

Ezekiel 34: 11-16
Matthew 25: 31-40
November 23, 2014
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

In 1920, William Butler Yeats published a poem titled "The Second Coming". Its opening verses seem as relevant today as they must have nearly one hundred years ago.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

With beautiful and terrible precision Yeats pictures humanity separated from all source of direction and purpose, unable to hear the call of the falconer to return home. Like the amusement park ride, "Tilt-a-Whirl" the centrifugal pull of the world draws all life to the extremes. What used to be a center which held all people together is now a howling void. There are fewer and fewer places where people can hold different views and remain together. There are fewer and fewer places where what we hold in common is far more significant than our differences. It is no longer about listening and learning from one another. It is about winning and losing. It is about the exercise of power. It is no longer about listening to a voice that is bigger than us all with humility and a yearning to understand. Instead it is about speaking only with people with whom we already agree and reinforcing our own opinions.

Meanwhile the real needs of the world go unaddressed and anarchy so powerfully represented by ISIS grows. When an election draws less than 30% of those eligible to vote, many beaten down by the barrage of attack ads and robo calls, do we not resonate with Yeats'

observation that, “The best lack all conviction while the worst are filled with passionate intensity”? This is not about liberal and conservative. It is far more than a political problem. It is a spiritual crisis.

In the midst of this nightmare the very body which used to be the meeting ground of all humans regardless of their perspective is now a mere reflection of the pulling apart world. The church is becoming a series of like-minded enclaves which trust in their own right-ness. Where can one go to be nourished in a transcendent reality that is beyond human definition and understanding? Where can one go without having to go through a political and moral litmus test? Who will commit to form and support such communities?

Who indeed?

The world which I have portrayed so darkly was in fact the world addressed by God through Ezekiel. In the passage just before the one we heard, God describes the failure of the shepherds to minister to the spiritual and physical needs of the people. The people are now scattered around the known world. They are in exile, not only from Jerusalem and their homelands; more critically they are in exile from God. Like the falcon in Yeats’ poem they are circling in the sky with no place to land. They cannot hear the call of God, the falconer, to come home to rest on his arm.

Now God says:

I, myself, will search for my sheep and will seek them out....I will rescue from all the the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness....I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak. But the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

Many years later a man from Nazareth spoke of himself as “the good shepherd” who seeks the lost sheep to bring them home rejoicing in his arms. He called to all who were scattered by the pulling apart world. Many were considered to be unfit for the community of faith: women, slaves, prostitutes, diseased, mentally ill, poor, objects of prejudice. Yet he also called the wealthy, the powerful—those called by Henry Fosdick, “rich in things but poor in soul.”

He taught that being lost is a universal problem. We are all in one way or another, lost. As a friend of mine observed recently, we are homesick for the peace that only God can give. A few centuries later St. Augustine would state that “our souls are restless until they find their rest in thee.”

Being lost doesn’t mean we have been the prodigal son. We need not have been outrageous and public sinners to qualify for our photo in the anthology of great stories of deliverance. Indeed, while Jesus welcomed the prostitutes and other sinners he also reached out to tax collectors aka white collar criminals. But most of all he yearned for those who sought security and peace in this world. The mass of humanity who Henry David Thoreau identified as living lives of quiet desperation—seeking salvation by wealth, race, education, success and political ideology.

Where is the community to welcome those yearning for such spiritual home? Where is the community where the thirsty find a drink and the hungry find food, the lonely find friendship, the grieving comfort, the despairing find hope? Where is the community which seeks to draw near to the great shepherd of the sheep and to be liberated from the spinning

whirl of the pull-apart world? When the Son of Man comes to judge the sheep and the goats, what communities will fill his heart with gratitude?

I hope none of us feels qualified to say for sure who those sheep and goats will be. Our job is not to take the inventory of anyone else. But I can tell you this: Jesus' sheep will include communities which don't have it all right. It will include communities whose services sometimes run too long, or whose joys and concerns sometimes stray, whose pastors make mistakes and sometimes preach sermons that are dull and long. It will include communities with very different understandings of Jesus and scripture.

But most of all his sheep will be ones that seek his voice, gather to receive and share his love and who yearn to love with Jesus' love. We will be those who gather of a morning to sprinkle water on the head of Kaden Bailey and claim that two thousand years ago Jesus died and rose from the dead so that Kaden will come to know for himself that Jesus died and rose for him—and that nothing can ever separate him from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

He will learn this from his parents and his family both here and in Malawi. He will learn from you, Christ's beloved sheep and all of Christ's flock where ever his life takes him. Amen.