

Sermon for Sunday, September 15, 2019 - "Whatever It Takes"

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 15, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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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 won't stop searching for one lost sheep, like a woman down on her hands and knees scouring her house for a lost coin. God will not stop seeking us out when we're lost and oh, how God rejoices when we're found.

This is great, good news for us and those we love because we all get lost. We're all lost sheep sometimes - cut off from community, wandering on paths that beat us down, in danger. Other times we're like lost coins trapped in deep pits and dark corners. What good news to know our Good Shepherd beats the bushes for us and enters every nook and cranny to find us.

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 closely 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'll only ever feel lost for a short time before God will swoop in to save us. And, when God doesn't quickly act to get things back on track, 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. Searching and finding is a long, involved process.

At times 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 length to find us and love us. God will go into the darkest places of our world and our lives to 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 does that, a God who waves a

magic wand and fixes everything. But, God has committed to be among us not as a superhero or a magician but rather as a shepherd caring for sheep, as a woman searching for a lost coin.

This is good news because getting lost and being found is also more complicated than these stories present. 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 once in a while. We need to be sought out as often as floors need to be swept; we need a shepherd who is on the path with us every day.

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 lead 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. Yet, 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 who are the sheep of God's pasture need God to search us out each new day, to turn us back to the path of life - time and time again.

This is what God does for us. In Christ Jesus, God has entered our world and is present with us on the paths we travel each day. God is there to find us, to turn us, to lead us. Each week, we are led back here to receive God's word and the meal of God's forgiveness - we are nourished and healed for the journey.

There are hard roads ahead in this 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 for silent prayer.