

When was the last time you offered this commentary on your life? “I am deader than a door-nail; a lost cause; it is time to throw in the towel; Sayonara, baby; the fat lady has sung;” (or one of my favorites,) “mighty Casey has struck out!”

The Israelites felt this way during the dark days of the Babylonian exile. Our text has eighth century BC Isaiah positioning himself to speak to this sixth century BC lost cause. You see, already in the eighth century, Isaiah knew that the days were coming when Israel would have no temple, no Jerusalem, no Davidic king, no annual pilgrim feasts, no commercial or political significance, and no hope! Mighty Casey will strike out! Or to use the words from Psalm 137:1, “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.”

In Isaiah 49:9-12, the message of redemption announces the Servant’s release of prisoners. He will gather them from all directions. While the specific word shepherd does not appear in these verses, the words graze, pasture, lead, and guide make it clear that the Servant is a very good Shepherd. He leads His flock to find food on barren heights, and in the hottest of weather He gives His sheep unlimited water. Their path is straight, compared with the normally hilly country where it is difficult to graze. This Servant has the ability to tend to a huge number of sheep that are drawn

from great distances. He even promises in our text, “They shall not hunger or thirst.”

Now, sheep are not intimidating creatures. The NFL has teams called the Chicago Bears, Detroit Lions, Denver Broncos, Atlanta Falcons, and Seattle Seahawks. I am not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet, but I am fairly sure that there will never, ever be NFL expansion teams called the Los Angeles Lambs or the San Antonio Sheep! What would the cheerleaders say, “Fleece ’em, Fleece ’em, ba, ba, ba!”?

Sheep are not intimidating creatures; in fact, sheep are dumb. They graze on the same hills until those hills turn to desert wastes, polluted with disease. Sheep bend down to drink from a pond, get too close, allow the water to absorb into their wool, fall in, and drown! We are not like that, are we?

Sheep are dirty. Their wool is like a magnet. It attracts mud, manure, maggots. It becomes caked with dirt, decay, disease. Sheep absorb every particle of filth in the atmosphere. We are not like that, are we?

Sheep are defenseless. They turn over on their back to rest, but then they can’t get up. Canines, coyotes, and cougars all know that a cast sheep is a sitting duck! But we are not like that, are we?

Israel had been just like that, and so it was “Sayonara, baby.” The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar did it, aided by Nebuzaradan, his exterminator. The towel was thrown in in 587 BC all because they had been like sheep!

They were dumb. Isaiah 1:3 states, “The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner’s manger, but Israel does not know, My people do not understand.” Israelites were dirty. Isaiah 64:6 states, “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.” And the people were defenseless. Isaiah 1:6 states, “From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness, only wounds and welts and open sores.” We are not like that, are we?

We are just like that, are we not? Isaiah 53:6 makes it clear: “We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.” And what is the result? “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion” (Psalm 137:1). You and I are living testimonies of lost causes, of all too often being spiritually deader than a doornail. We are exiled--so far from the Father’s will and ways; so far from bearing each other’s pain and burdens; so far from spouses, children, sisters, brothers. Mighty Casey has struck out!

So what is a Shepherd to do? He only has one option: to become a Lamb. But not any ordinary Lamb; “A virgin will conceive and bear a Son and you will call His name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). “His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (9:6). This is no ordinary Lamb; “He was led like a Lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so. He did not open His mouth” (53:7).

On Maundy Thursday, events began to unfold that would not lead Him to green pastures. Rather spit and blood would be caked to His cheeks. There would be no quiet waters; in fact, there was no water at all. His lips would be cracked and swollen and His throat parched. He would pass through the valley of the shadow of death as pain twanged her morbid melody. There would be no rod or staff for comfort. The cup would overflow all right, as He drank from the cup of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. Surely goodness and mercy would be twisted and perverted in the most inhumane way.

Reflecting on this great love, Peter writes, “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but

have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Peter 2:24-25). This is why we have the promise, “They shall not hunger or thirst.”

It was Luther who pounded the table at Marburg with the words *hoc est enim corpus meum*, “This is My body.” The Shepherd quenches our thirst with His body and blood--in, with, and under the bread and wine. When we come to this table, we receive forgiveness, mercy, and salvation. Because of these gifts in the Holy Supper, we will not hunger or thirst again!

When I am lost and exiled, Jesus my Shepherd leaves the ninety-nine and runs after me. When I am confused by the voices of demons and devils, He calls me by name and I know His voice. When I am dirty and full of filth, He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Jesus is my Shepherd who gathers me safe in His arms until I am better, holds me until I can live with the hurt, and carries me close to His heart forever.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.