

## ***Search and Rescue***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
December 10, 2017 ~~ Second Sunday of Advent  
Text: Ezekiel 34:11-14; 25-31

Ezekiel is an odd choice as the focus scripture for a sermon during Advent. It's not that we don't draw from the prophets of the Old Testament for inspiration during Advent, because we do. In fact, last week our whole focus was on the prophets, specifically Isaiah, the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. So, why do we find ourselves still dealing with prophets again this second Sunday of Advent? If it's "Shepherds Sunday" for the Advent Candles, why aren't we talking about the shepherds in Luke's version of the Christmas story? Why Ezekiel?

Well, that's because the reason we are looking at the people we find in the Christmas story – the prophets, the shepherds, Mary, Joseph – is to find in their stories some new understanding of ourselves in relationship to God. The shepherds as described in Luke's Gospel sometimes feel like stage props by the time we get to Christmas Eve. We are quick to equate them with kids in bathrobes and bernoos (that's the head scarf) and we never think about the shepherds as real people. I knew shepherds had been reduced to mere Christmas props when I saw little kids in Christmas pageant costumes – one a shepherd and one a sheep – featured in a Walmart commercial this year. The frazzled mom,

costumed kids in tow, apparently needed something from Walmart that just couldn't wait until after the Christmas pageant. So, there she is holding something in her hands, confronted by a long line of folks waiting to check out. Just when all hope for a timely exit is lost, up comes a smiling Walmart employee who "shepherds" her to the new register she opens just for them. The mom and the kids just can't believe their good fortune in their now speedy check-out and we all are reminded that the true spirit of Christmas is alive and well at your local Walmart. At least, that's what I think we're supposed to think. I have to admit, it's a pretty ingenious way of intermingling the Nativity story with the Santa story (the Walmart employee was wearing a Santa hat) in the hopes of blending the religious part of Christmas with the secular part of it. But, it still left me sort of sad. What does it say about us when a kid dressed up as a Christmas Pageant shepherd is used as a prop to make us feel good about shopping at Walmart? Nothing good, I'm afraid.

The shepherds are a very important part of the Nativity story because they represent us, all of us – the average, every day people to whom God's greatest gift was given on that long ago holy night. The shepherds were the lowest of the low on the social and economic realities into which the Baby Jesus was born. They lived among the sheep, whether they owned their own or were paid to take care of animals belonging to wealthy property-owners

in town. Their tasks were simple – to keep track of the sheep when they were out to pasture and to move them from pasture to pasture so they could be continually assured of food and water. They had to protect them from predators like wolves and wild dogs. They also had to know which sheep were more delicate and weak and therefore in need of special care. A good shepherd knew each and every sheep in the flock and would do whatever it took to be sure they were safe and well cared for. There was a practical reason for this – any lost sheep would have to be paid for by the shepherd himself, its value deducted from already meager wages. But, there was also the reality that a good shepherd genuinely loved the sheep. He didn't notice how bad they smelled when their wool got wet in the rain. He forgave them for not being the brightest animals in the world; they would literally follow each other off a cliff! Simply put, in spite of all the reasons not to love the sheep, a good shepherd did anyway.

That's why the metaphor of the good shepherd appears so often in the Bible as a way of understanding God's love for us. Like the good shepherd, God loves us no matter what. God sees past the grubby appearances of the homeless and the hopelessly addicted to love the person inside. God thinks we are beautiful no matter what size we wear or how much or how little hair we have. God knows we are capable of amazing things if only we'd give ourselves half a chance. God loves us beyond the short-sighted

decisions and foolish mistakes we are prone to. As the good shepherd, God loves us no matter what.

But today we are considering the shepherd not as a metaphor for God but instead as a metaphor for us, for all people everywhere who work hard to provide a life for themselves and their families. Like those long ago shepherds keeping watch out in their fields by night, we know what it is to be exhausted at the end of a long day. We know what it is to get frustrated that some problem or another stubbornly persists no matter how hard we work to fix it. We know what it is to long for more time to spend with loved ones, or even just for a few quiet moments alone.

