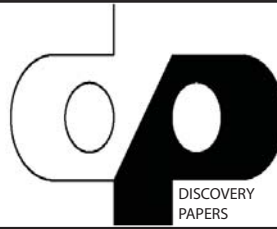


THE SHEPHERD PRIEST

SERIES: IMMORTAL. INVISIBLE.



Catalog No. 20150118
Hebrews 4:4–16
3rd Message
Steve Zeisler
January 18, 2015

Hebrews 4:4–16

Karl Barth is widely regarded as the most important academic theologian of the twentieth century. He was asked once if he could condense his numerous volumes into a simple statement for simple people. He replied profoundly, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”¹ This message takes up that theme - “Jesus loves me, this I know”.

We’re in the midst of a topical series based on Hebrews 11:1, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Faith makes our world larger—bringing future realities into the present (‘things hoped for’) and unveiling the invisible (‘things not seen’). In the last message we applied the insights of faith to the question of what it means to be human—using Abraham’s life as the guide for our instruction. Here we turn to consideration of Jesus and his love for us.

There are many metaphors in the Bible to help us understand ‘things not seen’ regarding the ministry of the Lord. He is the vine supporting branches. He is the head of the body. He is the first born among many brethren. He is the hen who would gather chicks under her wings. Here, as we consider his love, we will give attention to two of the word pictures that apply to Jesus: a good shepherd and a faithful high priest.

The well-known 23rd psalm takes up the first metaphor: the love of our ‘good shepherd’.

Psalm 23:1-6:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. ²He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. ³He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. ⁴Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me. Your rod and your staff they comfort me. ⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. ⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Two phrases will help us summarize this beautiful text. The first is found in verse 1, *I shall not want*. The word want means ‘deficit’ rather than ‘desire’ in this case. By faith, David announces that he will not miss out on anything; nothing required for living life to the full will go unsupplied. Yet, how can this be? Surely life is filled with loss and disappointment.

We must acknowledge that there is mystery in this, and certainly we are not promised that every stage of our journey will be trouble free. Yet we do know some of the ways that our shepherd helps us with these questions.

First, he changes what we desire. We can be fixated on outcomes (e.g., a job, a relationship, an experience) that would ruin us. Looking back, we find ourselves grateful, rather than resentful, that the Lord closed a door we wanted passionately to go through. He intends what is best for us in the long view and often teaches us to value what is eternal by saying no to what is expedient in the moment.

Also, there are questions of timing. We may want a very good thing that he intends to give us—a gift for which we need to wait. When he was about 5 or so, I remember promising that one day I would give my son a Swiss army knife (shiny, hefty, filled with gadgets) like the one I had. He was upset by my insistence that he should wait until he was old enough to use it properly. Yet, a good father (and a good shepherd) will sometimes encourage our desire for a worthy outcome but withhold it until our hearts and our circumstances are made ready.

In addition to questions of timing we discover that our experience of Christ grows in times of hardship. Today is Sanctity of Life Sunday, bringing into view the difficulty of unwanted pregnancies. How might the good shepherd be present in the doubt, blame, and heartache of a crisis pregnancy? His Word ministers forgiveness and gives guidance in the making of hard choices. He softens hard hearts; supplies comfort and courage. He embraces children who are born into chaos and uncertainty. Pain and disappointment may be unavoidable, but desperation and hopelessness need not fill our hearts. “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1).

We discover, too, that those who have been shaped by the shepherd's care amidst suffering are often freed to be other-centered. Knowing that "when we are weak we are strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10) enables us to step into the messy world around us with a message of hope.

The second phrase to consider from the psalm is in verse four, "I will fear no evil" (Psalm 23:4). We are no match for the evil one—the murderer and father of lies—and our fear of evil authority can cripple us. Yet, our shepherd's protecting presence (not our own strength) is greater than that which threatens us.

Here is an excerpt from a recent email from overseas sent by a member of our church. Eileen Chung is a single mom with grown children, who is ministering in a mission school in Niamey, the capital of Niger. Anti-Christian violence, stoked by Boko Haram in Nigeria recently spread north to her city. She wrote:

"The loud screams of the angry mobs just outside my door subsided by late afternoon, so did the smokes from the burning buildings. The university students had come to my place this morning. We prayed that those who watch the flames of the burning churches will catch the flames of the Holy Spirit, to turn passionately for the Lord. Please pray with us that this event will actually draw more people to Christ. My heart aches for those pastors and dear friends who have lost everything, other than just what they were wearing at the time of their hasty flee. We were all stunned. All church services are canceled tomorrow. Almost all the churches in Niamey are burned. The Christian schools were attacked and burned. I received an email from the US Embassy warning us of their forecast of that disruption is scheduled to escalate tomorrow. Our missions have warned us to be ready to leave on short notice."

