

"Who Cares"

Text: Ezekiel 34:11-16

May the love of God the Father fill you with wonder, may the sacrifice of the Son fill you with gratitude, and may the gifts of the Holy Spirit fill you with faith, hope, and the eager expectation of our Lord's return. Amen.

Dear Fellow Servants of Jesus Christ: There's an old saying in the news business that helps to identify what is and isn't newsworthy: *"Dog bites man – not a story. Man bites dog – story!"* It's true, isn't it? It's the strange and unusual that is deemed newsworthy. What is bad and what goes wrong in life gets all the attention, while all the things that are good and go right tend to pass without notice. Thousands of planes take off and land without incident and without fanfare. It's the one that crashes that gets all the attention. Millions of motorists start their cars in the morning, drive where they need to go, and return without mishap. It's the wreck that everyone notices. Millions go to bed at night and wake in the morning after a quiet and peaceful night's rest. It's the rare home invasion that everyone talks about.

That's also true about the human body, isn't it. Think of how many impossibly complex systems – chemical, electrical, and biological – all work flawlessly in the human body every moment of every day without so much as a passing notice or a word of thanks to our Creator and Protector. Eyes see, ears hear, hearts beat, unseen infections are identified and destroyed. But man oh man don't we let the world know when something goes wrong. Millions of processes take place flawlessly, all of which are forgotten in the face of that one thing that doesn't.

One of those incredible "take for granted systems" in the human body is the ability to feel satiated or satisfied. No matter how ravenously hungry or thirsty we can get (which, by the way, is also a blessing we take for granted because it is our body telling us it needs fuel and hydration) there is also an incredibly complex system that tells us when we have had enough. Yours probably spoke pretty loudly this past Thursday. Not only does it tell us we've had enough, it actually begins to make what we would have given anything for just a few minutes earlier actually look repulsive. Granted, that "you've had enough system" probably could and should kick in a bit faster for some of us, it is still a marvelous insight into the wisdom of our Creator – a self-contained system that lets itself know both when it needs more and when it has had enough. No wonder David, in considering the creation of his body in Psalm 139 said, **"I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."**

Yet as is the case with every blessing, there is also here the potential for abusing the good things that God has done for us. Even our God-given ability to feel satisfied carries with it the potential to allow that basic gift to become what God never intended. The God-intended cycle of our lives is supposed to be: need, petition, fulfillment, thanksgiving. We perceive a need, ask God to fulfill that need, he does so, and we thank him for it. That's how it is supposed to go, but the cycle we tend to adopt is: need, fulfillment, apathy.

Obviously if this is a bad system in connection with material or physical things, it is infinitely worse when carried into the spiritual. This morning we will address this very problem and seek answers on the basis of our text, found recorded in the Book of Ezekiel, the 34th Chapter:

^{ESV} Ezekiel 34:11-16 "For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. ¹² As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³ And 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 ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. ¹⁴ I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares 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, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice."

This is God's Word, given by inspiration through the Prophet and mercifully and miraculously preserved and passed down to us today. Thank God for giving us his perfect truth. That we too may enjoy the Life and wisdom these words were intended to provide, so we pray, **"Sanctify us by Your truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth."** Amen.

If you drive in rural North Dakota after dark, especially this time of year, you are probably well aware of just how stupid deer can be when it comes to crossing highways in front of several tons of fast-moving steel. They flat out seem to have a death wish. Not only do they insist on crossing in front of approaching cars, they seem determined to wait

by the side of the road and cross only when you can no longer avoid them. Obviously complaining about this is about as productive as complaining about government spending, but for creatures as cagy and elusive as white-tailed deer this lack of highway smarts defies our sense of logic.

So what does that have to do with the Sunday sermon? As you undoubtedly noticed from the Scripture readings and from the fact that we today commemorate the Last Sunday of the Church year, the general focus of our service this morning centers around the coming of our Lord, the end of this temporal age, the Resurrection of the Dead, and Judgment Day. All of these are fitting topics as we look back at the year now drawing to a close and look forward to what comes next. Yet this is supposed to be more than just a time for clichés and pious-sounding phrases about *"being ready"* and *"prepared for the coming of our Lord."* If it is no more than that, we will be pretty much just like those deer in the headlights - brute beasts that calmly (or in a panic) step right in front of the oncoming truck.

Our great and terrible enemy here is apathy. Nothing I hear from fellow Christians frightens and saddens me more than apathy. Apathy is the apex spiritual killer. *"I don't care"* is the stuff the damned are made of. Understand this well. If you were, God forbid, to fall into some grievous and hurtful sin, which then drives you to your knees in sincere guilt and remorse, you would find yourself in an immeasurably greater situation than those who have committed no great or specific sin but who just doesn't care – doesn't care about anything having to do with the spiritual or the afterlife, doesn't care how God sees them or their actions, don't care what God says in his Word. Just doesn't care. Worst of all are those souls who have heard and believed the gospel, only to grow cold and indifferent to that message of Life.

