

April 2, 2015  
Isaiah 49:7-13

Maundy Thursday B  
He Prepares a Table

*Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, our Servant King. Amen.*

When was the last time you offered this commentary on your life? “I’m deader than a door-nail; a lost cause, it’s time to throw in the towel; Sayonara, baby; the fat lady has sung; or the mighty Casey has struck out.” Think about, perhaps it was the last time you had a sleepless night or maybe it was that Monday where nothing seemed to go right, from the moment you got up to the moment you laid your head down on your pillow. Maybe it was when you were caught in a sin that you didn’t want anyone to know about...you know one of your secret sins (we all have them). Only you can come up with the last time you offered this commentary on your life. These words typically come when our days are dark and dreary...possibly even when the clouds cause darkness and dreariness.

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 the 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 and festivals, 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 the 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. Let’s read these verses again:  
<sup>9</sup> *saying to the prisoners, ‘Come out,’ to those who are in darkness, ‘Appear.’ They shall **graze** along the ways; on all bare heights shall be their **pasture**;* <sup>10</sup> *they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them, for he who has pity on them will **lead** them, and by springs of water will **guide** them.* <sup>11</sup> *And I will make all my mountains a road, and my highways shall be raised up.* <sup>12</sup> *Behold, these shall come from afar, and behold, these from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Syene.”* <sup>1</sup>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 St. Louis Rams. The NBA has teams called the Chicago Bulls, Milwaukee Bucks, Minnesota TimberWolves,

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.* (2001). (Is 49:9–12). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

Memphis Grizzlies, Toronto Raptors, Atlanta Hawks, New Orleans Pelicans, and Charlotte Hornets. In the Final Four you have the Kentucky Wildcats playing the Wisconsin Badgers. There's even the Arizona Diamondbacks, Chicago Cubs, Miami Marlins, St. Louis Cardinals, Detroit Tigers, Tampa Bay Rays, Toronto Blue Jays, and the Baltimore Orioles. Not all of these are intimidating creatures, you can see that most of them are in some way. I'm no prophet or the son of a prophet, but there will never every be NFL expansion teams called the Los Angeles Lambs or the San Antonio Sheep! I am pretty sure that they the North Dakota mascot committee won't take into consideration the North Dakota Fighting Lambs. What would cheerleaders says, "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 into desert wastes, polluted with disease. Sheep bend down to drink from the pond, get too close, allow the water to absorb into their wool, fall in, and drown! We aren't 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 aren't 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 aren't 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 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 the foot to the top of your head there is no soundness, only wounds and welts and open sores."* We're not like that, are we?

We are just like that, aren't we?! 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."* 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 pains and burdens; so far from spouses, children, sisters, brothers. Mighty Casey has struck out!

So what's a Shepherd supposed to do? He only has one option: to become a Lamb. But not any ordinary Lamb; *"A virgin shall 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 wouldn't lead Him to green pastures. They would lead him far from green pastures. Events would cause one of the twelve to betray Him, another to deny Him, and the rest to run away from Him. Events would unfold that wouldn't lead Him to green pastures. Rather spit and blood would be caked to His cheeks. There would be no quiet waters; in fact the only water to be found, is the water found flowing from His pierced side. His lips would be cracked and swollen and His throat parched from the hot Palestinian sun. He would pass through the valley of the shadow of death as pain of all kinds, emotional, physical, and spiritual pain twanged her morbid melody. There would 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 on Maundy Thursday when Jesus gave you food and drink to quench your thirst and feed your hunger. It was on Maundy Thursday when Jesus you a meal. It was Luther who pounded the table at Marburg with the words *hoc est enim corpus*, “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 of sins, life, and salvation. Because of these gifts in the Holy Supper, we will not hunger or thirst again!

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

In the name of Jesus, our Servant and Shepherd King. Amen.

*Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen.*