

# STRIKE THE SHEPHERD

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Vicar Lincoln Albrecht—Abiding Grace Lutheran—Zechariah 13.7-9

A whistle blows, sneakers squeak as children scurry to the center line desperate to arm themselves. You see the importance of this dodgeball game, in the steely glare of the captains, in the hesitant start of those picked last. Each kid knows that for a little while their self-worth will be determined by how hard they can throw, how quickly they can roll away, how well they can catch.

And the new kid knows it too. He hasn't been in town long, but he knows during this gym period it will be long enough to develop a reputation. His competition stares him down, confident, almost arrogant. The new kid rears back, sweat trickling down his arm, putting a little extra on this throw. As the sinking rubber ball arrives into the grasp of the opposing captain, he didn't think there was anything special about this throw—but he hadn't seen the southpaw spin correctly. As the dodge ball arrives at his finger tips it violently rearranges his index finger at an unnatural 45 degree angle. The once boisterious boy screams in agony. The other children flee, scattering to the back corners of the playing field. They don't want to be the next victim. There is a new champion of the dodge ball court—the new kid.

Often times, our lives as Christians are like those other kids. When we see trial & tribulation strike someone close to us, someone we look up to and respect, we are frightened. When these burdens bring even the strong to their knees—suddenly we don't want any part of this. We quickly look for ways to escape—worried we will be next. But God told us it would be this way—the fires of trial and tribulation will come to every Christian. Our Shepherd was struck violently, well aware the sheep would scatter, but confidently knowing the true flock would be gathered. **We read our Sermon text today from Zechariah.**

As we read through our sermon text for this morning—our first question is why? Why does the LORD Almighty strike the Shepherd? Why does he put so many through the fire? Why are so many lost?

We can become scattered by frustration, disillusionment, and disappointment; separated from our stricken Shepherd and the flock, easy prey.

It's easy to become disillusioned as a Christian isn't it? Because being a Christian separates us. We are different. We are weird. We wake up early on Sunday morning. We separate ourselves by our words and actions and for what? Are we really that different? Who do we think we are? As soon as we get that Christian label people expect more—they expect us to be different, better. But maybe they really just want us to see that we aren't different, or better. What's the point? We know that we aren't any better.

We struggle with sins of selfishness, dishonesty, evil and lustful thoughts. What's the point in pretending? No matter how hard we try—we fail. Time and again. And we get frustrated; it would be easier to just give up on being a Christian, on yourself. Because you are a fraud. You aren't the good person you pretend to be to your co-workers, to your friends, to your family, to your spouse. If they only really knew you. The judgmental thoughts you frost over with a smile.

Our hypocrisy makes us sick. How could anyone love someone like that? We certainly wouldn't. Think of all the wicked thoughts and deeds we have—not just the ones that aren't perfect—but the really dark, twisted ones. And God knows them all. How can he love me?

And our minds convince us there are only two possible explanations. Either God doesn't know, and has just been pretending to what he claims, like everybody else. Or he knows. And really which is worse?

And it's not like this feeling of disappointment is one-sided. God has every reason to be disappointed in us—but the disappointment doesn't stop there.

We have so many reasons to be disappointed. Because the cost of being a Christian is so expensive. We have set so much aside. And for what? To pretend to be something we aren't. We are disappointed we haven't achieved as much as we were capable of. We set goals and didn't get anywhere near them, in our professional and personal lives.

Maybe you feel like you could have achieved a lot more at work if you weren't so dedicated to church. If you had spent a few more hours in professional development instead of meetings for church, you'd have that title, that corner office. Or maybe that is why you haven't spent as much time at church as you once promised. Maybe work has consumed all your time. And you are terrified that if you cutback even a little bit you'll lose it all.

But we know we won't experience wild earthly success. Maybe you have already counted that cost. But you're disappointed in your home life. After all, this is why you came to church, to get things straightened out at home. You were sure that a lil bit of church would fix all those issues, quiet the conflict.