Hear what Scripture has to say about that worst of all worlds in Hebrews 6:4-6: ***"For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶ and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt."***

Hear well also God's message to the apathetic Church in Laodicea: ***"I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth."*** (Revelation 3:15-16)

Recognize here not only the voice of God himself, but also the fact that God does not make idle threats. Understand also that God does not warn against that which he *hopes* will happen. His warnings are always given with the express purpose that the sinner will hear and turn away from the danger. This is the sort of God we have. He hates evil, but he loves you. In fact he loved you enough to sacrifice his Son for you. He loved you enough to subject his greatest Treasure to horrors well beyond our human powers to grasp or measure.

Our text certainly reveals God's love for us in striking fashion. Listen again to that text, but this time focus your attention on the words "I" and "myself" – remembering that this is *God speaking to you*:

"For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. ¹² As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³ And 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 ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. ¹⁴ I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares 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, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice."

Remarkable, isn't it. If you are having trouble being impressed by this, consider again just who is speaking to whom. This is God speaking – the Creator and Sustainer of all that exists. He is not only the Maker of all that is; he is still the center of his creation – the focal point of everything that exists. As such, he is immeasurably greater than the greatest of his creation. All power, glory, praise and honor rightly reside with him alone. Everything else that exists pales in comparison. God is immeasurably greater than even the sum total of all of humanity and angels combined.

Yet given all of that, what is the focus and concern of the God of heaven and earth? With what does he occupy himself and on what does he direct his love, attention, and care? You.

Why? Some would probably answer that it is because of the value that his Son placed on us. While that is true, it is also true that God loved you *before you were created*. Ephesians 1:3-6: ***"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons..."*** That means he also therefore loved you before he sent his Son, and therefore also before his Son paid the sin debt by which mankind had incurred the wrath of divine justice. He does not love you because he sent his Son. He sent his Son because he loves you. The advent of Jesus was therefore yet another demonstration of the love that *he has always had for you*. It was further evidence – the greatest evidence – of how he values you.

Again, how amazing this all is when we stop to examine two immutable truths. First, how unworthy we all are because of our innumerable sins, and second, when we stop to contemplate how far above us is our God that he should pay any attention at all to the likes of us. So, who cares? First of all, God does. This is why apathy on the part of mankind is as bewildering as it is wrong and sinful. How could any human being ever be apathetic about anything in any way connected to our infinite, immortal, omnipotent and omniscient Creator-God?

Though we have a God who cares for us and seeks us out even when we wander, we still have the terrible power to distance ourselves from him and to wander from the path of life. In the words of our text, we have the power to turn ourselves into those apathetic ***"fat and strong"*** sheep that God will sentence to hell on his Day of Judgment.

But his warning also means something else. It would be a pointless warning and therefore a waste of time if there were nothing that you and I could do about the problem, no remedy. Clearly there is. God has offered us the powerful, foolproof means to keep us in the faith and thereby to be preserved until our Lord returns: his holy Word.

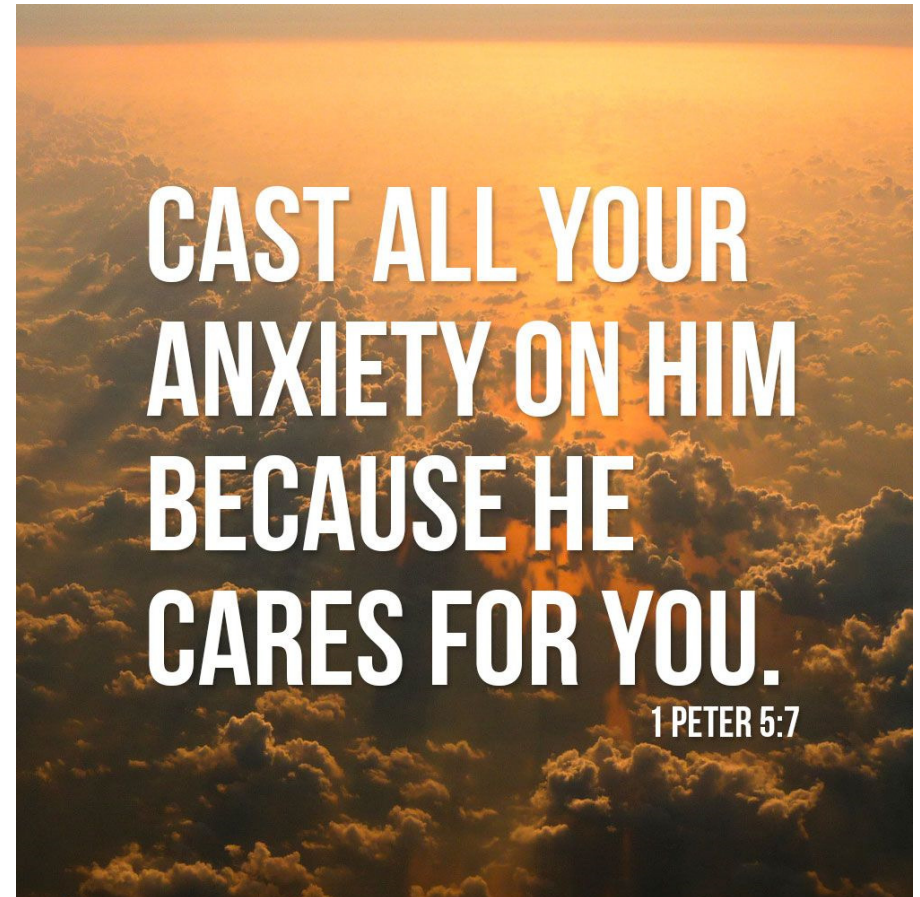
We conclude where we began: *"Who cares?"* The answer is that God cares, but so should you. On Judgment Day you will be sentenced to an eternity in heaven or in hell. No middle ground; no opt out; no escape clause in your contract. Heaven or hell, for all eternity. God in his mercy sent his Son to pay in full for all your sins. He has already sought you out. He found you when you weren't even looking for him and set your feet on the path to heaven by creating saving faith in your heart. You now have the terrible power to throw away what God has done for you. Or you can

