

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“Seek Your Servant, O Lord”**

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*“I have strayed like a lost sheep. Seek your servant, for I have not forgotten your commands” (Ps. 119:176).*

Psalm 119, the longest psalm of the bible, sure ends differently than it began. In verse one the psalmist writes, “Blessed are those whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD! Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart. They do nothing wrong; they walk in his ways” (119:1-3).

The last verse of the longest psalm doesn’t have the same self-assured confidence. The psalmist still knows the law of the LORD, but also knows he hasn’t kept it. “I have strayed like a lost sheep. Seek your servant, for I have not forgotten your commandments.” For all his devotion to God’s law, the psalmist keeps wandering into sinful ways, like a lost sheep. He knows he has not walked according to the Law. He knows he’s lost, in danger, and needs to be rescued. “I have strayed like a lost sheep. Seek your servant.”

Normally, we think of God being far removed from us, up there in splendid heavenly isolation, waiting for us to seek *Him* and pursue *Him* and find Him. And indeed, in some Christian circles there are a lot of people talking about when they found God. But that’s not how it works. In truth, we are the ones who hide from Him, and He’s always the one who must go out and find us again and again. He takes the initiative and tracks us down. One poet even gave God a new name: “The Hound of Heaven.” He wasn’t being irreverent; He was rejoicing that God gives chase, even as we flee from Him.

“I have gone astray like a lost sheep. Seek your servant.” Throughout the Bible, God is continually having to seek out the lost. Right from the beginning, Adam and Eve, after rebelling against God, make another poor choice by trying to hide “themselves from the presence of the Lord among the trees of the garden”. God will have none of it. God takes the initiative; the initiative Adam couldn’t take and flushes them out. “Adam, where art thou?” He knows exactly where Adam is, crouching behind that bush, trying to make himself invisible, hoping the all-seeing God doesn’t see him, poor, miserable, sinful creature that he is. But God was not going to let Adam stay that way. He was going to force the relationship forward, because that’s who He is and that’s what He does.

Our God is the God of pursuit. And we are the ones inclined to flee from him.

The psalmist who writes Psalm 139 complains about God’s unfair advantages: “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there. If I make my bed in the depths, you are there! If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast!” There’s no escaping God’s supervision. “You hem me in – behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me” (v. 5).

Remember how God ran Jonah down? To avoid God’s call, Jonah was going to flee all the way to Tarshish, the far side of Jonah’s world. But God pursued Jonah, all the way to the deepest, darkest depths of the sea.

Contrary to popular assumption, God is not passive. God is not content to watch us flee from Him. And He is not content to wait for us to come back to Him, because there’s a good chance we never will. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus asks the Pharisees, “If you were a shepherd with a hundred sheep and you lost one, what would you do about it? Would you ignore it? Would you shun it? Would you despise it? Of course not! A real shepherd would search for it and keep on searching, quote, “until he finds it.” The shepherd finds the lost sheep, not the other way around. Not the other way around.

And to reinforce the point he tells the story of an old woman who has ten silver coins. She loses one. So, she lights a lamp in her dark house, and turns it upside down and inside out. Like the shepherd, she looks for the coin [quote] “*until she finds it.*” That coin is you and me. Inert. Lifeless. Still. Dead in our trespasses and sin. We are no more able to find God than a coin is able to find its owner.

In Revelation, Jesus says “I stand at the door and knock.” We don’t have to climb some mountain to find a guru. The Lord Himself comes to us and knocks on **our** door, sometimes relentlessly. Writer Anne Lamott speaks of her conversion as one day standing outside a little church, looking in, listening to the singing, and finally stepping through the door. She stepped into the church, but also acknowledged that God all along had been pushing, nudging, prodding. She wrote, “I took a long breath and said out loud, “All right, you can come in now.”

We do not pursue God or seek him mostly because, as lowly sinners, we don’t want to have anything to do with Him. We are afraid of Him and His consuming holiness.

