

Being Found

Ezekiel 34:11-16; Luke 15:1-10

Somewhere along the line in my life the major theme of the gospel changed from “You’re Lost!” (and here’s how to “get saved”) to “You’re Found!” (with salvation at its heart as being found). And as the syntax of the gospel changed, fear, guilt and anxiety changed to joy.

About the same time, I read the works of New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias who taught us to read Jesus in his own Aramaic tongue. Jeremias wrote:

Because repentance means being able to live from forgiveness, being able to be a child again, repentance is joy.¹

Re-reading the gospels, I saw that with Jesus repentance and salvation changed places! Salvation comes first, bringing repentance in its wings. Salvation was so little our work it was like being found.

The tectonic plates of my soul were shifting.

Our lectionary texts for today have put Ezekiel 34:11-16 and Luke 15:1-10 together. They are both about shepherds, and they give two sides of the same coin.

One has to do with the “social gospel”, the transformation of society, and the other has to do with the “personal gospel”, or the transformation of persons. Ezekiel gives us the first and Luke the second. Sometimes the church has emphasized the social gospel, other times the personal gospel, sometimes one to the exclusion of the other. Jesus won’t let us choose.

The great missionary/theologian E. Struley Jones said,

The personal gospel without the social gospel is a soul without a body. The social gospel without a personal gospel is a body without a soul. One is a ghost, the other is a corpse.

Our goal at Grace is to be neither a ghost or a corpse, to embody the whole gospel of Jesus. Jesus means justice, yes, *and* healing and compassion and kindness and reconciliation and peace, peace inside your own skin, peace with God, peace with others. It is personal, and it is social.

II

In Chapter 34 of *Ezekiel*, Ezekiel is talking about the social gospel, what happens when God is the Shepherd of the nation. In the ancient near-east the

king was often pictured as the shepherd of the nation. Some were righteous kings, and some were wicked kings.

Any surprises here? Wickedness is the biblical word for human evil, evil on a human, historical scale. No need to bring Satan into the picture. Satan already has enough press.

At the beginning of chapter 34, Ezekiel addresses the wicked kings, the evil shepherds of Israel:

Woe, shepherds of Israel
who only take care of themselves.
You do not take care of the flock.

You, he says,

- have not strengthened the weak
- you have not healed the sick
- you have not bound the injured
- you have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost
- you have ruled harshly and brutally

Sounds like the daily news.

So, God says, "I will remove them from their flock, and I myself will become Shepherd of Israel." And look how God the Shepherd leads the nation:

The lost I will seek
 The strayed I will bring back
 The injured I will bind up
 The weak I will strengthen.

This is what a God-led nation looks like.

And here comes the last sentence whose hearing may have been jarring to your ears today:

But the fat and the strong
 I will destroy. I will feed
 them with justice.

There is a translation issue here. Ancient Hebrew texts differ with the spelling of one word—with the change of one Hebrew letter in the word.

Our translation—which is the most common—reads:

But the fat and the strong I will *destroy*. I will feed them justice.

Another translation, with the change in one Hebrew letter says:

And the fat and healthy ones
 I will *guard*. I will tend them rightly.

Which is correct? Destroy or guard? Both could be. Sometimes God's prophets spoke warning: "The fat cats and big shots will be fed with justice!" And justice will undo them. As Wendell Berry spoke of our relationship with nature: "Beware the justice of nature."

Other times the prophet spoke comfort: I will care for *all* my sheep and tend them rightly. Both could be true. Someone said of Jesus: "Jesus came to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable."

Ezekiel shows us the difference between wicked kings and nations and righteous kings and nations. In democratic societies, we the people choose what kind of nation we want to be.

III

Now we move to Jesus' parables in Luke—and to the personal gospel.

Who of you, he says, having 100 sheep will not leave the 99 safely in the sheep fold and go after the one who is lost? And when you found it, bring it home and throw a party? Then he added, "There will be more joy in heaven, over the one sinner who repents than the 99 righteous who need no repentance."

Jesus told the story, Luke says, to answer the grumbling of the righteous of his day who couldn't care less about the lost: "If they're too stupid to stay with the flock, why go after them?" People still grumble: they say the poor, the sick and

lost get what they deserve. Jesus is like the fictional detective Harry Bosch here: “Everyone matters, or no one matters.”

Then Jesus tells a parable about the poor widow who lost one of her precious silver ten coins. They were all she had to live on the rest of her life, her social security.

She turns the house upside down looking for it, sweeping every corner, looking under and behind everything. And when she finds it she is ecstatic with joy and invites her friends and neighbors to celebrate.

Joy is what happens in heaven when something lost is found, when someone lost is found.

IV

What have you lost in your life, when have you lost something precious?

There’s a wonderful poet and teacher Naomi Shihab Nye, born to a Palestinian father and an American mother. Nye often begins her class on writing asking the students to write on “What Have you Lost?” She says that it is one of the few times her students complain that the length of the assignment is too short! Page after page: a lost dog, a lost necklace, parent who died, or brother or sister.

Loss is one of the most profound experiences of life. Things we have lost, people we have lost, relationships we have lost, health we have lost.

Sometimes what we have lost is ourselves, our own dear and truest self. It's like we got lost in the woods and cannot find our way back again. Sometimes we are so lost we don't even know we are lost.

Then something happens, or, someone happens, and we find ourselves again and find our way home. We are found.

Jayber Crow, a character in a Wendell Berry novel, says looking back over his life:

...this feeling came over me that I had strayed back onto the right path of my life.²

When that happens grace has happened.

Jesus is saying that God is always on the way to find us. Some of us have met this God in Jesus.

Conclusion

Fred Craddock tells the story I've told some of you before. Some young people were playing "Hide and Seek" One person is blindfolded, counts to 100. The rest

go and hide. At 100 the blindfold goes off and the person goes to find the others.
(Do young people still play that game?)

Fred remembers one day when playing the game. He found the perfect place to hide: underneath the back step of the back porch. He crawled through the small opening and squeezed his body as far back as he could.

He said that for awhile he gleefully said to himself: “No one’s going to find me, no one’s going to find me!” Then suddenly he said, “No one’s going to find me!” So he stretched out his toe so someone could see it and find him.

Isn’t that what we all want most, to be found? Found and known and treasured?

Perhaps those are the soul echoes that have kept “Hide and Seek” around. The fear of being lost; the joy of being found.

I close with a poem by the poet I mentioned, Naomi Shihab Nye. The title, “Kindness.”

Kindness

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.

What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.

How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.

You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.

You must wake up with sorrow.

You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

What have you lost? Have you been found? It is God who has been looking
for you. It is God sending us out like a shepherd.

1. Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus*

(N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1960), 83-4.

2. Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000), 86.