

A Good Shepherd, A Divine Rain, and the #96 Bus

Ezekiel 34:11 For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. 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. 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. 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. ¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. 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.

Well I did something new last a couple of weeks ago. Melis and I met downtown and we had dinner and saw just a great production of Guys and Dolls. And rather than drive so we'd end up with two cars, I did something I'd never done before in Oregon- I took the bus. I stopped in Fred Meyer, got a bus pass, and then waited on Boone's Ferry for the good ol' #96 downtown to Portland. Well it was great. My favorite thing was this guy who got on with this crazy orange Mohawk and I have no idea how many piercings. He put his bike on the rack, and I noticed a sticker on it that read, 0.00 and 9/10ths. It took me a minute to get it. Of course it was a reference to how much the gas cost to run his bike- i.e. nothing. I tell you, sitting there with this crazy looking bike nut, I felt like a true Oregonian, a true Portlandian. I mean you would never see this in Nebraska, right? I love it.

Now I used to ride the bus all the time. When I lived in Austin as a student I didn't own a car. Between my trusty bike and the extensive Austin bus system- there wasn't a place I wanted to go that I couldn't get to. But I had forgotten how different it is with the bus. There are always the people you see that you probably would never

otherwise come in contact with like the bike nut. I like this part. But there are parts about riding the bus that are harder. The thing that's hard for me is the waiting. It's not being in control and being able to go when I want to and having to depend on this thing to come.

Now Austin was terrible. The buses did not do well in the heat. I mean I don't know who was in charge of purchasing, but if you're looking at a whole bunch of different kinds of buses and some of them do better in the cold and some do better in the heat- it's like someone was playing a practical joke on us. During the summer when it would get really hot, some of the buses would just stop working. I remember sitting at one stop waiting for over two hours- and when my bus finally did show up, it was like a clown car- I mean you could see people's faces sticking out the windows just to get some air to breathe. It was hard for me- learning to wait like that. In my car I can just jump into it and go wherever I want, whenever I want pretty much. With a bus- with a bus you've got to learn how to wait. You have to learn how to read standing up. And when you realize you're going to be late and there's not a thing you or anyone else can do about it- you've got to learn how to breathe and accept the hand you've been dealt for that moment.

Now this kind of acceptance- this is not a natural instinct, is it? Our natural instincts seem to be to push, to shove, to hurry and to make our own way in the world. But, and this is the great spiritual lesson the bus has to teach us- things don't always go our way. Have you noticed that? Life doesn't always bend to our every whim. Sometimes, no matter how hard we try and push, no matter how much we're out there

given' it all we have- we end up dealing with a person or an event that just isn't budging. Some of us have known relationships where no matter how much we tried, no matter how much *we* were willing to change- our partner on the other side, they either weren't capable or weren't willing to work with us. And there just isn't anything you can do. Some of us are sick this morning- or are caring for people who are sick. And you know one day you are healthy and fine, and then the next minute you're walking out of a doctor's office with a diagnose and a kind of numb fear in your gut you don't know how to put words to. And there isn't a single one of us here this morning who isn't affected by this enormous economic tsunami, the bottom of which experts tell us we still haven't seen. We've seen 401k's turn into 201k's. And while some of us have a little time before we need to use this money- a lot of us don't. And we're not talking crazy money, money to buy a vacation home or something- we're just talking about enough money to retire on and continue living in the home you've got and still pay your bills. No, life does not always acquiesce to our desires, does it? And if you're like me, you don't learn how to live differently, how live without all the pushing and shoving, until you come face to face with something immovable- something you can't change.

This is how it was for Israel in the text for this morning. Now, Ezekiel is one of the coolest books in the Bible. He uses all this wild imagery and symbolism, and it's so strange that there was actually a rabbinic rule that no one under the age of 30 was allowed to read it, and even then not without a teacher. Did you know the Bible came with an parental warning label? People would probably read it more.

But the passage this morning isn't strange at all, though. It's absolutely clear what's going on. Ezekiel is writing at a time we call the exile. Some of you know the story. 722 years before Christ Assyria comes in and wipes out the Jews living in what we call the Northern kingdom. But the Jews in Jerusalem and in the South hold the Assyrians back. Rather than being thankful, though, they kind of believed they were successful because of the temple in Jerusalem- they kind of believed that as long as they had that, nothing could happen to them. Even the leaders, the shepherds, the people who should have known better- even they fell into thinking this way.

But, while Israel grew more and more complacent and indulgent and less and less caring of the poor- the great kingdom of Babylon rose up and took over Assyria. And pretty soon Babylon looks interested in Israel, too- but the leaders said there was no way Israel would fall, not with the temple. Well, you can guess what happens. In 586 Babylon conquers Jerusalem and marches all of Israel off, back into the wilderness, and into exile. And for 70 years the Jews found themselves again living as slaves.

