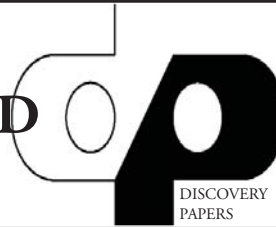




GOOD, GOOD, GOOD



Catalog No. 20140420
John 10
Easter Message
Scott Grant
April 20, 2014

It was triggered by a song. That, and the interruption of Internet service: a friend had given me a compact disc that included the song “The Ballad of Jody Baxter” by Andrew Peterson. I had just finished listening to the song for maybe the fifth time as I parked my car to begin my day at work. I ascended the stairs, entered my study, and plugged in my computer only to discover that the Internet was down. Instead of immediately looking for something else to do, I quieted myself for a few moments. That’s when “The Ballad of Jody Baxter” came back to me.

In the song, the singer identifies with Jody Baxter, who used to enjoy playing in the woods as a child: “And it was good, good, good, but now it’s gone, gone, gone.” Now, as an adult, the singer feels like “a little boy who’s lost in the woods always looking for the fawn.”¹

As I leaned back in my chair, I felt the words of the song, and I began to weep—and I didn’t stop weeping for fifteen minutes or so. I often feel bursts of joy or sadness that produce a tear or two, but fifteen minutes of tears is a rarity for me. When I weep for that long, I wonder whether God is trying to get my attention. Especially because I had planned to do something other than lean back in my chair and ponder the lyrics of a song, I assumed that he was.

Why did I weep? Sometimes, I feel like the boy who’s looking for something that’s lost. The more you live, the more you lose. Something that was good, good, good is gone, gone, gone. It stabs you with nostalgia only to remind you that you no longer have it. The singer begs the fawn to come back to him, but the fawn doesn’t come back.

Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be

You enjoy a relationship, but the relationship, for whatever reason, comes to an end. When I graduated from Awalt High School, which later became Mountain View High School, we celebrated at Fiesta Lanes in Palo Alto, which later became Palo Alto Bowl, which is now becoming townhouses. As the party was breaking up, I was standing in the parking lot with a friend. Overcome by the moment, he turned to me and lamented, “We’ll never see most of these people again.” He was right, of course. Most of these relationships came to an end.

You enjoy a season of bliss, but the season passes. Bill Walsh was probably the greatest coach the San Francisco Bay Area has ever seen. He revived the long-suffering San Francisco 49ers in 1979 when he became their head coach and then led them to three Super Bowl championships in the 1980s. After leaving the 49ers in 1990—a little too early, he later surmised—he wrote a book about the glory years. On the last page, he tells of driving to the team’s former training camp in Redwood City after he had retired, to take one last look: “As I circled through the parking lot, looking at the deserted field and the weathered building, memories flashed through my mind—the personalities, the laughs, the glory. Driving out, I said to myself, ‘God, I wish this was 1979 again.’”² But of course, it wasn’t 1979 again. The season had passed.

You enjoy the world and look out on it hopefully, but as the losses add up, you adopt a more “realistic” outlook. Such was the case for Søren Kierkegaard, the famed philosopher, who wrote,

*If I were to wish for anything, I should not wish for wealth and power, but for the passionate sense of the potential, for the eye which, ever young and ardent, sees the possible.*³

Kierkegaard, of course, had lost the “passionate sense of the potential”; he could no longer see “the possible.” He adopted a more “realistic” outlook.

You lose a relationship. You lose a season. You lose an outlook. If you’ve suffered such losses, or other kinds of losses, it may feel as if you’ve even lost yourself, or at least the best part yourself. That may be the greatest loss of all: you lose yourself.

It was good, good, good, but now it’s gone, gone, gone. Moreover, the possibilities for future loss seem endless. Something cries within us, “It’s not supposed to be this way!” There was a time when it wasn’t.

