

ASH WEDNESDAY

FEBRUARY 13, 2018

FIRST, MARSHALL

PASTOR SCOTT FULLER

Psalm 23; John 10:1-18

*Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we believe and in believing we obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.*



In our Gospel passage from John, Jesus describes the special relationship that exists between sheep and their shepherd. In a very real sense, he takes the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and translates it for the benefit of his followers. The sheep, he tells them-and-us, feel secure because their shepherd:

- calls them by name,
- leads them to green pastures and beside still waters,
- protects them in times of danger and
- guards them from every evil...

It's a word image that's beautifully descriptive of the bond that exists between these animals and their keeper... It's a word image that's **also** beautifully descriptive of the bond that exists between loving parent and child.

And yet...infinitely more than sheep that are comforted by the presence of the shepherd, and even much more than children cling to the profound love of their parents, we – all of us, all people everywhere – are encouraged to look to God as the one undying source of love, acceptance, and strength for life... for everyone, forever!

We're encouraged to believe that the Spirit, working through the Gospel, tells us who and whose we are: children of God, called by name, accepted and loved for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Now, the sad state of life reminds us daily that countless children worldwide are not able to celebrate that special bond of love between parent and child... You may know some of them – perhaps you were one of them.

In the same way we know that there are countless people whose names remain unknown regardless of their age, people for whom our God remains unknown, unnamed, and, seemingly, uncaring...

A number of years ago some of Carolyn's relatives purchased a house out in Seattle, WA. It had been owned by an elderly woman who died with neither relatives nor close friends. The authorities began disposing of her things and, through a friend in real-estate, Carolyn's cousin was able to tour the house before it had been cleaned and readied to sell.

Well, they immediately fell in love with it and offered to buy it on the spot, agreeing to clean it out themselves. Loads of things went to Goodwill and others to the dump, one-time treasures whose value had truly only been in the eye of the beholder...

The last thing to go was a single sheet of music that stood on the piano in the living room. The heading of the piece was both a sad epitaph of the woman's life, and yet, at the same time, a heartwarming assertion of her faith in God. The song's title was: ***Even though the World Forgets, God Still Remembers!!***

Think of all the lonely people in this world – those who die nameless and friendless, as well as those who, like sheep, have gone astray – have wandered off and found themselves lost.

Yet even for those of us whose names are known by some portion of the world, that doesn't necessarily mean that **we** are known...and accepted...and loved, does it? You know what I mean if you've ever received a piece of junk mail or robo-call or spam email. There's nothing quite so IM-personal as to be contacted by a computer that knows you only by address, number or name.

I have a built-in defense against a lot of that stuff. Though the name that my parents have called me from birth is Scott, my first name is, actually, Robert. So when I get a letter or email that starts out, ***Dear Bob...***, I know that the sender has no clue to my identity, no knowledge of who I am as a person.

Yet WE who *get it* that we're children of God, are blessed to believe that not only are we recognized by name, face and voice, but we're also known, accepted and loved. When all the world has given up on us, and maybe even justifiably so, GOD STILL REMEMBERS... God remembers...not:  
 WHAT we've done (thank goodness!), nor  
 WHO we **are, have been, or will be**, nor even  
 HOW we've lived our lives. Instead, God remembers WHOSE we are, sheep of the Lord's flock, sinners of our Savior's redeeming.

No, the world, by nature, is not a friendly place... You're familiar with all the sayings that reflect the arena of life out there:

It's a dog-eat-dog world...  
 The survival of the fittest...  
 It's a jungle out there...

So it can be easy for someone to become lost, to wander off, to find themselves alone...even when they're doing everything right.

Just a couple weeks ago, our Jr. High kids were out one night collecting food for a Confirmation project. First Lutheran member Steve Hamner knows the exact amount they took in – 750 pounds! He hauled it over to the Food Shelf by himself. Great work, Confirmation kids and thanks for your help, Steve!!

One of the groups that went out had an experience that created a little excitement for a short time. Ameer Houseman, their adult adviser, parked the van and instructed the kids on what to do:

They were to divide into two groups: one would take the left side of the street, and the other would take the right.

They were to walk up to the front door, knock, explain that they were Confirmation kids from First Lutheran collecting food for the food shelf, and would they like to contribute to the effort.

The kids were to continue down the street until they came to the corner, turn around, come back to the van and unload their food. Then they'd move the vehicle, and start all over again.

Simple, right? Off both groups went...what could possibly go wrong? After a while the first group came back...but there was no sign of the second. So they waited a little while. Then they waited a bit longer...still no sign. So Ameer called Tonya to explain the situation.

Three Confirmation girls: Taya Weber, Hannah Babcock and Kaia Williams had kinda disappeared. The news was a little disconcerting but...it was a cold night, so we could picture the girls being invited into the house of some good First Lutheran folks for a cup of hot chocolate. Tonya said that she had the girls' phone numbers and she'd give them a call...

...which she did...but...not one of them answered their phone. That raised our concern a little more.

Tonya called again...and...turns out that Taya didn't even have her phone along – she'd left it at home. So Tonya called Bill, explained the situation, where the girls were last seen, and asked if he'd mind hopping in his truck to go scout the area...He said he was on his way...

Well, just a few moments later Ameer called back – the lost had been found. Turns out the girls were on the side of Elaine street that morphs into Patricia Court – the girls just know that it went on forever...! They never came to an intersection so they just kept going to house after house, collecting more food and dragging their bags full of groceries along with them!!

After the excitement had died down...Becky Weber was telling her daughter Taya about how concerned people had been when they couldn't find the girls. To that her daughter replied, *Well, we didn't know we were lost!*

Isn't that good? *We didn't know we were lost...* That can happen to any of us, right? We go through life, putting one foot in front of the other, only to discover one day that we're lost – and didn't even know it!

Other times we find ourselves lost and we know exactly how we wandered off the path...

Either way it's good to know that we have a Good Shepherd who always comes looking for us, calling our name, bringing us comfort, promising to be with us always.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor and an officer in the Germany army during WWII. He was implicated in a plot to overthrow Hitler, then arrested and held as a prisoner until he was finally executed...literally the day before the camp was liberated by Allied soldiers.

While in prison, he wrote some amazing things, not the least of which is a poem entitled: **Who am I?**

*Who am I? They often tell me I would step from my cell's confinement  
calmly, cheerfully, firmly, like a squire from his country-house.*

*Who am I? They also tell me I would talk to my (guards)  
freely and friendly and clearly, as though (they) were mine to command.*

*Who am I? They also tell me I would bear the days of misfortune  
equably, smilingly, proudly, like one accustomed to win.*

*Am I then really that which other men tell of?  
Or...am I only what I know of myself,*

*-restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,  
-struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat,  
-yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds,  
-thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,  
-trembling with anger at despotisms and petty humiliation,  
-tossing in expectation of great events,  
-powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,  
-weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making plans,  
-faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?*

*Who am I? This or the other?  
Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?  
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,  
and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?*

*Or...is something within me still like a beaten army,  
fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?  
Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.*

*Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, **I am thine.** -Dietrich Bonhoeffer*

So thanks be to God that imprisoned or free, sinner or saint, hypocrite or hero, lost or found, or a strange and complicated mixture of both, we know above all, who we are: the sheep of God's pasture. And Jesus Christ is our Good Shepherd.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.