And in one of the most powerful passages in Ezekiel, he writes to the people in exile, and he writes in the voice of God. Right before the text for the morning Ezekiel says God is through with the shepherds that are leading Israel- God is through with the ways they abuse their authority and get fat off of the very sheep they are supposed to be protecting. And in our passage this morning, a passage Christ picks up in the Gospel of John, Ezekiel promises the people that they do have a shepherd- God is their shepherd. And he tells them that as their shepherd God will seek them out, gather them together, and that God will be the one feeding them. In fact Ezekiel creates this gorgeous image

of God restoring them, gathering in the lost, and feeding them and giving them water from fresh springs.

And this sounds so good, doesn't it? God being our protector. God gathering us in. God giving us food and water. But, the thing Ezekiel leaves out is the time line. Everything promised here does come true- but it doesn't come through immediately. In fact it doesn't even come through quickly. In fact it takes about 50 years for the things Ezekiel is saying to come true. 50 years. Life runs over the Israelites like a bus- and they had to figure out how to wait and to live into these words of hope.

This happens to us as individuals, too. I just finished a biography on one of the most amazing women in the church, a woman named Teresa of Avila. She was born 1515, just two years before Martin Luther tacked up his 95 Theses and set Germany on fire, and she grew up in an ambitious Spanish family. They were ambitious, they were hungry to climb socially, mainly because they had a secret. See in Spain at that time you might have heard of a little thing called the Spanish Inquisition? Yeah, in one of our darkest, blackest moments, the church traded a tradition of love for new order of torture, we gave up grace and love in exchange for a thousand guillotines. We rounded up everyone who didn't look like they belonged, everyone who looked like they might be Jewish or Muslim in other words- and we gave them a choice. We gave them the choice of baptism or death. And though most of us only heard about in the last couple of years, it was the church that actually came up with waterboarding. We designed it as a way of ironically punishing those refusing baptism. We called it the 'water cure' - because people either submitted to baptism or died.

Well, this is important because Teresa's grandfather on her father's side was Jewish. And even though he converted and suffered being paraded through the city streets of Toledo with other converts being mocked and beaten, to have a convert in your family tree was seen as a terrible blemish. To have even one Jew or Muslim in the family taints the entire lineage.

And so her grandfather, hoping to escape this, moves the family from Toledo to Avila to try and start over. And they do start over, they successfully blend in and in time became seen as respectable leaders- but underneath all of this success, and really what drives their hunger for success, is this dark secret they are hiding.

Well this hunger, this drive, this passion to take life by the horns- this was just absolutely baked into every fiber of Teresa. She grows up hearing legends about the wars between the Christians and Islam- and the Christian martyrs who risked their lives to pray in the Holy land. And she was such a fiery young girl, she convinced her younger brother Rodrigo to escape with her and try to make it to Jerusalem. They make it nearly an entire day's journey in the Spanish desert when her uncle finally finds them and takes them home.

She was famous for being a beautiful woman, too. One time a young man saw her foot escape from her dress when she was out and about, and he told her what a beautiful foot she had. Now most women of the time would have died from embarrassment. But Teresa? Teresa went straight up into his face and said, "Oh yes? Well take a good, long look my friend." And when she saw the stunned expression his face she finished saying, "Because it's the last time you'll see it or any other part of me." And then she turned on her heel and left him dumbstruck.

Teresa was independent and head strong. She made her own decisions- something rare today, but incredibly rare back then. When she decided to become a nun, her father said over his dead body. And she decided to risk it. Women just didn't do that- but Teresa did. She didn't need to depend on anyone- she depended on herself. She wasn't waiting for life to happen to her- she was grabbing it by the horns. And this works for her really well- up until she turns twenty. But when she turns twenty Teresa is struck with a terrible illness that would haunt her for most of her life. She was bed ridden with a dangerous fever and terrible pain for weeks at a time. The pain was so bad that for months this proud, arrogant, beautiful young woman, was reduced to the life of an invalid, now depending entirely upon her sisters in the order for everything from changing her clothes to feeding herself. It was as if all of a sudden life just hit her, and everything she had once taken for granted now seemed like a million miles away.

Now if this hadn't happened to her, she believes there's no way she would have become the person she did. No way would she have become great. She would have been an interesting person- but it was only when she was faced with her own dependence and she had to learn how to receive from others- this is when she learned how to be great.

One of the images Teresa is most famous for is for imagining the life of faith as being like a garden. She says inside each of us there is a field, and the moment, the instant we acknowledge it- God takes up all the weeds and plants the most wonderful seeds. But then, all you gardeners know, in order to nurture this garden it's going to take

a lot of water. Teresa says there are four ways of watering this garden- her metaphor for caring for the soul. The first three are similar.

The first way is by using a bucket and a well. Has anyone drawn water out of a well with a bucket? It's heavy coming up. It's heavy carrying it to the garden. It's a lot of work. Most of the time, Teresa says, this is what caring for our soul feels like. It feels like work- we have to think about prayer, or we have to force ourselves to make it to church. I won't ask for a show of hands on that one. So caring for the soul is like watering a garden by lifting up a heavy bucket from the well- we do it, but we have to kind of make ourselves.