Everything Was Good

Come back with me, then, to a long-ago time, when God created humans and placed them in a beautiful

garden, to walk with him and to care for his creation. Everything God created, according to Genesis 1, was “good.” There was no such thing as loss, not even death. Think about it: it was everything we could have hoped for, everything we could have wanted. Except for one thing: we weren’t in charge; God was in charge. So the first humans tried to take charge. At that point, for the first time, humans suffered loss—they lost the presence of God, they lost the garden, and finally, they lost their lives (Genesis 1–3). Humans have been trying to move God out of the way in order to do things their way—and suffering loss—ever since. In the garden, it was good, good, good, but now it’s gone, gone, gone.

Right about now, some of you may be thinking, “What a downer of an Easter message! The title of the sermon is ‘Good, Good, Good,’ but this is ‘Bad, Bad, Bad!’”

In “The Ballad of Jody Baxter,” the singer wonders, “Is there any way that we can change the ending of this tragedy? Or does it have to be this way?”

The fawn may not come back, but the Internet does. After my fifteen-minute jag, I checked my computer, and we were back in business. “The Ballad of Jody Baxter” faded to the back of my mind, and later that day I began studying the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John, in the New Testament, the basis for an upcoming sermon that I planned to preach. In that chapter, Jesus proclaims himself to be “the good shepherd.”

What makes him good? Jesus himself answers the question: “*I lay down my life that I may take it up again*” (John 10:17).

The Good Shepherd Lays Down His Life

Jesus, as the good shepherd, lays down his life: he chooses to submit to his enemies, who execute him by nailing him to a cross. It wasn’t enough for them to crucify him, though; they also found it necessary to make sport of him. While looking up at Jesus as he is dying on the cross, his enemies mock him: “*If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross*” (Matthew 27:40). To them, the suggestion is a joke. To Jesus, it is as real as the nails in his hands. At any point, he could have called on more than twelve legions of angels to rescue him (Matthew 26:53).

The most definitive title for Jesus was “Son of God.” It was central to his identity and his vocation. Think for a moment about the times when you hear that awful voice within that threatens something you consider central to your identity or vocation. You know the voice: “You’re not

much of a man, are you?” “You’re not much of a woman, are you?” “You’re not much of a . . . whatever.” When you hear the voice, it demands that you prove it wrong. Jesus hears the voice: “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” Jesus hears the voice, and though he could have come down from the cross, he stays on the cross. What keeps him there?

Again, Jesus answers the question: “*The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*” (John 10:11). By sheep, of course, Jesus means people. He goes to the cross and he stays on the cross for people, including his enemies, who mockingly urge him to come down. He has proved to be a laughable disappointment to these people, to the point that they abuse him mercilessly at his weakest moment, but he stays because he loves them, even them. If he stays for them, he stays for us. He stays for you. Jesus not only goes to the cross for you, he also stays on the cross for you.

In Homer’s *The Odyssey*, Odysseus, returning from the Trojan War, has to sail past the island of the sirens, who sing their beautiful but deadly song. Odysseus knows that no man who hears their song can resist it and that all who hear it end up dead on the shore. So what does he do? He has his men stop up their ears with wax but has them strap him to the mast, ears open, with orders to tie him tighter if he pleads with them to loosen him. We might imagine Odysseus hanging on the mast, with his hands stretched out on the crossbeam. When the ship sails by the island, the sirens sing their song. Odysseus, finding the song irresistible, struggles to free himself and orders his men to release him, but they tie him tighter, and he sails to safety. Now think about this: Jesus hears the sweet song of the sirens—“If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross”—but he had no one and nothing to keep him on the cross.⁴

What keeps him there? It isn’t the nails. It’s love. It’s love for you. Rising from within Jesus is love for you so intense in its beauty that it overpowers the voice demanding him to come down.

We all, at some level, question our value. We desperately try to instill in our children that they have value, that each is a special snowflake. Everyone gets a trophy, but as a coach in youth sports, I can assure you: participation trophies don’t stop kids, even the little girls whom I have coached, from trying to figure out where they rank. All of us, even the most self-confident, who can never stop trying to prove themselves, question our value at some level.