Because it doesn't seem right that Christian couples should have struggles just like everybody else. We shouldn't have to deal with that. That's why we started coming to church in the first place. Wives are disappointed in their husband's lack of interest. He used to care, used to listen, used to be there when I needed him.

And similar thoughts come from the easy chair in the living room. She used to try. She used to have dinner ready right when I came home—now all I have is leftovers. She used to try to impress me—but it seems like she doesn't care anymore.

And maybe both are disappointed in the kids. That was whole reason you came to church. To train your children in the way they should go. Because the world is too dangerous, nowadays. And yet, they still seem to make the same immature mistakes their unchurched friends do. Shouldn't it be different? Shouldn't it be better?

Our lives seem fake, meaningless, and lonely—at times, we wonder if it's all worth it. The fires of trial are hot and filled with disappointment. Life isn't what we expected it to be. The world once looked so conquerable, but now we feel like the ones who have been conquered.

The Israelites, too, chased after the illusion of fitting in with the group. They eagerly pursued the empty victories in war, in trade, in harvest—trying to appease false gods. The Israelites fell into indifference, ignoring the prophets who spoke the clear words of God that fell upon deaf ears—they were more focused on avoiding the fires God told them were necessary.

Zechariah brings this same message to us—these fires are necessary. God doesn't want to torture you for making him harm his one and only Son. But without these fires we get too distracted by the glitz and glamour of this world—too focused on temporary success in life, in work, in our family lives—to see the Shepherd's victory in enduring the striking we deserved.

Our Shepherd denied himself all the things we have futilely chased after to win for us the one thing needful—salvation in heaven. Christ’s words and actions separated himself from the religious and political authorities. Christ could have compromised his teachings and became a part of the Pharisees or the ruling Romans—but to do so would be to compromise our salvation. Christ endured intense persecution, bitter loneliness in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross so we wouldn’t be eternally isolated from the love of the Father.

Christ kept the company of sinners—becoming the object of derision and disdain—because he came to save sinners. He stayed by their side even though he was constantly disappointed by their immaturity, their weak flesh, their selfish nature, their ignorance, because he came to redeem these weak sheep.

And Christ was put on display because he was weird, different. He was mocked because he claimed to be the Messiah, the perfectly acceptable sacrifice—different than all the rest. He could have come down off the cross, avoided all the jeering. Instead he remained on the cross, facing his mockers—even saving them, in order to finish what he was sent to do. Christ knew he had to be different to make a difference.

And he has gathered us together to be different too. Yes, the fires of trial and tribulation are hot. The loneliness is real and painful. The disappointment may bring us to our knees or to tears—but we aren’t alone. God promises that he will bring us through all these fires. He promises all his real sheep are like a precious metal in his eyes. We face the fires, but for a different reason. It’s not meant to consume you, but to refine you. To strip away all the sin in your life.

We face these fires with the same confidence Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had. Regardless of what happens in this life our God is powerful enough to save us, to spare us, if it is according to his will.

The strength of God’s promise, the power of the faith the Holy Spirit works in our heart makes us different. When we face the fires; we recognize their purpose and see our God. We recognize he has called us, you and me, his people. He owns us—he has bought us with the blood of his Son, our stricken Shepherd, and he will see us through these fires to the other side, with him in heaven. Whenever his children call upon him he will answer us. Take comfort that the LORD, mighty and powerful to save is your God.

Many times the struggles of being a Christian look intimidating, especially when we see others stumble. Like those children fleeing to the corners in dodge ball we may wish that we didn’t have to endure the pain coming our way. But with the strength of God we can embrace the struggles facing us, knowing our God will see us through it. He promises he will because we are worth more than gold or silver, because we are his people. This is why the Shepherd was stricken in the first place, so the LORD God could gather his true flock. As his people we confidently proclaim, “The Lord is our God.” AMEN.

**Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. Amen.**