

September 15, 2019 – Ezekiel 34:11-24 & Luke 15:1-10

This past week was the anniversary of a tragedy. The 18th anniversary, to be precise. Which doesn't seem like it would all that significant. It's not a big, round number, like 10 or 20. But people seemed to observe it more this year than many prior years.

My wife speculated that it might have to do with the realization that, after this year, there will be no children who were alive when the attacks occurred. That, perhaps, we feel like we have to work harder to remember 9/11 because, from this point on, none of our children will ever remember it for themselves. I can see some logic in that.

Unfortunately, they've got plenty of other tragedies to remember in these last 18 years. Hurricanes and fires. Shootings in schools and movie theaters. Wars and terrorist attacks. This sinful world has brought plenty of tragedy to us all, child and adult.

It's not a great feeling, is it? That feeling of helplessness in the face of suffering. That feeling of despair in the face of evil. We try to come up with solutions. We try to blame people. We look for answers. But there aren't many answers. And those we do find could take another generation or more to implement.

Jesus had an expression for this helpless confusion. He looked at us and he saw “sheep without a shepherd.” Scared and alone. Scattered. Wandering. Waiting for someone to look for us. Hoping that a shepherd will find us. Lead us back to a familiar place and a secure home.

So its not surprising then that the prophet Ezekiel would utilize the same imagery of lost sheep to describe the people of Israel. A similar calamity had befallen him and the Israelites of his day. For as he wrote the words of chapter 34, he was not sitting in his home in Jerusalem. He was not going about his assigned tasks as a priest, caring for the temple and offering sacrifices for the people. He was not surrounded by high city walls, a strong army, or the guidance of a God-fearing king.

No, Ezekiel was in Babylon. Carried away from the only home he had ever known in the conquest of his country by King Nebuchadnezzar and the subsequent exile of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. A time that he describes in this passage as “a day of clouds and thick darkness.” Was it actually cloudy and dark the day that Nebuchadnezzar marched into Jerusalem? I don't know. But it certainly felt pretty gloomy for the people.

It was a dark day for them. Afraid. Alone. Confused. Angry. Grieving. Distraught. Like many of us watching a tragedy unfold on TV, fundamentally their life hadn't changed all that much. They were not slaves in Babylon, after all. They were well-treated. They had homes and businesses there. Freedom to walk about the city and even worship their God (most of the time).

But even with all that freedom and all that seeming normality, everything had changed. Their world had been rocked. Their faith shaken. Their leadership had failed them. One king after another, pulling them further and further away from the Lord. Bringing pagan idols into the land even as they encouraged immorality and injustice by their very lifestyles.

If they couldn't trust their king, who could they trust? If they couldn't trust the man whom God had anointed as their shepherd to lead them and keep them secure, what were they to do? They were scattered. They were wandering. And they felt as if no one was looking for them. Sheep without a shepherd.

I think that's an understandable feeling for us. Disaster strikes. Homes are lost. People die. We recover. We rebuild. Nothing has really changed. And yet, everything has changed.

You can see it in the way that people flock to leadership in this country. A man promises us security and peace by war and military might, and we run to him. A man promises us hope and change in grand, eloquent speeches and he becomes a virtual messiah to us.

We are sheep. And we feel alone. And it seems like we'll follow any man who sets himself up as a shepherd. Even when he himself is just another little lost lamb.

And as Ezekiel points out, the reality is that any man can make promises. Any man can say he is a shepherd and then plunder the flock. Any man can say he will protect the sheep and then abandon them to wolves. Any man can promise a green pasture and then trample it under his own foolishness and selfishness.

But only one man has made all those promises and then backed them up with actions. Only one man has promised to be our shepherd and then stuck with us through all eternity. Only one man has promised to defend us from all foes and then defeated death itself to protect us. Only one man has promised to bring us into a green pastures and then showed us a glimpse of that paradise as he healed the sick, cast out demons, and raised the dead.

Only one man sacrificed all he had and gave up his very life to rescue each and every one of you when you strayed. His name is Jesus Christ and he is our good shepherd. Who will never leave us nor forsake us. Who leads us to streams of living water and the rich pastures of his holy mountain and will tend his flock until the storm clouds of sin and death are gone and the bright new day of our resurrection has come.

He has searched for us through the wilderness of sin and brought us home. He has lit a lamp and scoured the four corners of the earth to bring us back to him. He has rejoiced to find us even when we were the ones who went astray. Even when we didn't want to be found.

Those sinners and tax collectors who ate at Jesus' table didn't become sinners and tax collectors out of ignorance, after all. They weren't tricked into those lifestyles, into making those choices. They weren't innocent bystanders.

They earned the label of "sinner." They put money, power, and pleasure ahead of their God. They hurt their neighbors for their own gain. And, in that sense, the Pharisees and scribes were absolutely right to call them those names.

The difference is that when Jesus declared, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near," they repented. They begged for God's mercy. When Jesus declared, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," they followed him, and held onto every word he spoke. When Jesus declared, "Your sins are forgiven," they knew that their sins were forgiven. And heaven rejoiced that a lost sheep had been rescued. A lost coin had been found.

Jesus is still seeking us out. The shepherd still comes to rescue his sheep. To bind up the injured. To strengthen the weak. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Christ Jesus comes into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

He still receives sinners and eats with them. Right here at this very table. That's what communion is. It is Jesus still inviting tax collectors and sinners to dine with him. To dine on him – his own body and blood. To receive all you who repent and say, "Your sins are forgiven." So that all the angels in heaven rejoice.

Our shepherd is here. Our king is seated on his throne. The Lord has spoken. And when our Lord speaks, it is so. And though this dark world pulls many astray, leaves us injured and weak and dying, our Lord searches for the lost, binds up the injured, strengthens the weak... and even raises the dead.

Though it may feel like a day of clouds and thick darkness. Though we may feel like sheep without a shepherd. Though towers may fall, the Lord rescues his flock. The Son of Man has come to seek and save the lost. He has come to seek and to save you. Amen.