

I Kings 8:22-30, 54-66  
I Corinthians 6:13-15, 19-20

## 22,000 OXEN AND 120,000 SHEEP – A MORSEL AND A SIP

I don't know how you do it – manage to sit there dry-eyed, in the face of a moment like the one we just read about. I had to practice and practice so I wouldn't break down and be unable to finish the passage. So many hopes and dreams coming together – so much earnest gratitude and consecration. The whole Jewish nation is entering a new era, and hopes are so high and faith is so strong. Yet we know what will happen in a few short years: civil war; the nation will split; only a handful of the kings of either North or South will even pretend to care about God or the Covenant. And of course, faithful people and prophets will suspect that this is *why* Israel is defeated, destroyed, and scattered by nation after nation, until her final decimation under Rome.

We have grown calloused and hardened to such plights. Horror stories from every part of the globe have poured in upon us for generations. It is not just past history but also present reality that individuals and peoples are slaughtered, their hopes are dashed, their faith is mocked – and no God comes to their rescue. As many of us know, if you work with pick or axe all day, your hands become calloused. If one part of your body is cut or smashed in the same place enough times, the scar tissue gets thick, and sometimes that part of your body is nearly useless. Well, our hearts get scarred and calloused in the same way. I do not say this as an accusation. I am not trying to suggest that we can merely pretend that our hearts are *not* scarred and calloused, just because somebody thinks it would be nice if we were all innocent and loving. In fact, if you do not have calluses on your heart, I don't think you can survive in this broken world. People who pretend they do not have any calluses are doing just that – pretending. And the real question is: When and in what circumstances will we ever let anything get past the calluses and truly reach our hearts again? When and in what circumstances will we claim any real hope or allow ourselves to live by faith again?

Some of us (and I am one of them) can tell you that the only reason we ever let anything get past our shields and calluses – the only reason we dare to hold *any* hope or try to live by faith again – is because of a Jewish carpenter. Years ago, He lived and died and rose again to open up for us a WAY to be in this world – a WAY different from anything we had ever heard of or thought about before.

Judaism – no matter how much we honor it, no matter how much we owe to it, no matter how much it is the mother and source of Christendom – is about peace and prosperity on this earth. That is the hope it holds out and the reason for its Covenant. That is its mission: to be a light to the nations, so that everyone will “see the light,” turn to God, and obey the Covenant, and then there will be peace and prosperity on the earth for everyone. And the reason Judaism can never accept Jesus as the Messiah is precisely because this was not His purpose or message. Jesus did not preach or expect peace on earth. He came with a different Message for a different Kingdom – unseen, and eternal.

That is hard to swallow. Hard enough to split the Jewish nation, and to cause mayhem on the earth ever since. It is hard to shift from all our earthly expectations to something spiritual, something interior, and at first it seems unreal – ethereal. Yet it is harder still to go on believing in the hopes and promises of the First Covenant. We know the results. However illogical and stupid and unbelievable it may seem in theory, the whole world keeps choosing chaos and pain rather than banding together to make life better for everybody. The obvious and irrefutable truth is: Even Israel never kept the Covenant, never mind spreading it to the rest of the world. Clearly and obviously Judaism is correct, her Covenant is from God, and it *would* work – IF the people of the world would work it. But they will not. Or they are incapable of keeping it. Whichever. Life will never be lived on the basis of the First Covenant (the Old Testament) – not in this world. A significant number of people, even among those who swear allegiance to the Covenant, will not even keep the core precepts of the Ten Commandments. They prefer to cheat and pretend rather than keep the Covenant with willing, obedient hearts. And never more than a handful of people, even within Israel, ever work it for very long or with any earnestness. Nothing works if we will not work it. Which means there is no hope; there is no reason for faith. At least not from this earth, or *on* this earth.

But Jesus came and blew our minds: Stop being nearsighted. Life on this earth is about more than life on this earth. The Way you live here will count and will accomplish things beyond this world – because none of you are staying here. If you love somebody and they die, you may *think* it went for nothing and is all over, but that is not the truth. If you find yourself endowed with incredible gifts of artistry and design and you build a great building and somebody runs an airplane into it and destroys it, you may *think* all your gifts and labors went for

nothing, but that is not the truth. “My Kingdom is not of this world. But you can live for me – live for my eternal Kingdom – right here and now. And I promise you it *will* count! It will last and be real in a realm far more brilliant and lasting than anything you can imagine here.”

“That’s just pie in the sky,” a lot of people say. But they do not put up their blood for collateral; they do not rise from the dead to prove it; they do not meet us in our prayers any time we are willing to slow down and listen. So after we have had some experience with the reality and love of the Risen Christ in our own lives, we don’t care very much what they say.

The eagerness of young Solomon and his enthusiasm for God and the Covenant are poignant in this chapter. His hopes and dreams were landlocked and earthbound, but he was young and they were very real. The whole nation felt like the time had finally arrived. They had been through slavery and mayhem, and many times Israel had come close to losing it all. But now they ruled from Egypt to the Euphrates. David had fought off all their enemies and they were prosperous and strong. Surely God was with them, they would go from strength to strength, and all the promises of God would be fulfilled – in the real and physical world. Every person who has experienced a little success on earth knows how this feels. But like Solomon, often they do not know how short a time it will last.

