

Ezekiel 34:11-16

“Shepherds Among Us”

Every time I study a passage to prepare for a sermon, I discover something new, something that I have forgotten, or perhaps something I have just forgotten to remember. While I have preached very little from the prophet Ezekiel, I had completely forgotten to remember that he was a prophet who lived DURING the Exile, in Babylon, WITH the children of Israel. All of you have heard me preach enough to know that this is a part of Israel’s history that fascinates me. What a wonderful surprise when I learn something new about that time. But perhaps a burden for you because now you have to hear about it!

Any time I read about events during the Exile, I find that they just tear at my heartstrings. The Israelites ended up in Babylon because of their inability to live up to the covenant with God, but haven’t we all done that? Don’t we ALL deserve judgment and punishment for our sins? Still, I always try to imagine how they felt.

I thought about this as I watched interviews with people in Oregon and Florida this week. The wildfires in the northwestern part of the United States have been horrific. Fires have burned over three million acres in California, Oregon and Washington. Entire towns have been wiped out. People have compared the terrain to pictures from the moonwalks. One man spoke through his tears about losing his wedding album and pictures of their children growing up.

The Hurricane season this year has been equally damaging. Hurricane Sally left trucks overturned, barges and home completed destroyed, over 290,000 people without power. An ironic sign floated through the streets of one town advertising, “Down Under Dive Shop”, Kayak

rentals and sales. Perhaps thinking about what some of our fellow 21st century Americans are dealing with will help us take a walk in the sandals of the Exiles.

And it is in the midst of the feelings of chaos and abandonment that Ezekiel offers a word of hope from the Lord. God, the good shepherd, makes promises to the people, assuring them that they have not been forgotten. These promises are true for each of us listening today in our own private Exiles that we have lived through or may be dealing with right now. And friends, if there has been a time in our recent history when our world needed to hear a word of restoration, it is 2020.

God's first word of assurance is that when we are lost, God will seek us out. Have you ever been lost? My favorite story about being lost, one that I have shared before, comes from minister Steven Clark Goad. He tells about the day that his mother got lost in Danner's Dime Store in Indianapolis, Indiana. Steven says that he knew exactly where HE was – in the toy section, having a ball with a new game that he discovered. But all of the sudden he heard his mother crying desperately, "Stevie, Stevie, where are you?" He said, "I knew in a minute that my mother was lost and so I ran to find her."

In truth, there are many ways to be lost. Some of us have been lost physically – either by taking a wrong turn or refusing to ask for directions or by staying too long on the toy aisle in the dime store. Some of us have been emotionally lost – not being able to make a decision or pitying ourselves because we can't understand why things have happened the way that they did. And I suppose if the truth be told, many of us have been spiritually lost too. We have been like Stevie's mom in the dime store but what we are yelling instead is, "God, God, where are you?"

Ezekiel reminds us that, no matter how far we stray, no matter HOW we get lost, no matter our reason for leaving God or leaving church, that God has his eye on us. God is always

praying that we will come home. In fact, as an exercise for study, I went back through the passage and wrote down all the verbs found in these verses. Every one of the actions taken in this passage belong to God. Listen to the list: search, seek, rescue, bring them back, gather, feed, bind up, strengthen. The only action the sheep take in all six verses is to lie down and eat. Sounds about right! Because as God's sheep today, the metaphor is the same. God often has to seek us out and rescue us.

As a pastor, I have heard every excuse in the book about why people don't come to church. It's my only day to sleep in. Sermons are too long -too short. Church is full of hypocrites. I find God in nature easier than in church. Well, I've said it before and I'll say it again – going to church does not make a person a Christian any more than going to a garage makes them a car.

Now, don't misunderstand me. God wants us all to be a part of the working body of Christ. But **not** going to church does not make one lost. Having no relationship with the shepherd who will search, seek, rescue, feed and strengthen you makes one lost. And friends, the Scriptures are clear that, if you are lost, YOU are the one who has moved, hidden or rejected the invitation.

In the Garden of Eden, after the first sin was committed, the writer of Genesis tells us: But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" (Gen3:9) God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah, "You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart." (Jer 29:13) And our Lord Jesus Christ said to sinful and despised Zacchaeus: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." (Luke 19:10),

God is always the good shepherd. God is continually waiting, seeking, indeed praying for every child that has wandered away from the fold. But out of God's love for us, we have

been given the choice to *want* to come back in. God will never abandon us. Ezekiel makes this clear to the Exiles who feel they have been forgotten.

But I think the more relevant message for us in today's world is that God places other shepherds among us. What I mean is that God sends people to search, seek, rescue, gather, feed, and strengthen us on God's behalf.