The terrible circumstances are not glossed over. Destructive violence and an uncertain future are described honestly, but fear is not the dominant note. Prayer is central—believers calling on God to act as he did (in the same part of the world) with Joseph of old, turning to good what was intended for evil (Genesis 50:20).

No longer cringing in fear, we partake of a banquet—a joy-filled meal—in the presence of enemies. And we know the companionship of the shepherd as we journey through the dark valley.

So, to summarize Psalm 23: the shepherd guides our steps so that we assert with confidence: a) I will miss out on nothing, and b) evil will not triumph.

However, in addition to our shepherd's guidance and protection in the world around us, we have need for care of our hearts. For this we turn to the imagery of a high priest and are given help with a broken inner life.

Prescribed holy days and animal sacrifices gave the children of Israel insight into the nature of their sins and the fact of their sinfulness; of their need for cleansing, pardon, and restoration. Though most Christians—especially in the West—are unfamiliar with religious practices like the priesthood and temple service depicted in Israel's law, we see that the New Testament makes use of what was familiar to Israel and describes Jesus as a faithful high priest. This imagery helps Christian believers with the same human needs—the weight of failure, our moral inadequacy—in the age of the Spirit.

Regarding the deadly nature of sin, consider the lyrics of Bonnie Raitt's song, "Guilty":

*"I've been drinking, and I shouldn't come by I know,
but I found myself in trouble darling and I had no
place else to go.*

Well I'm guilty, yeah I'm guilty.

I'll be guilty for the rest of my life.

How come I never do what I'm supposed to do?

Nothing that I try ever turns out right.

*Well you know how it is with me baby,
you know I just can't stand myself.*

*It takes a whole lot of medicine for me to pretend to
be somebody else."*

How can we know forgiveness and become free of sin's bondage? Let's turn to a text in Hebrews for a description of our high priest.

Hebrews 4:14–16:

Since then we have a great high priest who was passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Verse fourteen tells of Jesus passing through the heavens into the presence of God. It draws on the image of the Day of Atonement. One day each year, the high priest would pass through the courtyards of the temple and through the veil that covered the Holy of Holies. He would enter the presence of God and come out declaring that the sins of the people were forgiven and that the guilty were restored to favor with God—a message we need to hear.

David's story of failure and renewal is instructive. The king brazenly sent for a married woman, committed adultery, arranged for her husband's murder, lied repeatedly, and brought his kingdom into defeat. As events unfolded, he attempted a double life: displaying outward bravado as he disintegrated inwardly "When I kept silent my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was dried up" (Psalms 32:3-4). Then the king's Shepherd arranged for his sin to be exposed and for a journey of confession and restoration to begin (2 Samuel 12).

David's resulting song of hope (Psalm 51) can be seen as a reply to the desperation of Bonnie Raitt's sad anthem: "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin" (Verse 2); "purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean, wash me and I shall be whiter than snow" (Verse 7). Jesus, our high priest, will act on our behalf, bringing about exposure as it is needed, forgiveness if we will have it, and hope for newness of life.

Returning to the text in Hebrews 4, there is another phrase that I have found compelling. Jesus sympathizes with our weaknesses. We are familiar with Christian testimonies that speak of past failure that is now overcome—once I was blind (or addicted or greedy) and now I can see (now sober and generous). But honesty about present weakness is much more difficult to acknowledge—weaknesses are what make us vulnerable. I want mine to remain hidden, to pretend they don't exist.

Yet Jesus, a fully human advocate for sinners, has battled the temptations that pull on us. He doesn't identify our weakness to humiliate or take advantage of us, but rather to offer help and a way forward. We find that our dark desires and characteristic shortcomings are places where the savior sympathizes and helps rather than judges us.

We began and now end with the lyric of a simple song, a song with the greatest theme of all—"Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so."³ Two images, a shepherd and a high priest, have given us insight into this great reality. May Jesus' love transform us.

Endnotes

¹ Warner, Anna Bartlett. "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know." 1859.

² Bonnie Raitt. "Guilty." *Takin My Time*. Music: Bonnie Raitt. Lyrics: Randy Newman. Warner Brothers, 1973.

³ Warner. "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know."