

## SERMON- Proper 19 (Year C)

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*Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28*

*Psalms 14*

*1 Timothy 1:12-17*

Good Shepherd (Burke)

September 15, 2019

*Luke 15:1-10*

### OPENING:

It was 1947, and a group of Bedouin shepherds were tending their flock in an area near the Dead Sea in modern-day Israel. One of those shepherds, a man by the name of Muhammed Ahmed el-Hamed, started noticing some holes in the cliff faces nearby. Out of boredom or curiosity, he started to throw rocks down to see how far the caves went down. Eventually, one thing led to another and...

He found himself down inside the caves

where he found a dozen clay jars.

He looked inside the jars and found a scroll.

And what was in that first clay jar was a scroll which contained the Book of Isaiah, more than 2000 years old.<sup>1</sup>

He had found the first evidence of what would come to be known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. This was Qumran Cave #1.

He did not know it at the time, but what was lost was now found.

What had fallen was about to rise again.

This was a find of stunning, earth-shattering archaeological, theological, and historical significance. The discovery would send shockwaves across academic communities and leave results that the Church and secular experts are still fighting over today.

And it all occurred because a 20<sup>th</sup> century shepherd lost a sheep and was trying to find it.

Now, one way to look at this, through a cold cynical lens, is to simply say that these scrolls hidden for 2000 years were bound to be found and it was merely a matter of time before someone stumbled upon them.

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<sup>1</sup> Lim, Timothy H. 2017. *The Dead Sea Scrolls: a Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford, 20-1.

## **PARABLE:**

Another way too look at it though is through the lens of our parables this morning. Here Jesus stresses the absurdity of looking for the “1” amid the “99”, the absurdity of such devotion and favoritism, indeed the absurdity of God’s love for us.

We have all lost something, and we have all felt that anxiety of losing one’s cell-phone, and wallet, maybe a wedding ring, maybe a child.... and then the sheer and utter celebratory joy of finding that thing. Put yourself in that headspace, put yourself in the miraculous reversal of the joy of finding what was lost.

Then think about our dear shepherd, Muhammed Ahmed el-Hamed, searching furiously for that one sheep, looking and looking, ignoring the cries of his fellow shepherd, frustrated about that one that got away.

Then think about the world at that moment in history in 1947, what people had seen in that century so far. A catastrophic Great War, a “War to End all Wars”, a Great Depression, then the rise of dictatorship and another war, the Holocaust, and then the dropping of the Atomic Bomb. We were lost as a civilization, and then this Shepherd looks for a sheep, and finds a cave, where he finds a scroll, where they will eventually find 800 scrolls of God’s ancient wisdom.

Now that’s a dramatic, hyperbolic reading of that event.

But our parables today are not about logic, they are not about best practices related to shepherding and animal management, or how to keep one’s coins so you don’t lose them in your couch cushion. These are extravagant, preposterous, ridiculous stories of God’s love for us all. They are about the reality of the depths that God will go to find us.

God has a sense of humor in it all of course, I am fully aware that the drama that I am describing involves a Muslim shepherd finding a Jewish scroll that is now being described in a Christian sermon.

That’s another lesson about God’s logic, it’s ironic, humorous, one where you find things in the most unexpected places, and are encouraged to look and be with people that you would not expect.

## **SHEEP:**

Luke has this story paired with the Parable of the Lost Coin, and the story of the Prodigal Son which will come next in Chapter 15. Both of these have the same dynamic at their core as the Parable of the Good Shepherd just expressed in different ways.

Christine likes to say that *this* version of the Good Shepherd story is actually the “better version” than the one we get every spring from the Gospel John on Good Shepherd Sunday.

Luke, the master story-teller, gives a *virtuoso* performance here—the sheep getting lost, the shepherd being willing to abandon the other 99, the rejoicing upon the return, and that unforgettable image of the sheep laid across the shepherd’s shoulders.

Indeed, this is the story the one that inspired so many visual depictions of the Good Shepherd, that would inspire so many churches to be named after that image.

Those Medieval depictions show Jesus with his arms like this, carrying the sheep, fastened painfully and unmistakably in the shape of the cross.

For an illiterate audience, the imagery was particularly powerful because it highlighted Jesus in action. These depictions suggest that Jesus will abandon everything to find you, there is no place that Jesus won’t go, no lengths that he will not extend to rescue you.

As the sheep, we might be unwitting to the whole thing, you might be bucking and braying, you might not even want to be found, but there Jesus will be carrying you home to safety.

Jesus is always going out in search of the lost one, picking you up, throwing you across his shoulders.

THAT is the effort that God makes to find you. That’s the rejoicing that all will experience upon our return.

## REPENTANCE:

Amazingly, and it's so difficult for us to understand, we don't need to *do anything* in order for that to happen, it's always God's initiative, God's plan for our salvation.

We are just poor sheep, wandering about, we are inanimate coins lost in the floorboards, dusty scrolls in a deep cavern.

The message is, through all of that, through our own iniquity and own sheer inertness, God's going to get what God wants.

God reaches out and says "You might be lost or least or little or dead" but not to me.<sup>2</sup> Jesus grabs us in the depths of our sin and carries us home.

Otherwise we are dealing with some awful shepherd advice or awful advice about financial management.

## CONCLUSION:

Now there are 170 churches named after the Good Shepherd in the Episcopal Church in the United States—again probably because of the beauty of this story.<sup>3</sup> But the dynamic itself is present all throughout Scripture, all throughout history. That act of rescue is what God has been up to all along. It's the main narrative of calling his people Israel back to himself, It's what is happening in the story of Lazarus, of the Prodigal Son, and of St. Paul. IT's the story of what happened with that deteriorating parchment in a cave in Palestine. It's the story of what happens with you and me. God grabbing us by the scruff of the neck, and saying "I am not done with you yet."

Now things have not gotten better since that moment in 1947. That's another mystery of God's logic and justice. Our hope though is that we might model the absurdity of God's love, to be the hands and feet, and indeed the *shoulders* of Christ Jesus in the world. And so we pray this ancient prayer associated with the Good Shepherd, that echoes through the ages:

"Lord, let those who are asleep, when they are redeemed from death, freed from guilt, reconciled to the father, and brought home on the shoulders of the Good Shepherd, enjoy everlasting blessedness in the train of the eternal king and in the company of the saints."<sup>4</sup> **AMEN**

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<sup>2</sup> Capon, Robert Farrar. 2002. *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 180.

<sup>3</sup> Dart, John. "What's Hot and Not in Episcopal Church Names" *The Christian Century* (June 1, 2004) 121:14

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Finegan, Jack. 1959. *'Light from the Ancient Past': the Archeological Background of Judaism and Christianity*. (Vol. 2.) Princeton, NJ: Princeton, UP: 384.