Sheep & Goats

Hespeler, November 22, 2026 © Scott McAndless – Reign of Christ
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24, Psalm 95:1-7a, Ephesians 1:15-23, Matthew 25:31-46

When Mr. Goat arrived home after a long day's work, he settled in for a lovely dinner of fresh grass, weeds and shrubbery with his family. But as he did so, he heaved a huge sigh. His family could not help but notice. His wife looked up from her plate of alfalfa with concern.

"What is it, dear?" she wanted to know. "You sound so discouraged."

Jesus' Promise

"Oh, it's nothing really," he replied, "it's just that I was thinking of the promises that Jesus made to us before he went away. Remember, when he was taken up into heaven, his very last words to us were, **"And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."** (Matthew 28:20)

"I mean, wasn't that supposed to be the one thing he was always about – being with us. That was even supposed to be the promise contained in his birth that he was to be called, **"'Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.'"**

"Right you are, my dear," replied Mrs. Goat. "Of all the promises that Jesus gave us, that is the one that I hold closest to my heart. But why would that make you feel so down?"

"Well, it is because I was out there in the world today and all is not well. In fact, things are ba-a-a-a-d, really b-a-a-a-d.

"What do you mean?" his wife asked gently.

Hungry Person

"Well, for example, I was walking along during my lunch break, just minding my own business, when I passed by someone who was hungry, I mean, really hungry. He looked like he hadn't eaten a thing in days. He was nothing but skin and bone.

"That was a distressing enough sight, but the thing that really troubled me was how he looked so hungrily at my lunch bag, which was full of my favourite snack of apples and carrots. I began to imagine him jumping me and stealing my lunch. And so, I clutched it closer to my chest and hurried on by.

Thirsty Person

"But then I immediately came upon another person who was practically dying of thirst. When I saw her, and how she glanced at my water bottle for a moment, I gripped it closely and practically galloped on by her.

"You see, that is what is troubling me. If Jesus is supposed to be with us, why are all of these very disturbing things going on? I'm beginning to fear that maybe Jesus has abandoned us altogether!"

Mrs. Goat chewed her cud very thoughtfully as she absorbed what her husband had said. She wanted to reassure him he was wrong, but she wasn't sure if she could do that. Finally, she swallowed and spoke up.



Stranger

"I think I know what you mean, dear. I had an equally discouraging experience today. I was just going about my business, not troubling anybody, when I suddenly saw a… a stra-a-a-a-nger. Like, it was a

foreigner, some kind of immigrant or a refugee or something.

"Well, you know very well how troubled I can be when I have to deal with something that is unfamiliar. New things always upset me. I like it when everything is always the same and predictable. I was afraid this… stra-a-a-anger might make me experience new things, so I hurried on by and pretended that I hadn't even seen him.

"My harrowing experience is making me feel the same as you. Where is Jesus? If Jesus were really with us as he promised, surely he wouldn't allow such disturbing things to happen to us. This is troubling."

Naked, Sick and in Prison

The goat family hadn't finished their bleating. Soon the kids spoke up. "Today at school," Billy Goat chimed in, "there was one of the other kids who came in torn and dirty clothes. It was disgusting! If Jesus were really with us, surely he wouldn't let people go out like that. I was afraid that someone might say that I should give him the red shirt that I was saving for snack time."

And then Sally Goat spoke up as well. "One of my friends at school is sick, and another one was actually arrested for coughing up a red shirt and flagging a train! That was so disturbing. I felt like my friends had let me down. So, I pretended like I never knew them. If Jesus were really with us, I don't think our friends would let us down like that.

And so, we leave the goat family as they continue to complain to one another about what makes them feel as if Jesus is no longer with them.

Sheep Family

Meanwhile, just down the street, the Sheep Family was also talking about their day. They had had some remarkably similar experiences to the Goat Family, but their discussions took some different turns.

Mr. Sheep, for example, spoke about an encounter on his lunch break with someone who was starving. He had responded differently from Mr. Goat.

Hungry and Thirsty

"I saw my poor fellow sheep there, as thin as a rail," Father said, "and I looked down at the lunch of succulent grasses that I had packed. I didn't have a ton, mind you, but I decided that maybe I could share what I had.

"And so, I sat down with the poor fellow, and we ate together. He told me of his life and the circumstances – things far beyond his control – that led to his hunger. And, you know what, he really is a fine fellow, who offered me some wisdom and encouragement that kept me going through the rest of my day.

"As a result, when I came across a ewe a bit later who was practically dying of thirst, I didn't hesitate a moment. I had my water bottle out and offered the whole thing to her in a moment. And she too offered me a blessing that has lifted my spirits ever since."

Stranger, Naked, Sick and in Prison

"Oh, that is so lovely," replied his wife. "That reminds me of something that ha-a-a-a-ppened to me today. I met someone who isn't from around here – who comes from a flock a long way away from here. Poor thing, she was kind of lost and confused because she didn't know how things work around here.

