to firefighters and policemen to superheroes. As a populous, we love movies, TV shows, and stories about these “savior” figures, but why is that? Why do we as people (in general) love superhero movies or movies about cops/firefighters? On the whole, we love movies, shows, and stories about those being saved, whether that’s physically, emotionally, or spiritually. I believe it’s because we ourselves don’t always know if *we* are saved. We can theorize as much as we like, but at the end of our days, whenever that may be, no one knows beyond a shadow of a doubt what they will see, where they will be, or who they will encounter. I have a feeling that, if I were to ask everyone here “Are you saved?”, the answer would be, “I believe so, yes.” We believe we are saved. However, as strong as one’s belief can be, it’s different than knowledge. None of us *knows* if we are saved. Therefore, it’s pertinent that we then look to the Bible to see what knowledge it can share with us on this matter.

One answer on how do we not just believe but know if we are saved is from the Ezekiel reading for today. The reading tells us that God is our shepherd. God even says, “I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.” Note that God is not appointing others to look after us. God is explicitly stating right here, “I am the shepherd, and I will watch them.” He then continues on to say, “I will rescue them from all the places where they are scattered on a day of clouds and darkness.” In other words, no matter how far apart we are, no matter what we face in life, we will all be brought closer by God. No matter how far apart we are physically, we are brought spiritually close as a flock in a pasture. God then continues, saying, “I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak.” So, in short, God loves us, God cares for us, and God is always there for us. Therefore, this passage tells us beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are all saved. However, there is another answer given by one of the other suggested Bible readings for today.

The gospel reading for today, from Matthew 25, is the Parable of Sheep and Goats, a very familiar parable. In this parable, we are told the sheep are those who “love their neighbors as themselves.” They care for the sick, visit the lonely, feed the hungry, and saturate the thirsty. The goats, on the other hand, are those who do not do those things. In the end, we’re told the

sheep are saved and the goats are not. Therefore, if you are a sheep, you are saved, but if you are a goat, you are not. We have this conflicting message then. Are we saved or not?

The Ezekiel passage says God loves us, cares for us, and will never abandon us. The Matthew passage, though, says that, at the end of times, we'll be divided into "Saved" and "Condemned." Therefore, we need to watch ourselves. So, which is the truth: the "carefree salvation" proposed by Ezekiel or the "needing to constantly worry about where we fall" proposed by Matthew? The answer is both. Like Ezekiel says, God is a parental figure who won't abandon us ever and loves us more than we can comprehend. Like Matthew and other parts of the Bible, there is mention of the separation of the "saved" and the "condemned," but these passages should not be a catalyst for fear and trembling. If God does condemn God's children (which is a can of worms for another time), it's very easy to tell which of the two categories you'd fall into. All you have to do is ask yourself one question: are you concerned about which category you're in? If you say "yes," that means you are concerned about your salvation, and therefore, you're by definition putting forth the effort to follow God's laws. You're "doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God." You're loving your neighbor and God with all of your heart, mind, soul, and strength. You are putting the talents God has graced to you to work and you are prepared to wait for the Second Coming of Christ. However, if you say "no," that could mean a couple things. It's possible that you *could* be very confident in your skills to live by the laws of God to a point that you don't even need to worry about it. The only warning there would be "beware of self-exultation/over-confidence". The other possibility is you don't care about living under God's rule, but rather decide to "blaze your own trail" and "fly by the seat of your pants," which is the only reason you *might* be condemned, if God condemns God's children at all. Again, that last point is a can of worms we won't open right now. So, if you are "saved," which is anyone who's been baptized and tries to do God's will, God is your shepherd.

In the end, then, I encourage of you all to take comfort in that fact. We are all saved. We are all watched over and cared for by a God whose love is limitless and unconditional. In short, we are the sheep both passages speak about. We are cared for, and though we might stray from time to time, though we might not always make the most righteous of decisions, we will always be brought back because God will always search for us and bring us home, welcoming us as prodigal children. We are told these things not that we might just believe but know, that we might not just believe we are saved but know we are saved, that we might not just believe in the Triune God but that we might know the Triune God. So, I have to wonder: How can we not celebrate having a God like that, a God through whom we have an irrevocable salvation and an immeasurable love? Therefore, I invite you all, as you go forth from this place on this Christ the King Sunday, to rest assured in the knowledge that you are saved, you are loved, and you will be cared for by God for all eternity.