But what if there were someone who valued us so much that he considered us worth dying for? And what if that someone were not just a family member or a friend but

the Son of God? And what if he died for us even though we tried to move God out of the way in order to do things our way? What if he did so, in fact, *because* we tried to move God out of the way to do things our way? The good shepherd lays down his life for you. That means you have value—transcendent, permanent, inestimable value. Jesus considers you worth laying down his life for, worth staying on the cross for.

Yes, Jesus stays on the cross for you, demonstrating that you have value—but for what purpose? The word “that” implies purpose in Jesus’ statement, “*I lay down my life that I may take it up again.*”

The Good Shepherd Takes Up His Life Again

Jesus, as the good shepherd, not only lays down his life, he also takes up his life again: he rises from the dead. When he rises from the dead, he does so with a new kind of body. He is not simply resuscitated; he’s resurrected. He’s still human, but he rises to a new mode of physicality. He’s even able to pass through locked doors (John 20:20, 26). He rises from the dead, ascends to the Father, and sends his Holy Spirit to dwell with his followers so that he might be with them always.

Mary Magdalene was a tortured soul until she met Jesus, who cast seven demons out of her (Luke 8:2). She became a devoted follower of Jesus, but then she looked on in horror on Good Friday as Jesus died on the cross. On the Easter Sunday, she comes to the tomb but discovers, to her horror, that the stone covering the mouth of the tomb has been removed. Someone has stolen the body of Jesus, she concludes. Overcome with grief, she weeps. Talk about suffering loss!

Then Jesus, alive from the dead, appears to her, though she doesn’t recognize him, at least in part because he has a new kind of body. Finally, Jesus speaks her name, “Mary,” and she knows she has heard that voice before. She clings to Jesus, but he tells her to release him because he has not yet ascended to the Father. After Jesus returns to the Father, he will be with Mary in a better way, when he sends his Spirit to live within her (John 20:1–18).

Jesus, who values us enough to die for us, is with us today, alive from the dead, in a better way than the way he was with the disciples: a more intimate way, an omnipresent way, a permanent way. Or should I say, he is with those who want him to be with them, for he does not force himself on anyone. He only dwells in those who confess that they have tried to move God out of the way and who invite Jesus into their lives.

Moreover, the resurrection of Jesus is prototypical. Those who believe in Jesus will be raised as he was raised to walk with God in the new creation. When Jesus returns to remake humanity and to remake creation, their perishable bodies will be raised imperishable. He will “*transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body.*” The present body is like a seed; the resurrection body is like a redwood. We will be better—way better—than we are now (1 Corinthians 15:42, Philippians 3:20–21).

To Restore and Enhance All Things

In the beginning, everything was good, but humans, by trying to move God out of the way, wrecked everything, losing the presence of God, losing the garden, and losing their lives. In the middle, the good shepherd comes to lay down his life and take it up again. In the end, when the good shepherd returns, everything will be good again. In fact, it will be better than good, for the description of the new creation in Revelation 21–22 outshines the description of the first creation in Genesis 1–2. The whole of the new earth is described as if it were a garden. With bodies “like his glorious body,” we will walk with God in the new and better and bigger and eternal garden.

For what purpose did Jesus lay down his life and take it up again? He did so in order to restore everything that was lost. Indeed, he did so to restore and *enhance* everything that was lost: the presence of God, the garden, life itself (1 Corinthians 15:20–28, Ephesians 1:10, Colossians 1:19–20). Everything that you’ve lost, or, at the very least, everything that you have *appreciated* about what you’ve lost, will come back to you thirty-, sixty-, and a hundredfold. When Jesus comes back, he’ll bring the fawn with him, so to speak. Indeed, he’ll bring herds upon herds of fawns with him. The singer wonders, in “The Ballad of Jody Baxter,” “Is there any way that we can change the ending of this tragedy?” The good shepherd knows the way. The good shepherd *is* the way. He will change the ending of this tragedy.