Like those long ago shepherds, we do work hard and sometimes we wonder if it's worth it. In fact, sometimes it seems like we all work so much harder these days than was the case a few decades ago. I am old enough to remember when computers were touted as huge labor-saving devices. Anyone else remember those promises? Computers were going to make work simpler, life at home simpler, health care simpler, banking simpler all of which was supposed to give us more free time. Well, I don't know about you, but I am still waiting for all that free time we were promised. It didn't happen. In fact, just the opposite seems to have happened as corporate America appears to have decided that the best route to take into the future is the one where fewer people do more work for less money. It's getting more and more difficult

to earn a living wage, no matter how willing you are to learn a trade and then work hard at it. Even if you get a college degree which at one point was supposed to be an automatic admission ticket into the American dream, now all it gets you is a lot of debt and a slightly higher income bracket. No wonder folks feel overwhelmed and frustrated. No wonder folks long for a simpler time where life felt more predictable, more logical, more achievable. No wonder we listen to the news each day and just shake our heads. No wonder we wonder if the shepherds might have had it a lot easier than we do.

This is why I wanted us to read Ezekiel today as we think about shepherds and their connection to us, right here and right now. In the text we read this morning, Ezekiel is reminding the people – the people of his own time and still us today -- that no matter how lost and alone they feel, no matter how frustrating and overwhelming life can sometimes get, God never loses sight of us. God never forgets us. God never leaves us alone in the dark, even though it can feel like that's exactly where we are. "... so I will seek out my sheep," God says through Ezekiel. "I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness." I will seek my own, God promises us. I will rescue them when they become lost in the darkness and clouds which sometimes envelope our lives. Lost jobs. Health crises. Broken relationships. Fractured dreams.

These are all part of the human condition. These are all part of us, we know that. And Ezekiel reminds us in clear and specific terms that *God knows* it too. *God knows* when we are hurting and overwhelmed. *God knows* when we feel like we're going to shatter into a thousand pieces if something doesn't happen to change things. *God knows* when we feel lost in a cloud of darkness, groping our way forward on nothing more than a wing and a prayer. We are not alone in those moments of deep darkness, even though it feels that way. We are never alone, not really, because God is with us even then.

Now, does this mean, God will just step in and fix everything for us like some cosmic fairy godparent. No, not hardly. Does it mean that the job lost, the relationship broken, the health problem encountered will just miraculously go back to what it was before if we accept God's unconditional love for us in that moment of despair? No. What makes you think it should be that easy? Nothing about living life in the world each day is easy or simple, thanks to the often selfish and misguided thoughts and actions of fragile humans in positions of power. Humans created the mess in which we find ourselves, not God. That's why God's love for us is not about making our lives easy or simple. Instead, God's love for us is about telling us over and over again that we are up to whatever challenge life throws at us. God's love for us is a continual reminder of how uniquely special each of us are, how

precious we are to God every moment of every day, no matter how much the world tries to tell us otherwise. Like the good shepherd, God creates the space within which we dare to believe we are worthy of God's love, where we dare to believe we are transformed by that love into the new creation always possible with God.

How does that transformation begin? Not with God's magic wand, that's for sure. No, God's transformation of our lives begins within each of us as we receive God's love and then do what we can to pass it along. God's new life for us begins when we see beyond ourselves to the people around us who are hurting too. God's new life for us happens when we loosen our grasp of all the things we're afraid of, all the things that keep us stuck and hold us back, reaching instead for some new possibility God holds out in front of us. The thing is, dear ones, God never promised us that life would be easy or simple or straight forward. God only promises to love us through whatever happens. Accepting God's love for us as real and transformative does not prevent bad things from happening just like the shepherd can't keep the sheep from wandering away and getting lost, or falling down a crevice and getting hurt.

So in these moments when life seems so hard and too difficult or painful or overwhelming, I encourage you to think about the shepherds of the Christmas story. They had one of the most difficult, undesirable and unwanted jobs of their society and

yet it was to them, and only them, that God's good news of a new beginning was proclaimed on Christmas night. God's angel came to them in the dark and cold and proclaimed to them, "Do not be afraid; for see I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord." Do not be afraid. Search and you will find. Believe and find rescue. Trust and step out onto the path God places before you, a path illuminated by hope that new life, whatever that might mean for you, is always possible. Dare to see yourself as the precious gift to the world God created you to be. Who knows what could happen then? Amen.