Fortunately, like all things- we can get better at caring for these gardens inside of us. It can get easier. If we're able to bear down through this bucket phase, caring can become a kind of habit- something we do that isn't so hard. Teresa says the next two ways of drawing water are like this. The next two images she uses are the waterwheel and irrigation. I've never actually seen a real waterwheel, but they're pretty amazing machines. They are just what they sound like- they're a wooden wheel with buckets all around it. And the current of a river turns the wheel and buckets come down scoop up water and deliver it down a kind of aqueduct. This is so much better than carrying a bucket. And by irrigation, Teresa talks about planting our garden next to a great river and allowing trenches to keep the garden saturated all the time.

In both cases the water is coming more easily- more automatically. And this can habit when we change our habits. One of the most interesting members I knew back in Austin didn't start out as one of our members- his wife was really involved, but he kind of kept everything at arm's length. He was a city planner, but in his spare time he was

an artist and a musician- and he saw himself as much more spiritual than religious. His experience with organized religion, as he called it, was almost completely negative- it was either kind of oppressive or just boring. Neither of which was real interested in. I surprised him by agreeing. And we started having coffee. Off an on for the first year we getting started he and I would meet at a Starbucks overlooking the Texas hill country, and we'd talk about art, philosophy, religion- some of the best memories I have of that time are talking with him. Well, he ended up started coming around on Sunday morning. First it was kind of sporadic. Pretty soon he became the most regular guy around- he started coming more often than his wife even. And I remember one day we were talking, and he said to me with a kind of shock and dismay that he'd never gone to church so often in his life, and he didn't know what was happening to him. I didn't know what to say. I asked him, "So...does it seem like a good thing that's happening?" He laughed and said it was- he was just surprised how easy it was. Going to worship and always been this huge effort, and now he did it without even thinking about it. It was like a water wheel or a channel- the water was just flowing for him. It was easy.

Now all of this is interesting- but not really surprising. It's no shock that a nun would tell you that if you pray more or go to church more often that it will become more easy over time and that this is a good thing. The surprising thing is the fourth water- the water. In Teresa's mind for those most at home in their faith, watering their garden isn't like a bucket, a waterwheel, or by irrigation. For those most at home in their faith watering the garden is like rain falling from the sky- an utter gift of God.

Why is this surprising? On the one hand it isn't- she says when a good rain comes it soaks the ground like nothing else can. And this kind of follows the pattern of

the harder we work the more we gain. But then she turns everything around and acknowledges that sometimes it doesn't rain. Sometimes it doesn't rain. And a garden depending solely on the rain is going to know times of drought, times of terrible dryness. And more than this, depending on where are gardens are located- we just aren't going to be able to grow every kind of plant. We have to be learn how to be happy with the kinds of gardens, the kinds of souls we have, and to learn how to be patient with the rain that comes. For there is no forcing the clouds. There's no pushing them around.

No, the deepest, most profound faith isn't the kind of faith that's happy or peaceful all the time. No the deepest, most profound faith knows times of plenty AND times of great emptiness. The deepest kind of faith knows times where the water is flowing and won't stop AND times where you can't find a drop for miles around. And this faith learns how to slow down, how to wait, and to change the things we can but to accept that God is God- and we are not.

Sometimes I work down at that coffee shop at Warm Springs and Boone's Ferry-Bella. I was there this week. I was sitting so I could see my car in the window. As I was a working a young man came walking over. He was a young, Hispanic man with a hood over his face. He looked rough. And he stood outside right next to my car. At first I just kept working and tried not to notice. But then I looked up, and it looked like he was staring into my car. Again, I just went back to working. But I looked up again and he was still there. He was standing as still as he could be- and he was just staring into my car. Was he looking for something he could take? Was he thinking maybe he'd try to hot wire it? Well, I was getting angry, and I was just about to get up, when he

abruptly started to move. Only it wasn't towards my car. It was towards the street. And I watched as the #96 bus rolled up. Same bus I took downtown. And I saw him get him. And I realized he wasn't staring into my car- he had been watching for the bus. And he wasn't rough looking- he was tired. And he had his hood up because of the rain. He had been waiting for the bus- and he had been waiting with so much more patience and hope than I was exhibiting, sitting there in my warm spot rushing to so many wild judgments.

Folks, the holiday season is here. And we are all going to be rushing around. With so many places to go and so many things to do. We're all going to be rushing around. And for some of us these holidays will be exactly as you dream. Things will be just like what you are expecting, and it's going to be a wonderful time with family and friends. Great. Celebrate that. But, for some of us, there will be things that just won't work. Your team will lose. The turkey will be dry. And that family member, the one who drives everyone crazy, the one you try to love, but no matter how hard you try you find yourself imagining yourself killing in a thousand different, creative ways- they will still show up, and one more year will not have improved them. And no matter how hard we try, we just won't be able to fix all this. We just can't. And when the holidays are like this, I will pray for rain. Not a cold, Oregonian rain- but a warm, divine rain. A rain of God's grace soaking down, down, into the very bones of our souls. And I will pray that refreshed by such rain, that we may find, even in these hard, dry times- we may not get what we were hoping for, but we will find a strange blessing that we have needed for a long, long time. **Amen.**