

I Will Seek Out My Sheep

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Christ the King Sunday, November 24, 1996. Scripture Lessons: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Debbie Jean Ford disappeared one day. She was only six years old, the daughter of Presbyterian evangelist, Leighton Ford. "Do you know where Debbie Jean is?", Ford said to his wife. "No, I thought she was with you." "When did you see her last?" A frantic search began. They searched everywhere for her: the other houses nearby, the shopping center, the school yard. They walked up and down a little dirt road calling, "Debbie Jean", fearing the silence. Two hours later she showed up. She told her parents she'd gone with a friend to a candy store, and then on to the friend's house. After the thunder, lightning and tears had passed, Leighton Ford said this: "During those hours that my little girl was missing, there were books to read, letters to answer, telephone calls to make, planning I had to do - but I could think of only one thing: 'My little girl is lost'. I had only one prayer and I prayed it a thousand times, 'God, help me to find her.' Parents can't imagine a greater fear than the fear of losing one of their children.

Christians believe that God is a God who mobilizes all his resources to find his lost sons and daughters. No where is that portrayed more clearly than in the message of the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a Jewish priest. He was deported to Babylonia in the exile of 597 BC. In Babylonia, God called him to be a prophet. In chapter 34, Ezekiel severely indicts the

past rulers of Israel whom he likens to shepherds. "You were supposed to tend my flock", the Lord says. "You were supposed to feed my sheep. But you've exploited them. You've driven them from my flock and scattered them."

God has given the church the responsibility to find his lost and scattered sheep. If we fail, God himself will come searching for his lost sons and daughters, but God will hold us responsibility for dereliction of our duties.

When they found Maryanne Cardel she had been dead for several hours. Maryanne was an elderly woman who lived in an Atlanta welfare hotel and her only friends were a bottle and a pen. With the bottle she eased her pain. With the pen she wrote about her experiences. Finally the bottle became more demanding than the rent, so they evicted her from the hotel and she went looking for a place to spend the night. She knocked on the doors of shelters but there was alcohol on her breath ~~but there was alcohol on here breath~~ and rules are rules and they turned her away. They found her the next morning, her body stiff and blue in a litter strewn field. Beside her was a note she had written with her pen. "I have no one to help me and no one understands", she had written, "but God is not dead. He is only asleep." Near where she had died there's a billboard advertising a popular restaurant and on the billboard it reads, "All you can eat, \$4.95." The one who found her was a member of the church and what he said about it was, "Forgive me, Maryanne! Forgive me! God is not asleep, but I have been. Forgive me." (Tom Long, "An Understated Masterpiece"). And God forgive us if we ever become

more concerned about the sheepfold than the sheep, or the building than God's lost sons and daughters. God has given us the responsibility of seeking out the lost.

Have you ever moved to a new home far away from friends and family? You feel lost at first. The things most of us take for granted take on crises proportions: "Where should I buy groceries? Where should I get a lawn mower? Who can I trust as a baby sitter? Where should I do my banking? What are the schools like? Where should I go to church?" They're lost. What a wonderful opportunity for us, for our church, to help these lost newcomers find their way and, hopefully, be found by God. God has given us the responsibility to search out and find his lost sheep.

Some people are lost because they've left the fold of our church and never find another church home. Jim Sumner sent out questionnaires to every person who has been confirmed in the OPC over the last ten years asking them several questions: Do you attend worship regularly? Are you active in your faith community? The vast majority say, "No! I do not attend worship regularly. No! I am not active in any faith community." This is not an indictment of the confirmation process. Rather, it underlines how important it is for us who are active members to constantly reach out and look around us to see who's missing, and then go find them quickly. If a new member is not incorporated into a smaller group within the church, like the choir, or a Sunday School class, or a home Bible study or a service project -

they wander away within about a year. But God gives us the responsibility to shepherd them.

This summer I saw the movie, Apollo 13. At 10:08 p.m. EST on April 13, 1970, an explosion took place on board the space ship. Soon after the explosion came a terse announcement from Jim Lovell: "Houston, we've got a problem." It quickly became apparent that the astronauts were in serious difficulty. Lost in space. All the resources of our nation were mobilized for the rescue attempt. From all over the world messages offering help poured in. When the astronauts finally got back, John Swigert was asked if he prayed. "I sure did," he replied, "and I believe the prayers of a lot of people around the world had a lot to do with bringing us back."

Just as our nation mobilized its resources to save lost astronauts, our church needs to mobilize our resources to rescue the spiritually lost all around us: our new neighbors who must feel lost in their new surroundings, our old neighbors who may have no idea what Christ and his church means to us, and our own members who've become scattered. We mobilized our resources after fire destroyed our church building, but now it's time to put that same intensity of effort into searching for God's lost sheep.

It was New Years Eve, 1984. Sam Todd, a theological student, wandered out of a New Year's Eve party in New York City. He wandered out into the night and was never found again. For months, his family searched. They followed every lead. They went to morgues, hospitals, mental institutions, but nothing.

His brother John said, "Sometimes its ironic. I wish we could find something, even tragic, just so we would know. A reporter for the New York Times asked Sam's father what he thought about all this and this is what he said, "We are a family of faith. We believe in a loving God who knows where Sam is and Sam is in his care and we are too. But we live in a world where much more awful things happen all the time. Where people living under autocratic governments have disappeared and we've known several of them personally. And Sam's disappearance is an awful thing for us but it's mild compared to that. And this sometimes makes us feel humble." (Tom Long, An Understated Masterpiece).

Christians believe that the reason God loves lost people so much because he, too, lost a son. He knows what it feels like to lose a child. And God doesn't want anymore of his sons and daughters to be lost. ^{we believe in a loving God who knows where his lost sheep are; They're in} Let's help God find them. Let's make that ^{Let's do our part No matter how small or great} a priority in our church. ^ Let's make our church known for being the church that really searches for the lost.

Let us pray: Shepherd God of Israel, who sent Jesus to be the shepherd of the church, we thank you for his love which guides and nurtures your people. Give us grace and courage and imagination and love to seek out your lost sheep so that one day there will be one flock and one shepherd. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.