"All she needed was someone to be a friend to her. And so, that's what I decided to be. And you know, it just brightened my day so much just to have a new friend."

After that, the young lambs also had their own stories to share. Young Sammy Sheep had given his extra wool coat to a friend who was shivering because she had been shorn. Sally Sheep told of how meaningful it had been for her to go visit one friend who was home sick and another who had been arrested for trying to start a stampede.

Jesus' Promise

As the whole sheep family shared their experiences, they all found that their efforts to help those they thought needed it had made them feel good, but that it was more than just a sense of feeling virtuous.

The connections that they had made with people who were going through difficult times had made them feel less alone. It seemed to them that they had received more in the way of friendship, wisdom and blessing than they had ever given away.

For the sheep also remembered the promise that Jesus had given them when he went away – that he would be with them always, to the end of the age. They sometimes wondered what had happened to that promise because they hadn't seen him around.

But they all agreed that their encounters with the people who were hungry or thirsty, the strangers and the poorly clothed as well as the sick or imprisoned people had made them feel sure that the promise had not been forgotten. The people they had gotten to know as they struggled had given them something that they could hold onto and take comfort from; they just couldn't quite put their hooves on what exactly it was.

When the Son of Man Comes

And so it was that, when the Son of Man came in all of his glory, both the sheep and the goats crowded around him. They bleated loudly for they were glad to finally see their Lord, but they also raised their voices with an important question.

"But what about your pro-o-o-o-mise?" both herds wanted to know. "You said you'd be with us always, but we haven't seen you in a long, long ti-i-i-i-me.

Jesus Was There

So Jesus explained that actually he had been there all the time, just as he had promised.

"Do you remember when you saw that unfortunate person who had had nothing to eat in a long time?" Jesus asked. Mr. Goat nodded, scowling at the memory, while Mr. Sheep also nodded, fondly thinking of the connection he had made.

And Jesus went on from there to list all of the people that they had encountered – the thirsty person, the stranger, the one who had no proper clothes and the poor sick person and the hapless prisoner. They all remembered these encounters and nodded in recognition. But again, the goats all scowled while the sheep smiled with fond recollection.

You Missed Him

"What about them?" Mrs. Goat bleated boldly. They were the problem. They were what made us so certain that you were not with us. If you had been, surely you wouldn't have allowed them to disturb our comfortable lives with their problems!"

"Oh, that's too bad," the Son of Man replied, "because, you see, all of those people who were 'disturbing your comfortable lives,' it turns out that they were me. I was present with you in them. I was

there; you just missed it."

Jesus turned to look at the sheep family with a smile. "But somehow, I don't think that you sheep didn't miss me. Am I right?"

Sheep's Experience of Jesus

"Well, kind of," Mrs. Sheep said, looking around at her family. "We didn't recognize you at the time, but there was something in the encounters that helped us not to give into the despair of this world. It made us feel less alone, and there was some light and hope in a troubling world where people struggle with many things.

"We didn't know that it was you, but now that you say it, it does ring true to us. Yes, now we realize that you were there all along."

"Well, sweet child," Jesus smiled at her, "that is because you fed me, you shared water with me, you welcomed me as a stranger, and you offered me clothing when I needed it. You visited me when I was sick and in prison. Thank you! But somehow, I think that the Goat Family will struggle to believe because they did none of that for me."

Is It Just About Judgement?

The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats is generally taken as a story about who gets to go to heaven and who doesn't. That is because the story is set during the final judgement day, a powerful scene taken from Jewish apocalyptic literature. But I have always believed the story is more about this life than it is about another.

There is a reason why this parable is only found in the Gospel of Matthew. This Gospel has a unique theme: the theme of God being with us.

Message to a Church That Is Missing Jesus

The Gospel opens with the promise that Jesus' birth means, "Emmanuel," which Matthew helpfully translates for us as, **"God is with us."** (Matthew 1:2) And then it ends with Jesus' final words to the church, **"And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."** (Matthew 28:20)

This indicates to me that Matthew is writing this Gospel for a church that is concerned with the question of where God is in the midst of all the trouble in their world.

The stories and sayings he includes all try to reassure his readers of that ongoing presence. This unique parable offers perhaps the clearest reassurance, though it is a somewhat surprising reassurance.

It turns out that Jesus has indeed been with us all along, but that you may have missed it. You may have missed it specifically because you walked by a hungry person and didn't offer them food; you passed a stranger and didn't welcome them; you… Well, I hope you get the idea by now.

It Depends on You

And this story provides us a big challenge, doesn't it? It turns out that the fulfillment of one of Jesus' most important promise depends on you. I mean, Jesus is here in this world and present with us; that part of the promise is fulfilled, but you will never know it or experience it until you step out of your comfort zone and reach out to someone who is hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick or in prison.

It depends on you, so the question – the only question I want you to carry out of this place – is: what will you do for the next such person who crosses your path?