Remember Peter, and the miraculous catch of fish? After a long night of fishing with nothing to show for it, Jesus comes along and tells Peter to put out into deeper water and let down his net. Peter knows it isn’t going to work but he oblige. He lets down his net and so many fish swim into it that the net begins to break. That’s when it dawns on Peter: he is

in the presence of a holy and righteous God. “Stay away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.” Jesus ignores that request. He does not stay away. He does not abandon Peter any more than He abandoned Adam. Even after Peter’s three-fold denial of Jesus, after the resurrection, the first person Jesus wants to see is Peter – not to scold or even the score, but to forgive and restore.

In our Epistle lesson, Paul describes how far he had strayed. “I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and an insolent opponent. . . But Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”

One begins to think if Jesus does not give up on Adam, or Jonah, or Peter, or Paul or the rest of them, maybe he won’t give up on you or me.

Indeed, you are here because you have a shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ. You are here for no other reason than the fact that he left the glory of heaven and came down to this earth to die for you on a cross and redeem you. You are here because your Shepherd refused to give up on you. You were lost to sin and death, but He has sought you and found you, forgiven and restored you to the flock by grace, as in Holy Baptism and Confession and Absolution. You are here because Jesus is not afraid to eat with sinners . . . as in the Lord’s Supper.

In our Gospel lesson, notice the contrast. The Pharisees and Scribes are grumbling, whereas the shepherd and the woman are rejoicing. The Pharisees are disgruntled because Jesus was welcoming the wrong people and even eating with them. This offends their self-righteous assumptions and Luke makes sure we notice.

On the other hand, in verse five, when the shepherd finds his lost sheep, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing, not grumbling. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.”

The woman who finally finds her lost coin does the same thing. She too calls together her friends and neighbors saying, “Rejoice with me.” Their first response is to be happy and throw a little party. Their joy isn’t complete until there are other people with whom to share it.

When you get really good news, you want to share the joy, right? Remember, God created us in His image. There is something about God, just as there is in us, that wants to share the joy. Therefore, “there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

God delights in seeking and saving the lost. He doesn’t begrudge the work. He celebrates when He finds them. He doesn’t resent us for getting lost. He is just glad to have us back. And He created the angels in such a way, with such a temperament and disposition, that they are glad too just to have you and me back in the fold.

Somehow the angels rejoicing makes me think of retrievers who go berserk when guests come into the house. You, you personally, are a cause of joy to God and His angels. You matter to Him, and You make Him happy whenever you repent. And you make Him happy because He has found you. Zephaniah 3, “The LORD your God is a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing” (v. 17). What have we done to deserve that? But that’s how He wants us to be as His church. After a long absence, some come back. Be like the retriever and be happy to see them. Be like the angels. Don’t grumble and think, “Well, it’s about time.” Rejoice as the Lord rejoices.

One last thing. Bethesda gave us these windows. Bethesda gave us also this statue of the Good Shepherd. Normally it sits in my office. One day, if the congregation desires, we may place it permanently in the sanctuary, perhaps mounted on that wall. It’s hand carved from one piece of wood. The staff, of course, is a separate piece.

Sometimes when I’m counseling an individual I’ll point to this statue, and say, “That lamb is you. Notice He has you firmly in His grip. And notice also, the lamb is not struggling or fighting to be freed; not kicking or thrashing or writhing. The lamb seems to know it’s in a safe place. In fact, if you take a closer look after the service at the lamb’s face, I think you’ll also notice a little smile. (If a lamb can smile, that lamb is smiling.) He’s content. He knows He’s in a safe place and is home at last.

That’s you and me. God has found us. God has forgiven us. God rejoices over us. We are safe and we are finally home.

Let us pray: Seek your servant, O LORD. Seek all your servants: our children and grandchildren, our friends and neighbors, our siblings, our co-workers. Seek those who are fleeing from you because they’re afraid of your holiness. Seek those who hate you because they have been taught untruths. Seek those who try to ignore you, because they pretend you don’t exist or don’t care or cannot be known. Seek your servants, O LORD. Use us also to turn in love and pursue all who still flee, that they too might find rest and peace in You, and that we might love one another as we are truly loved, through Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd. Amen.