In a few years, Solomon himself would break the Covenant. And it would not be a minor infraction. He would blast the Jewish Way to smithereens forever. He would take his reputation for human wisdom seriously and, in human pride, decide that he was smarter than God – more intelligent than the Covenant. Most of the kings who come after him would follow his example, until there was nothing left. Solomon was so influential that a lot of *you* still think he was right.

For the moment, if you are willing, think about the difference between that vast throng that gathered in Jerusalem to dedicate the temple, and the tiny gathering of people here this morning. A whole nation suspended life for a whole week – dancing, singing, feasting, praying – expecting earthly prosperity and success. The 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep went up in the flames on the altar, not to mention all the lesser sacrifices. It was a great party in honor of God – food and drink until nobody could hold any more.

All you get is a tiny sip of juice and a morsel of bread too small to last you until noon. We spoil nobody's appetite here. What in the world is going on? Well, it is not really "in the world," or we completely miss it. That is part of the point. We do not pray for worldly success; we pray that we will be faithful – that we will be obedient. We pray that we will hear the Spirit's guidance and be willing to follow it. And we say "Thank You" to the One who invited us into this New WAY of hope and faith when we thought such things were gone forever. And we remember His love, and we give Him our love in return.

How did Jesus make this jump – how did He put it together? How could He know the presence of God and "see" the unseen Kingdom so clearly? How could He proclaim a Gospel that went so far beyond Law and keeping rules, until even creatures of dust and flaws and failures like us could hear and feel the possibility of a personal bond – a relationship – with the Numinous, Eternal God? Even if He Himself saw it, how could He have nerve enough – confidence enough – to invite us into a WAY so different? How could He know so much and reveal so much? And how could He be so certain? So certain that nobody and nothing could dissuade Him from His Message and mission?

Such questions are beyond human answers. All our creeds are minuscule and foolish in the face of such questions. It is the mystery of the Messiah and Son of God. He is human, yet unbelievably different. He does not cheat, coerce, or dominate, yet we cannot shake His influence. He hurts nobody, yet is hated with ferocity greater than this world displays against its most hated criminals. His WAY is so different, it threatens, angers, and draws venom from even the most religious people. And He is kind and compassionate, yet will not compromise His truth, will not back away from confrontation, will not make peace with those who oppose Him – no matter how wealthy they are; no matter what high reputations they have in this world; no matter how much they malign Him, discredit Him, or insist that He has no right to put them in a bad light by bringing a LIGHT so much better, so much softer, so much truer.

How did Jesus make this jump? I believe it is impossible to explain except by the realization that He is the Christ – the Messiah sent by God. In a sense, that is no explanation. It is a leap of faith. I hope we have all taken that leap. Otherwise, what we do here today has no meaning for us. Instead of filling us with comfort, love, inspiration, and resolve, it is merely a morsel of bread and a sip of juice. Contrast Solomon's great feast, and

the thousands of sheep and oxen being sacrificed, with the quiet inner communion we take this day, remembering a very different sacrifice. Of course, this communion can be missed and abused just as badly. How *Jesus* lived is no protection against how *we* live; it is only an invitation to follow Him into a very different LIFE. Nevertheless, contrast the great festival of dedicating the outer, physical temple with the interior dedication of a very small, inner temple: ourselves. It is a profound contrast between two very different “ways” – The Outside Journey versus The Inside Journey.

Are you still looking for an outer vision and purpose? Are we here to accomplish something grand or impressive in the outer world? It is always a strange relief to turn to the outer world and escape from our inner destiny and purpose – our relationship of obedience to the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord. But the outer world is never the pearl of great price. Jesus learned deeply from the history and travail of His people, but He knew His life and Message would cause mayhem, as any new “way” does in our world. The tendencies to go back to our old ways of thinking and doing are constant. We must keep reminding ourselves and each other: The reconciliation and peace is with God – not with the outer world. All the promises, satisfactions, rewards, and delights of Jesus’ New WAY are about an unseen, eternal Kingdom – not about the physical realm in which we find ourselves for the moment. For that very reason, we can never determine how true or real His WAY is – except by taking the road, walking the WAY, following Him into it. We think we can imagine what it would be like to open our lives to Him – to grant Him our allegiance and obedience. But that is never more than imagination (fantasy) until we actually do it – actually take the leap. “My life is yours, Lord. Do with it what you will.”

Communion, as the very word implies, is something we all wish to take in unity and community, in peace and love. We want to do it in a Christian Way – we want to do it like Jesus did it. That may seem more difficult than usual, for some of us. So we need to remember *how* Jesus did it. His whole world was swarming around Him like angry hornets when Jesus took the first communion meal with His disciples. Temple police were looking for Him and would, before the evening was over, arrest Him, and He would be dead by three o’clock the following afternoon. The words forever haunt us: “*In the same night in which he was betrayed, our Lord took bread ....*” Those words were not about His enemies; they were said of His friends. If you are looking for an earthly “sweetness and light,” you are not going to be happy with Jesus as your Lord.

By the way, the peace and unity, the love and mercy, the community of grace and forgiveness that are so powerfully embedded in the sacrament of communion are about the bond and relationship between us and God, between us and Jesus. That is all supposed to flow into our relationships and bonds with each other too, of course. But that is not where it begins or ends. And that is why nothing in this world can destroy this meal or keep it from us – if we accept our Lord’s invitation and come to His banquet. All the same: It was “*on the same night in which He was betrayed*” that our Lord took bread – and broke it for us – those many years ago. May none of us be willing to reenact *that part* of this gracious and incredible meal.