

2020 11 22 Rev. Sara M. Holland Sermon

Scripture: Psalm 100, adapted & Ezekiel 34:11-16 & 20-24

Title: “Sought out & Brought Back”

Theme: Reign of Christ Sunday, Reigning Compassion

Intro:

For the Lord is good; God’s steadfast love endures forever. For the lord is good; God’s steadfast love endures forever. Reigning Compassion is what we celebrate today. Compassion with a capital C as Jesus was such an embodiment of a deep compassion that needed to be revealed on earth in the 1st century.

For the Lord is good; God’s steadfast love endures forever.

We all know what it is to hide. For safety, for fun, to scare a friend who is coming around a corner.

Google knew the reasons to hide:

To hide a relationship

To hide your IP address (that’s the thing on the internet that gives your location)

To hide your identity

To hide your friend list on Facebook or some other form of social media. . . .

We have reasons to hide and we all hide.

What we read in Ezekiel is this word from God:

¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak . . .

Our compassionate God is not one who is seeking out those who are perfect, but those who are vulnerable and who are in need. In fact, in this good word from Ezekiel we really hear a proper warning to any sort of oppressor.

And, oh so characteristic of Ezekiel, God naming God's self in a repetitive and clarifying manner. "I, the Lord," "I, God, have spoken" we hear time and again.

So Ezekiel is an excellent book, not comfortable or easy to read, but excellent. It has amazing imagery and shows deep calls to profess the might and comfort that God brings.

Ezekiel is from the Hebrew Bible, commonly referred to as the Old Testament; this book is one of the former or first prophetic books in an important body of literature that speaks about the coming of God and the character of God.

The picture of God given in Ezekiel is, in some ways, problematic, but there is a certainty, clarity and comfort in the transcendent, divine *and* parental image of God offered here.

For the Lord is good; God's steadfast love endures forever.

When we read Ezekiel, it helps to remember how this prophetic journey began. Ezekiel is this amazing book where we get this image of the prophet (Ezekiel) devouring the scroll. Ezekiel is told to 'eat what is offered' to him so he may speak truth to power. As Ezekiel struggles to fall in line but does, he speaks God's word to the people of Israel. Now in this part of Ezekiel, that we have read today, we hear that God will seek us out, God will find us even when we scatter:

¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed

For the Lord is good; God's steadfast love endures forever. The psalms were sung; can you hear this song? For the Lord is good; God's steadfast love endures forever.

Michael D. Coogan notes in regard to the Psalms time and place: "With the Babylonian destruction of the Temple in 586 BCE, the scattered exiles prayed facing toward the Temple site in far-off Jerusalem [. . .]" (*quote continued on page 4*)

Coogan goes on: “When the Temple was finally destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE (or after the death of Jesus), Jews and Christians lost any chance of praying in an actual building and participating in its liturgy. The biblical text itself became the place where God graciously chose to dwell and hear the prayers of the people. Those who prayed could be sure of God’s presence no matter where they prayed.”¹

And in Ezekiel we hear: ¹⁶“I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed” Like a good parent looking for a child who has hidden. Often times we hide because we feel guilty about something we have done. I wonder if we can’t let God’s reigning compassion become our hiding place? I wonder if we could look to confess our struggles that relate to hiding more often.

We, congregationalists, us UCCers, have more space for confession. We do not like to admit we are wrong and we need to do so more often.

Not just before God but before each other too. This is one way we care for neighbor – confession, pushes us to morality. It is a way to fight that urge to hide from God’s divinity. Deep honesty. Confession leading to morality that ripples into the world.

¹Hebrew Bible, 783, Psalms, The New Oxford Annotated Bible – Michael D. Coogan key editor

For me, the ping pong table my family had when I was growing up kind of became a place of confession. I suppose the Spirit was moving around the table or something

When I was in about 3rd grade I told my parents I needed glasses. The reality was that some part of me had decided glasses were cool, so I just told them I needed them. The day before or of the optometry appointment, I ran under the ping pong table and hid when my parents started looking for me. I experienced a wave of guilt and I had heard from friends that the eye doctor could tell if you didn't need glasses which meant that the jig was up.

I heard my mom: "Sara! Time to go!"

I cried under the ping pong table with my secret eating me alive. I had a confession to make. Sometimes us humans only confess when we have to. . .

My mom forgave me of course. It was not a big deal though for a 3rd grader I felt I had truly betrayed my parent's trust. But just like the images of God in our hymns, in the scripture, God is the parent who always knows how to respond and always offers compassion.

I also heard that one time my parents caught me under the ping pong table with a stick of butter – I understand that I was using the stick of butter as a lollipop. . . I know, it is gross to New Englanders but any good southerner knows that there is but one ingredient that makes any snack a bit more tasty – butter of course. I cleverly went straight for the butter itself.

This time was less a confession and more of a getting caught as I understand it now. Still, that ping pong table was where I went to hide. As an adult, I do not have a ping pong table to go to. I would guess that there are few of us adults who have anything like that. Moreover, we do not go into a certain space in our faith communities to offer confessions to God as they do in other traditions.

As protestants in 2020, we have to figure out where our ping pong table will be –

We need to ready ourselves to be more honest and lean into confession.

We have sometimes ignored the pain around us or our own pain.

We have reacted from our own pains and hurt the people we love the most.

We have forgotten to care for creation.

If we do not confess such things we are doomed to ignore morality.

We must consider letting go of the parts of ourselves that we hide from others.

If nothing else, we must turn the core of who we are over to God.

¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed

We may not have a ping pong table, but God has given us Psalm 100 -

For the Lord is good; God's steadfast love endures forever. For the lord is good; God's steadfast love endures forever.

We can say this over and over but we must act this way! This way people will know about God's transforming love; this way people will see the Reigning Compassion that came in Christ.

So – have you ever literally or figuratively hidden from something?

I'm sure you have. . . we all have.

What is at stake when you consider placing this before God?

Can you do it? I think you can. For God proclaimed:

¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed.

We are, ourselves, we are sought out and brought back.

If the people in the ancient near east can call out in song to God when their temple is destroyed I am sure we can figure out how confession fits into our picture of faith. We can surely, surely let confession lead to morality and help us orient and find comfort in God's reigning compassion.

We are, ourselves, we are sought out and brought back. Let us know that it is so. Let us feel God's reigning compassion.

We invite you to join us in singing number 300 in the black hymnal, Jesus Shall Reign.