Jesus lays down his life: he stays on the cross for you. Jesus takes up his life again: he rises from the dead for you. He lays down his life and takes it up again to restore and enhance all things. Jesus does not come down from the cross! No, he comes up from the grave! Alleluia! He is risen!

What About Now?

Yes, the good shepherd will change the ending of this tragedy, but what about now? I can and should mourn for what’s lost, but not without hope, because the good shepherd will restore everything that’s been lost and even

make it better. Jesus restores to me, and even enhances, the “passionate sense of the potential,” the “eye which, ever young and ardent, sees the possible.” Especially in view of the coming new creation, the possibilities, quite literally, are endless.

Moreover, insofar as I’ve experienced anything good—a satisfying relationship, a season of bliss, a hopeful outlook—I have done so because I have a good shepherd, who came that I “*may have life and have it abundantly*” (John 10:10). Therefore, the good that I have been given says more about the goodness of the shepherd than about the goodness of what he gives.

When I lose what’s been given, I mourn, and when I mourn, I know that I need the good shepherd, so I seek him with greater passion and find him in new ways, just like Mary Magdalene, who found him outside the tomb so many years ago. No matter what I have lost, I still have the good shepherd, and him I cannot lose: “*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand*” (John 10:27–28). On the one hand, I cannot lose Jesus; on the other hand, I have more of him than ever: my appreciation for him, and satisfaction in him, has only grown through the years—and I expect it to continue to grow until the day I see him face to face.

Three times the singer delights that it was “good.” Three times he laments that it’s “gone.” In John 10, Jesus proclaims himself to be the good shepherd more than once. I counted the references. Three times he says he’s the “good” shepherd. Ah, now I see! It was good, good, good, but now it’s gone, gone, gone—but *he* is good, good, good! As I mourn for what’s lost, I’m finding, once again, that he is good. Indeed, I’m seeking him with greater passion and finding him in new ways.

Can You Hear His Voice?

When Jesus proclaimed that he lays down his life in order to take it up again, many people said, “*He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?*” (John 10:20). Many today say more or less the same thing: “why listen to him?” They may grant that Jesus said and did some good things, but they can’t imagine (at least not yet!) that Jesus laid down his life and took it up again so that he might restore and enhance all things, and they may even question (for the time being!) the sanity of those who

embrace such beliefs. They do what humans have always done: they try to move God out of the way, marginalizing him or even thinking him out of existence, in some cases suppressing the impulses of their consciences, in order to do things their way.

Although many who heard the claims of Jesus dismissed him, John reports, in John 10, after Jesus crossed the Jordan River, “*And many believed in him there*” (John 10:42). Many today believe in him. How about you? Listen to the good shepherd: “*And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice*” (John 10:16). Could he be speaking of you? Again, listen: “*The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out*” (John 10:3). Might you be one of his sheep, even if you haven’t identified yourself as such until now?

Mary Magdalene heard the voice of the good shepherd and recognized him when he spoke her name, and she even discovered him in a new way. Can you hear the voice of the good shepherd? Can you hear him speak your name? He knows you. He loves you. No one knows you as he knows you. No one loves you as he loves you. No one else lays down his life and takes it up again for you. No one speaks your name as he speaks your name. If you hear him speak your name, can you, like Mary, recognize him for who he is—the good shepherd, the Son of God? Can you discover him in a new way? Perhaps you have known of Jesus, but you haven’t known him like this. Confess that you have tried to move God out of the way and invite Jesus into your life.

What have you lost? A cherished relationship? A season of bliss? A hopeful outlook? Have you lost yourself? Whatever you have lost, today you can find Jesus, and if you find Jesus, you find everything, for he restores and enhances all things—and him you can never, ever lose.

NOTES

¹Andrew Peterson, “The Ballad of Jody Baxter” (Franklin, TN: Centricity Music, 2012). I later learned that the song was inspired by *The Yearling*, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings’ novel.

²Bill Walsh, *Building a Winner* (New York: St. Martin’s Press), 350.

³Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1992).

⁴I am indebted to N.T. Wright for this observation: N.T. Wright, *The Crown and the Fire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 38.