

“Lost & Found”

“For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out.”
(Ezekiel 34:11).

Perhaps you're familiar with this, those moments when you discover that you needed something that you never knew you needed until you needed it. While that sounds like a mouthful, I think it's a relatable situation. Usernames and passwords come to mind quickly for this sort of thing. We try and not think about them until we can't access something and then we recognize what we need. Sometimes classes at school feel this way. We endure classes we find pointless only to find down the road how much we truly needed that class. We even do this with rest and relaxation, where we find how much we needed a break after our bodies force us to slow down for a moment.

As our minds warm up to this idea that our experiences bear out, I'll put one more example in front of us that is a useful illustration for our weekend readings – the lost and found. You know that location where all the items go that are left behind. It's not something we think about until we need it. Yet, once we've found that we're missing something we're hoping that that place where things went missing has a lost and found. And for a moment, something we never thought we needed becomes a much bigger deal to us.

Some of you may know this, Emmanuel has a lost and found. It's located in the credenza cabinet to the west side of the stairs going from the church into Ebenezer and truth be told, it's full. Now, this isn't intended to be a guilt trip to get that space cleared out. I'm not attempting to create chaos at the end of service with everyone feeling like they must check out the lost and found. It's just a great tool to highlight a few points. That full lost and found reveals how forgetful we can be, how quickly and easily we move on and how useless we make those items waiting to be rediscovered.

Again, these observations are made just to serve this point that when it comes to the lost and found God acts the opposite of how we do. He isn't forgetful. He doesn't move on easily or quickly. Neither does He let the things He's searching for grow useless. However, our sinful struggles lead us to doubt God's memory, to question His motives and dismiss His plan for the life He's provided us. In our most honest moments, we're willing to paint God in the same way this illustration of Emmanuel's lost and found can depict us.

Truth be told, those honest moments are something we share with the people throughout Scripture. God is the God of the lost and found and yet, the complaint that unifies all of us sinners is that He's the reason the lost have to be found. He's forgetful. He moves on. He's useless. From Adam and Eve, to Abraham, to the Israelites in Egypt and then in the wilderness, to the generations of Israelites who made it into the Promised Land, to the people of Israel who experienced exile, there's this repetitive cycle of getting lost and the need to be found that isn't God's fault but many times that's how those sinners felt.

The first reading in our service from Ezekiel serves as a great snippet of this constant story for God's people. The two remaining tribes of the original twelve tribes of Israel, Judah and Benjamin, had not learned from their brothers and sisters' mistakes in the other ten tribes. They too, had strayed so far from their Lord and Savior that they needed to be awakened to their lost state via exile from the Promised Land. The nation of Babylon was their wake-up call, as they enslaved, deported and eventually destroyed Jerusalem and the temple.

Now certainly some of the problem for the generation of Israel in Ezekiel's time was outside influences creeping in and leading astray. Sadly, the more troubling problem was inside influences failing to care for the people and rather taking advantage of them. More often than not, Israel had a history of leaders who forgot their God-given calling to the people, who moved on easily and quickly from the people they were to serve and who became useless to the people who needed them most. This was true in Ezekiel's day and sadly, the people mirrored their leaders' failures as well. Worse yet, their sorry state led to questions about whether God mirrored these failures too.

We don't have to go any further than the first verse from our Ezekiel reading to get a clear statement of the different care God would provide His people as opposed to the leaders they had been used to. **“For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out.”** (*Ezekiel 34:11*). In this one sentence, the Lord highlights His claim and connection on straying sheep and gives no ending condition to His search and rescue for them. Here in these few words, the Lord comforts His people by continuing to speak of them as His own even though they've run away from Him. He assures them of His ongoing pursuit of them which gives voice to His faithful actions throughout the prior generations.

The words we have from our reading in Ezekiel put those questions about God to rest. He wasn't forgetful. He wasn't moving on. He wasn't going to be useless to them or let them grow useless. No as He stated through His prophet, He, Himself was going to search for His sheep. He was going to seek them out. Those lost and needing to be found were a personal mission for Him. The past failures of His people would not hinder His search for He promised to bring back His sheep from wherever they had been scattered. He was going to correct the injustices that had occurred and bring safety to His flock that had been preyed upon.

While God's people would witness foretastes of this promise through the lives and actions of Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther and Daniel as God protected His people and even brought them back to rebuild the temple and Jerusalem. The full and complete fulfilment of this restoration promise rested upon the one shepherd, the servant David, the one who would be prince among God's people. With King David dead and buried, this reference wasn't to the return of the mighty, but flawed leader of Israel, rather it pointed forward to One to come who was truly from the line of David, Jesus.

And this Jesus, David's son, yet David's Lord, the One who tells the parables about seeking and finding the lost in our Gospel reading, is God Himself searching and seeking for His sheep in every generation. He calls Himself the Good Shepherd and backs up His claim by dying upon the cross and drawing all people to Himself. It's His voice that unites the scattered flock and brings them home. It's His life that protects and shields His flock this side of heaven into life eternal. It's His promised return that gives hope of a world and life that isn't devastated by sin's injustice.

When you came here for service, I imagine that you that you didn't give it much thought as to how to describe where you were going. You were going to Emmanuel. You were going to church. What you may not of have realized is that the Lord was also bringing you to His lost and found. You sit here in the pews, you watch online, because the Lord hasn't forgotten you. He hasn't moved on from you. He wants to be present with you so that you might have purpose.

Yes, we may not have realized how much we needed this because we didn't know how far we'd strayed. But right now, the Good Shepherd has found you in whatever lost state that you have been. He has been pursuing you and wants to assure you that you are His because He died and rose for you to be His own. He is carrying you back to His purposes for your life and away from the sinful struggles that have preyed upon your life.

And even now as so many things in this world continue to seek to scatter and destroy the Lord's flock. As we are tempted to live by fear and not by faith, with growing awareness that we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered, may we continue to cling to our Good Shepherd who has found us. For through the love of our Good Shepherd we are more than conquerors, for neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord who has personally sought us and found us in this very service. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan