**Lost Sheep**

A sermon for the Season of Creation

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Nearly a decade ago now, I found myself on an extended trip to England. It was a pilgrimage of sorts to various religious sites ancient and modern. Our itinerary took us to all corners of England. And as we racked up the kilometers on the bus, we enjoyed beautiful views of the countryside – which, it being April, were full of sheep. Field after field in county after county…lots of sheep, grazing on a seemingly endless supply of grass.

It’s a comforting image, but deceiving. From afar, sheep look great. Up close, they kind of stink. Literally, they smell really bad, and within about 2 minutes of being near them you just want to wash your hands. You definitely do not want to touch them. Unless you are a child, in which case, of course, you probably want to jump on its back and ride one.

In the Good Shepherd parable in Luke’s Gospel that we hear today, we are compared to sheep. While in many ways it’s not a good comparison – our brains are much larger, we have opposable thumbs, not to mention the capacity for personal hygiene – in other ways it works pretty well. We tend to have a herd mentality when making decisions. We follow more than we lead. Like sheep, people often look better from afar or “in theory” in our imagined idealized versions of them, but when we get up close the stinky parts can be…significant. Above all, we are prone to wandering. We wander in spirit, the way sheep do in body.

Sheep get lost because they go about head down chewing up grass. They are focused on their own consumption to the point that how and where and when they consume literally directs their vision. And their vision directs their bodies and pretty soon, they can get themselves very far astray.

You and I know about this phenomenon. We may not spend the day with our head down eating grass, but we can surely understand being so focused on our own consumption that it begins to direct our vision. And that vision then directs our choices – consciously or otherwise. I see it in my own children and how captivated they are by advertisements…even for products they have no use for (like, life insurance). We live in a cultural moment that is pervaded by the consumption process. Everywhere we look we are bombarded with messages that we are defined by what we consume: what we eat, what we buy, what we drive, how we are housed, what we wear. Even in official government reports measuring the economy, the individual is often referred to not as a person, but as a consumer. We literally value ourselves for what and how much we can consume. They say, what you measure is what you treasure; so is it any wonder that we have an overconsumption problem – that we have normalized a completely unreasonable level of resource use? We have convinced ourselves that the grass is never ending, and that it always looks a little greener, a little juicier, a little nicer if we just wander a little further afield. It is any wonder that we all, like sheep, have gotten so lost?

Because, my friends, lost we are. Our collective heads have been down for so long, that we have lost perspective on where we are as a people living in relationship with this planet. As we mark the Season of Creation this year, the Gospel of the lost sheep seems so appropriate. In the quest to fill our metaphorical stomachs more and more we have wandered so far from God’s dream for how we are to live in relationship with the rest of Creation. Even when becoming aware of our having wandered from God’s hope that we would live in a sustainably with the rest of the earth, we continue to stray. We rationalize our consumption choices by breaking them down into smaller increments so they seem insignificant. How is one more LED or 10 fewer MPG’s on my new car going to save the planet? We allow short-term electoral politics to divide us around what is an issue of survival for many species, including our own. We forget that freedom is found in truth, not in deeper denial. We aren’t just East of Eden now, we’re off the map. We are light years from the living paradise into which God placed us.

And we know it. We have had many prophets warn us to look up. John Muir. Chief Seattle. Rachel Carson. Bill McKibben. Greta Thunberg. Our own retired bishop, Bud Cederholm. But we seem impervious to warning, too in love with our own broken habits and tendencies, to listen to those who call us to collective and individual repentance.

Today we hear one more prophet’s voice. These words Jeremiah are the stuff of nightmares. And they are appropriate. And they offer us a serious warning.

“I looked on the earth, and it was waste and void. On the mountains and they were quaking. The fruitful land was a desert. All the birds of the air had fled. The cities were laid in ruin. There was no one at all. … Because of this, the earth shall mourn.”

The prophet speaks to us of harsh, hot winds, of storms that make the skies turn black and, of a world without people. He is using these images to reflect the consequences of Jerusalem having strayed from the Lord’s desires. It isn’t just that this community’s refusal to be faithful will lead to some kind of punishment. That’s not the warning. Divine punishment would, sadly, be a better outcome. God frequently becomes frustrated with human disobedience to God’s covenant, smites for awhile, and then relents to allow the people of God to flourish again.

Rather, Jeremiah warns, the people’s faithlessness will lead to a situation in which the Creation that God made for them will become incompatible with their own existence. It’s not a punishment. It’s a fact. God’s Creation simply won’t be able to sustain us, if we continue to treat the rest of Creation as subservient to our desires. Our reckless consumption as a people will turn us against the rest of Creation. And if we get into a war with the planet, there’s really no mystery about who is going to win. “I will not make a full end,” says the Lord through Jeremiah. The world will recover. But it will be a world without people.

There is yet, some good news for us today. The Parable of the Lost Sheep is also the Parable of the Good Shepherd, one of the most comforting parables of the Gospel. In it, we are promised that whatever or whoever is lost, can be found. Be it a sheep. Or a coin. Or a people that collectively abuse the rest of creation. No matter how far we stray, God will never stop pursuing us. And God will find us in the depths of our wandering. The Gospel promises that, and I believe it.

I also believe that, as the Gospel tells us, our Good Shepherd will try to pick us up and put us on his back to lead us home. But here’s what I don’t believe. That we’ll just let that happen. Have you ever tried to pick up a sheep and put him on your back? I haven’t, but I’ve seen someone try at a county fair once. It’s not easy. The sheep don’t want to be there. Their instincts will tell them to kick and bite and wiggle their way out. Because all they want to do is put their heads down in the grass and keep eating.

The repentance that is so celebrated in the Gospel is not the act of the Shepherd finding the sheep. It is the act of the sheep being willing to be found, picked up, and brought where the sheep would not choose to go. That is the miracle of the story. And that is the miracle that we need.

We must, by the grace of God, find the strength to relent, to surrender, to be led by Christ into a new kind of relationship with the rest of Creation. One that isn’t just about how much of it we can consume, but that is rather about how we can live sustainably.

We became lost together not by making a singular bad decision, but by making many, many incremental decisions with our heads down in the grass. Each one felt like a small enough decision that its effects upon the earth were inconsequential. But we were wrong. And the earth is doing everything it can to tell us that. So to repent, we must make bigger decisions: ones in which the effects of our choices upon the earth will NOT be inconsequential. This is unlikely to be easy. And it certainly will run against the manufactured instincts that our culture has ingrained in us. But it is the miracle for which we must pray, and which we must encourage each other to expect.

Because we are Gospel people, gathered here to help each other trust in Jesus’ promises, to do hard good things together, and to shine light for the world when we have lost our way. Amen.