

Sermon for November 22, 2020  
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Two sets of words:

The first: Lost, strayed, injured, weak

The second: Fat (having more than enough) and strong.

Which set of words would you prefer to use as self-descriptors? Would you rather be lost, strayed, injured, and weak OR fat and strong?

Our world often attributes negative connotations to the first set of words. Think about how we use these words. Lost often carries fault and fear, strayed means you missed the mark and brings shame, injured often translates to broken, and weak...weak means something is failing, hasn't reached its' potential, isn't capable of standing on its' own.

Fat and strong however elicit a different response. We live in a world striving to be fat – self-secure in having enough. Strong means healthy, successful, stable, capable. We eat healthy foods and go the gyms to build strong bodies, we take vitamins and do mind puzzles to maintain mental strength, we strive to create strong resumes, invest and save to achieve financial strength. Fat and Strong are often the goal, the markers of success. They mean we are self-sufficient.

Now consider these sets of words:

The first: Sought, saved, rescued, brought back, bound up, strengthened, fed, given rest

The second: Destroyed, fed justice

Which set of words sounds more appealing? Which would you rather be?

In our Ezekiel text today, God is shepherd and God is searching out sheep. This text speaks beautiful words of hope and comfort. God says "I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places they have been scattered on days of clouds and thick darkness. I will feed them with good pasture. I will make them lie down."

God is active. God does not hesitate – "I WILL seek, rescue, feed and give rest." Don't we all want to be rescued from all the places we have been scattered on days of clouds and thick darkness.

But then the text goes on:

"I will seek...THE LOST.

I will bring back... THE STRAYED.

I will bind up... THE INJURED.

I will strengthen... THE WEAK.

But:

the fat and the strong, I will destroy.”

Lost, strayed, injured weak.... sought, saved, rescued, brought back, bound up, strengthened fed, rested.

BUT fat and strong.... then destroyed.

Which set of words do you find more appealing now?

While at first I most certainly gravitate towards being fat and strong, I find I am increasing willing to surrender to the reality of being lost, strayed, injured and weak. How many of us wear this mask of fat and strong, feeling that is what is expected and admired while truthfully feeling lost, strayed, injured and weak?

For the past 9 months we have been in a pandemic. We have been “scattered on days of clouds and thick darkness”. Our world has been changed. A quarter of a million people have died in the United States alone. We are lost, tired, sick, broken, fragile, overwhelmed, frightened...yet you can daily hear the human struggle to retain the illusion of fat and strong.

We need to hear God’s word today.

Lost, strayed, injured, weak – you are sought, saved, rescued, brought back, bound up, strengthened, fed, rested.

Fat and strong... you will be destroyed.

Striving to maintain our own fat and strength will destroy us but admitting we are lost, have strayed, are injured and weak, God WILL seek, save, rescue, bring back, bind up, strengthen, feed and give rest.

For as 2 Corinthians 12 says “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

This past week one of our congregational members shared a story on her Facebook page. It is likely a story you have heard before but hear it anew today.

An elderly woman had two large pots, each hung on the ends of a pole which she carried across her neck. One of the pots had a crack in it while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water. At the end of the long walks from the stream to the house, the cracked pot arrived only half full.

For a full two years this went on daily, with the woman bringing home only one and a half pots of water. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its’ accomplishments. But the poor cracked

pot was ashamed of its' own imperfection, and miserable that it could only do half of what it had been made to do.

After two years of what it perceived to be bitter failure, it spoke to the woman one day by the stream. 'I am ashamed of myself, because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your house.'

The old woman smiled, 'Did you notice that there are flowers on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side?' 'That's because I have always known about your flaw, so I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back, you water them.' For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate the table. Without you being just the way you are, there would not be this beauty to grace the house.'

We are cracked and flawed but held in God's sufficient grace, power made perfect in weakness. Only when we acknowledge and claim our cracks, when we stop trying to be fat and strong, self-sufficient and perfect, can God open our eyes to see what God can do with our brokenness.

Our Gospel text today tells the story of Jesus coming as the least of these. The Shepherd has gathered all the sheep and goats to be separated. The King says "Come you that are blessed by my Father inherit the dominion prepared for you from the foundation of the earth; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me...truly I tell **you just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family**, you did it to me."

Who are members of God's family? The hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned. Who inherits the kingdom? Those that extend the grace they have been given. For God seeks, saves, rescues, brings back, binds up, strengthens, feeds and gives rest to the sheep; then those lost, strayed, injured and weak sheep are to do the same.

This past week in our Zoom Youth Group, we took part in the NE MN Synod Middle School Gathering, listening to speaker Joe Davis. He started by saying "Remember who you are, whose you are, and how this impacts how you show up in the world." He talked about the unconditional love of God and how we can see and be this unconditional love in the world.

He talked about how even our skin is a reminder of who we are, whose we are, and how this impacts how we show up in the world. When you get a cut on your body, your body, does not stop and ask "Is this your fault? Shame on you for getting cut. Should you have done something differently? Do you deserve to heal?" Rather your body, the very being you were made, unconditionally responds to the cut, to the brokenness, longing and working for healing and wholeness. This is grace. This is who we are, whose we are, and how we are to show up in the world. Our very skin reminds us of God's unconditional love and in our skin we are supposed to be this unconditional love to others.

As Psalm 8 reads: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; <sup>4</sup> what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?”

We are the least of these, the least deserving, and yet God seeks, saves, rescues, brings back, binds up, strengthens, feeds and gives rest.

So let us boldly say “I am lost. I have strayed. I am injured. I am weak. I am done pretending to be fat and strong. God may your grace be sufficient for me.”

Then let us commit to extending this same grace to all people as siblings in the family of God. We are all sheep in need of a shepherd, cracked pots in need of a God that plants seeds. Remember who you are, whose you are, and may it impact how you show up in the world.