Some people are shepherds to us with their words. They bind up our wounds by encouraging us or rescue us by helping us see the good in ourselves. They strengthen us by letting us share a secret burden and then help us understand that we are still loved.

When Howard Henricks was growing up, he had a reputation for being a troublemaker in the classroom. As a fourth grader he was feeling very insecure, unloved and angry at life. To make things worse, on several occasions his teacher, Mrs. Simon, said to him, "Howard, you are the worst behaved child in this school." It was a difficult year for young Howard and the words of his teacher were stuck in his head.

The next fall Howard was sitting in a new classroom with a new teacher, Miss Norris. She was taking roll call and when she came to Howard's name she said, "Howard Henricks, I've heard a lot about you," looking at him and smiling. Yet she continued, "But I don't believe a word of it."

For the first time in his life, Howard believed in himself. He had heard a voice of hope and encouragement. From then on Howard was greatly interested in his schoolwork and he worked as hard as he could for his new teacher. It was a life changing event when that teacher used her words to shepherd him.

Sometimes people are our shepherds when they trust us enough to share their vulnerability. There was a woman in my home church that always served as a role model for

Christian living to me, especially when I was a young mother. By the grace of God, we actually became close friends, despite the thirty years difference in our ages. One day when we were having lunch, I complimented her on how well her children had turned out. She told me emphatically that their success was all because of her husband. She said, "I survived their childhood on cigarettes and Valium!"

I was so shocked and just blurted out, "YOU used to smoke?" She laughed and told me the story about how God actually spoke to her in church one Sunday and got her to quit. Whenever I tend to judge myself too harshly, I think about the journey that my friend took and the temptations she overcame. I remember that she is not perfect. Her willingness to share her faults has shepherded me over the years. Even now that story encourages me to love myself more and also to be less judgmental towards others.

Sometimes we are shepherds when we are willing to admonish, to teach or to correct someone. God, as our shepherd, corrects and guides us. Just as a literal shepherd has a staff and a rod to pull the sheep back in when they go down a stray path or poke the sheep in the side if he is about to eat a poisonous plant, God tries to keep us from harm. But as our shepherd, God must grow weary, like the parent who is always trying to teach the rebellious teenager the better way.

The very fact that God sent these words to the children in Exile must not be forgotten when thinking of this task. God clarifies this point in the last verse of our Scripture. "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, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice."

What wonderful words this must have been to those who KNEW they had been punished for their sins. Yet they also understood that now, God would punish their oppressors. God wanted the children in Exile to know that judging their actions was not the same as abandoning

him. God's justice was necessary for purifying, for their safety, to help them understand the consequences of actions. And also that EVERYONE who violates the covenant will have to be fed with justice.

We can help strengthen someone else's faith and teach them more about God's ways by speaking the truth in love than we can by letting them just get away with things. Shepherds did more than just cuddle the cute little lambs. They led them. They fought off predators and valiantly acted on their behalf. They did not take the easy road but worked constantly to keep the sheep safe and healthy, even if it meant doing things the sheep did not like or understand.

And when it comes to following God's command to feed the oppressor with justice, I think we are called to be shepherds with our actions. This is something that we can do individually or as a church. I often describe Nazareth as a Mission oriented church. I am so proud of the ways that you all support the needs of this community, our Presbytery and even the world. And when one individual is in need or hurting, your response to their needs is exemplary. But there is a difference between being mission oriented and missional.

Being missional means getting your hands dirty. It means doing more than writing a check. It means physically carrying someone to safety or literally binding up wounds of those who are injured. It means caring for the nutritional needs of the children who are not coming to school for those guaranteed meals. It means wearing a mask in the grocery store. It means taking one of the care bags for the homeless that the youth will package up this afternoon and giving them out. It means being with God's sheep where they are.

Our call from this passage is to care for the least, the lost, the excluded and to do so out of deep love and compassion, as God does. Because this is how people meet the TRUE shepherd.

Friends, the mission statement for our church is: TO WORSHIP AND GLORIFY GOD AND TO MAKE DISCIPLES FOR CHRIST. And we do this by sharing the Good News. But even more, we do this by SHOWING the Good News. We live out this mission statement in our daily living with our actions and words, along with our wallets!

When I was in seminary back in the 90's, we called this "Lifestyle Evangelism." And when I wrote that, a quote from a preaching conference came to my mind. The preacher said, "Evangelism is just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread." Perhaps in the world of COVID, fires, hurricanes, racial injustice and more, we can put this sentiment into action by our discipleship. We can be disciples and share our lifestyle evangelism by answering the call to shepherd God's people. In the name of the Good Shepherd. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

Nazareth Presbyterian Church, October 20, 2020