

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 11, 2016
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[click here to read scripture passages for today](#)

“Help All Along the Way”

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

These stories give us such beautiful images for God:

- God is like a shepherd who goes looking for one lost sheep and rejoices when it is found.
- God is like a woman down on her hands and knees searching everywhere for a lost coin. When she finds the coin she throws a huge party to celebrate.
- God goes out searching for us and rejoices when we are found.

This is great good news for us and those we love because we all get lost. We get cut off from community, we wander on paths that beat us down, we get trapped in unhelpful patterns, we end up in deep pits and dark corners. What good news to know that God is like a shepherd beating the bushes for us like a woman peering into every nook and cranny 'til we're found.

These are beautiful images but they're even more powerful when we zoom in a little closer. If we just glance at these stories, they can give us a fairly simplistic picture of how God searches and finds us. Looking more deeply can show us even more good news. For instance, if we just take these stories at face value, we might imagine that the whole searching and finding thing happens really quickly. In each of these stories it takes just one sentence for the object to be both lost and found. That fast-paced losing and finding could give the impression that we will only ever feel lost for a short time before God will swoop in to save us. And when God doesn't quickly swoop in to save us, or those we love, we can get discouraged.

But finding a lost sheep in the rocky hillsides of ancient Israel would have been a long and dangerous process. A shepherd would have to scale perilous heights and enter treacherous valleys. Searching for a small lost coin amidst a whole household with only lamplight would have been a painstaking, time consuming process - so many dark corners to scour, so much dust to clear away before the coin could be found. Searching and finding takes a long time. There will be times that it will feel like we or those we love are lost for a really, really long time. Yet all is not lost.

God has committed to searching for us no matter how long it takes. In Jesus we see that God will go to any lengths to find us and love us. God will go into the darkest places of our world and our lives and draw us into God's loving arms. God will trudge up perilous heights, even up on a cross, and enter the most treacherous valleys, even descending to the dead. God's search for us continues even into death. God will roll up sleeves and get down on hands and knees. God doesn't just stay above the fray and swoop to save us quickly. There are times we might prefer to have a God who acts like a superhero, a God who waves a magic wand and fixes everything. But God has committed to be among us like a shepherd caring for sheep, like a woman searching for a lost coin.

This is good news because getting lost and being found is more complicated than these short stories might initially make it seem. These stories could give the impression that we're either completely lost or totally safe

within the fold, gone astray or clearly on the straight and narrow path. The truth is we all get lost and found over and over again. We get tangled up in our pride, we trip up on anger, we get stuck in a pit of self-pity, often many times each day. We don't need a superhero to swoop in and rescue us; we need a shepherd who is always here to help us. It is only with the help of the shepherd that we can repent. The word repent means to turn and go in another direction. And, we need the constant help of a shepherd to turn us from paths that will leave us lost, to get us turned around and following the way of life, well-being, and true joy.

Too often these stories have been used to say, "we have to repent in order to be saved", as if repentance is something that we can do on our own, as if God's saving is dependent on what we do. But thinking we can do it on our own gets us lost. Thinking it all depends on us gets us lost. Besides, sheep and coins can't do anything to repent. They need to be found by a searching shepherd, a devoted woman. We need God to search us out, over and over, to turn us, again and again, back to the path of life. And this is what God does for us. Again and again, out and about on the paths we travel each day, God is there to find us, to turn us, to lead us. And, as we gather here to receive God's word and the meal of God's forgiveness, we are nourished and healed for the roads ahead.

There are hard roads ahead in our post-9/11 world that is plagued with religious violence, racial tensions, a refugee crisis, climate change. Sometimes we're tempted to get off the road and go hide. But that, too, would leave us lost. Instead, let's follow our shepherd who leads us on paths of love, forgiveness and service to others. Let's follow the woman holding out a lamp, shedding light, searching for a treasured object. Let's go shed light and convey the good news that all are treasured and beloved.

And, let's take a moment to pray.

Amen.