

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Luke 15:4-6a

Fear, being afraid, terror, a sense of unease and danger are important feelings that God has given to us to protect us and defend us from all kinds of possible harm. Fear causes us to teach our children about stranger danger. Fear stops us from patting big dogs with big teeth. Each of us have our own sense of unease and discomfort that comes out of some unexplained fear, a fear of the dark, small spaces, certain harmless animals, certain people. That's not what God planned for His world, but that's the way sin has made it. Fear, unease, danger, pain and grief, have destroyed the peace and safety that God had created. We know what kind of fear echoed around the world as a result of the September 11 attacks in the United States. Similar terrifying days have followed, including more and more terrorist attacks, fires and floods and the terrifying consequences they have had on people's lives. There are places where children are kidnaped and forced to serve in the armed forces, or girls are stolen for the sex trade. We can only imagine the fear in the hearts of parents and in those who are stolen?

What is the answer to the evil in our world? It's the government's job to provide a peaceful community for us to live in, but too often governments fail in this task.

It's the church's role, and that of every Christian, to share the peace of Christ in whatever way they can, in order to break the cycle of hatred, vengeance, violence, and destruction of property

and life. We need to tell our little corner of the world a new message, one that tells of the love and grace of God that comes through forgiveness, and new life in Jesus. When we share the peace of Christ with others, we are doing our bit to offer the world hope in the face of so much carnage and violence. Tell the world that there is a better way, that reconciliation, forgiveness and peace are possible. There is a way beyond fear. In the Gospel reading for today, Jesus was eating with “tax collectors and other outcasts” and some religious people complained that he shouldn’t be mixing with these low-lives. So he told the story of the lost sheep that we are so familiar with. A sheep is lost in the wilderness and the shepherd is afraid for the safety of this one sheep. There is someone who loves it, seeks it out, and tenderly embraces it.

We can easily become lost sheep in a wilderness of fear and insecurity. At any moment, events in our lives can raise our anxiety about our safety. Like the sheep in Jesus’ story, we can be certain that we have a shepherd who assures us that we are his children, joined to Him by our baptism as members of the family of God. We are reassured that, come what may, He will not let go of us, and will always be our helper and the giver of strength, when we feel the frailty of our humanity. We know that Jesus, our shepherd, will always hold us close when our fear and lack of security overwhelm us.

When we become lost sheep in the wilderness of fear about our own death, or that of a loved one, we can be certain that we have a shepherd who lovingly holds us close and comforts us with His words of promise. When we fear the day we will breathe our last breath, we are assured that Jesus our shepherd, who has defeated the power of death, will comfort us when our fears are the greatest. He will reassure us of His promises that He has

prepared a place for us in His Father's house in heaven. When death does come to us, be assured that Jesus the shepherd "puts us on His shoulders and carries us back home".

There are those times when we become lost sheep in a wilderness of questions, most of them starting with "why".

There are so many questions that rise out of fear, because we don't have all the answers. Why cancer? Why this tragedy?

Why me?

Jesus, the shepherd, sympathizes with us and understands. We might have so many questions for God, but there is no doubt about God's love for us. When we are finished with all of the questions, we will realize that God hasn't moved away from us one bit. His patience and love have not decreased one bit. Like the shepherd in Jesus' story, the sheep was lost in the wilderness, but the love of the shepherd was so strong that he left the rest of the flock to look for that one sheep. He feared for the safety of his sheep. We could even say, when we are lost in a wilderness of questions and doubt, His love for us burns stronger than ever before. When our faith in God's love falters we can be assured the shepherd "puts us on His shoulders and carries us back home".

There are times when we become lost sheep in a wilderness of helplessness. Being helpless fills us with fear and anxiety. It may be helplessness in the face of disease, or lying in a hospital bed after an accident; the helplessness that approaching death brings; the helplessness of giving into the same temptations over and over again; the helplessness that we can't change any of our circumstances. It's just at those moments when our strength gives out, we give up and we are fearful of the future, that Jesus' arms around us are the strongest. His presence and love strengthen us. When we are lost in the wilderness of

helplessness, be assured Jesus “puts us on His shoulders and carries us back home”.

One thing worth noting is the shepherd’s persistence. He doesn’t give up until he has found that straying sheep. We see that in Jesus. His persistent love for us, led Him to the cross. At the Communion table, He provides a meal for us, bread and wine, His body and blood. Even though we are sinners, nevertheless He shares Himself with us at this meal. Those grumbling words of the Pharisees could also include us, “This man, Jesus, is friendly with sinners. He even eats with them”. In all the trouble that sin causes in our lives, it is great to know that we have a Saviour, a loving shepherd, who “carries us on His shoulders and brings us back home”, and in the end, to our eternal home.

AMEN.