

What shall we do about ‘the Lost Sheep’?

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.

5th Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 6, Year A. June 15, 2008. (Text: Matthew 9:35-10:8)

About three hundred years before Jesus, a man named Isaiah was praying in the Temple in Jerusalem and had a mystical experience—a vision. Isaiah was a prince of Judah, a cousin of the king. He knew all the important people in the land; and the land was in turmoil. The rich were exploiting the poor, the leaders were playing political games with foreigners, and nobody was keeping faith, either with God or each another. In addition, the fierce Assyrians from the north were threatening to take over all the little countries, like Judah, that bordered their empire. It was a frightening time. As Isaiah prayed for his people, this was his vision:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphim were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the whole house was filled with smoke.

And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” Then one of the seraphim flew to me, holding a live coal taken from the altar. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has been taken away and your sin is blotted out.”

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

Times were bad. People were scared; they needed help. God asked, “*Whom shall I send?*” And Isaiah answered, “*Here am I. Send me!*”

Holding this dramatic picture in your mind, let’s go forward three hundred years. The Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks have all come and gone. Now Romans are the foreign occupiers of the little province of Judea. Political, economic, and religious circumstances are tense as ever. Jesus of Nazareth is going among the towns and villages, spending time with the ordinary people, talking to them, teaching them, and touching them with the power of God. He sees that they’re harassed and helpless. He calls them “*sheep without a shepherd.*”

Domesticated creatures don’t do well on their own, without human support. The wild Rocky Mountain sheep we have out here in Colorado are able to live on the slopes year-round and be fine; but an ordinary sheep, your next year’s sweater on the hoof, won’t survive without a human care-taker. They need a shepherd to look after their health and their diet, to care about whether they stay with the flock or wander off and fall in a gulley.

Jesus looked at the crowds and said, “Nobody *cares* about these people!” So he went to them himself, and he sent out his twelve disciples, as we read about this morning. He said to them, “*Go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.*”

The “lost sheep of the house of Israel” were people about whom the Jewish religious leaders did not seem to care very much. —I wonder who we’d say are “the lost sheep” in *our* society. We live in a time when many

individuals and groups seem to profit from positioning themselves as “victims.” We hear from them all the time. You can probably name several groups of co-called “victims”. But who are *our* “lost sheep”?

Here’s a way we might identify the “lost sheep” among us. America is the most religious of the Western democracies, but there are millions of people here who were baptized in infancy and taken to church and Sunday School as children, but who – for different reasons – either never came to personal faith, or at some point lost their faith. These people haven’t been in a church for years, and – if you were to ask them – most might tell you that they have no interest in ever coming back. These are *our* “lost sheep.” There are lost Episcopalian sheep as well as lost Methodist, Lutheran, Catholic, and even Baptist sheep —people about whom we might re-phrase a verse of *Amazing Grace*: “they once were found, but now they’re lost.”

The question is: Are we willing to let it go at that, or *do we feel called to do something for them?* When his people were in peril, God revealed himself to Isaiah and asked him, “*Whom shall I send?*” Isaiah answered, “*Send me.*” And God sent him.

I think Jesus is saying, “My lost sheep are out there walking the streets of Aspen. They’re getting off planes at the airport every day. They’re on the mountains; they’re at the Music Festival; they’re attending conferences at the Institute, eating in the nice restaurants, and shopping in the fancy boutiques. They’re also waiting tables, re-stocking grocery shelves, making beds in hotels, and driving limos back and forth to the airport. They’re mowing your lawns and building your houses. Some of them are working on your new church building. Lost sheep are everywhere I look in this town! ...Sheep without shepherds. —Whom shall I send to bring them back to Me?”

How do we answer him? How do we pray? Do we pray like this: “Oh, Lord, please send *somebody* to them, send laborers into the harvest. Send somebody to love them, somebody to connect with them, somebody to show these lost sheep how to find their way back to the flock, back to the fold of God. —Send *somebody*. But, Lord, please don’t send *me!*”

If we’re serious about our faith, we can’t pray that way. We can’t pray any kind of prayer unless we’re truly willing for God to use *us* as part of his answer to that prayer. If we’re not just a “holy club” of people who like to get together once a week and sing some traditional hymns, hear a sermon and receive Communion, we can’t just let somebody ELSE worry about the lost sheep! When Jesus says, “*Whom shall I send,*” our answer has to be, “*Here we are, Lord. Send us!*”

Rick Warren, the famous Southern California pastor whose books *The Purpose Driven Church* and *The Purpose Driven Life* have sold millions of copies, says that every church should have a target group it wants to reach. A church that wants to reach “lost sheep” should first try to reach the ones with whom they already have something in common, because they’re the ones with whom they’re likely to have some success.

I’ve told you that I believe God wants to “remodel” *us* this year, at the same time we’re remodeling the physical structure of our church building. One renovation I think God intends for us is a refocusing of our sense of mission. To whom are we *sent*? Who are the “lost sheep” the Lord wants us to round up and bring home to him? I’d venture to guess that almost every adult here this morning already knows at least *one* “lost sheep,” *one* “church dropout.” This might be your neighbor, or your sister, or your golf buddy. Maybe even your own child. I challenge you: connect with that person this week. Find out what he or she needs. Listen with compassion and sensitivity. Don’t offer pat answers; just show you care. Be a shepherd. When the time is right, share your own faith. When it seems appropriate, invite that lost sheep to rejoin the flock.

Today the Lord is asking, “*Whom shall I send?*” Let our answer be explicit: “*Here we are, Lord. Send us!*”