visit him regularly in his Word – where he has promised to meet with you, to strengthen you, and to preserve your eternal soul. These words are therefore both a loving warning and a benevolent invitation – from God himself – for you who have already been brought to faith in your Savior Jesus. Immerse yourself regularly in the power that is his Word and then trust that he will strengthen, protect and preserve you – as he promised. Apathy will vanish. With your God thereby working in and for you, you can have complete confidence that you will never be unprepared for his return. Amen.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 15:20-28** But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴ Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷ For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "all things are put in subjection," it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. ²⁸ When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.

^{ESV} **Matthew 25:31-46** "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' ⁴¹ "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

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ST PAUL LUTHERAN CHURCH

BISMARCK, NORTH DAKOTA

ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

2510 E. Divide Ave. Bismarck, ND 58501

Parsonage and Office: (701) 223-4885 Cell: (701) 425-5483

Website: www.bismarcklutheran.org

Mick Johnson, President Angela Pfennig, Organist

Michael Roehl, Pastor

The Last Sunday of the Church Year – November 26, 2023

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 552 (Stanzas 1-4) (Red Hymnal)

"Abide with Me, Fast Falls the Eventide"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The First Lesson: (1 Corinthians 15:20-28) In our first reading Paul reminds us not only of Judgment Day and the resurrection of all the dead, but the *reason* why Christians need never fear that day. In fact we ought to eagerly anticipate that day every waking moment, longing always for the return of our Savior Jesus. God grant us hearts that never forget that here we are pilgrims, just passing through.

Psalm 91 (Supplement page 33)

The Gospel Lesson: (Matthew 25:31-46) Our Gospel reading provides yet another picture of Judgment Day. Note that while we are not saved by our own good works, those works are used as evidence of saving faith – since only a faithful heart can produce a truly good work.

The Confession of Faith -

Nicene Creed – (Supplement page 5)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 572 (Red Hymnal)

"Praise to God, Immortal Praise"

The Sermon – Ezekiel 34:11-16 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"Who Cares"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Prayers

The Pre-Communion Hymn – 604 (Red Hymnal)

"Great God What Do I See and Hear"

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Brown Hymnal page 17)

The Distribution

The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving (Brown Hymnal page 20)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 552 (Stanzas 6-8) (Red Hymnal)

"Abide with Me, Fast Falls the Eventide"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here!
To our Visitors seeking Holy Communion – In obedience to God's Word, we practice "Close Communion." This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting anyone to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word, not in judgment of anyone's Christian faith.

Attendance – Sunday (35) Average (43)

This Week at St. Paul:

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| Today | -9:00 a.m. | – Sunday School and Bible Class |
| | -10:00 a.m. | – Worship Service w/Holy Communion |
| | -11:15 a.m. | – Fellowship Hour |
| Wednesday | -5:45 p.m. | – Confirmation Class |
| | -7:00 p.m. | – Midweek Advent Service |
| Saturday | -6:00 p.m. | – Annual Church Christmas Party |
| Next Sunday | -9:00 a.m. | – Sunday School and Bible Class |
| | -10:00 a.m. | – Worship Service |
| | -11:00 a.m. | – Fellowship Hour |

CLC News –Calvary of Marquette and St. Peter's of Iron River have called Pastor Michael Wilke. Teacher Daniel Barthels of Gethsemane Saginaw has announced his retirement from the teaching ministry following the end of the current school year. Immanuel of Mankato has called Pastor David Pfeiffer.

Advent Services – The first of our three Midweek Advent services is scheduled for this Wednesday at 7pm. These services provide a good opportunity for Christians to refocus at a time of great distraction.

Confirmation Classes – Confirmation parents and students please note that Confirmation Classes will begin at 5:45pm again this Wednesday and that that will be the start-time through Advent.

Church Christmas Party – The Annual Church Christmas Party is scheduled for this Saturday, December 2nd at 6:00 pm. The event is open to all, whether single or married, and all are encouraged to attend.