

2 March 2005  
Lent 3 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

## Jesu Juva

“Stray Sheep / Found Sheep”

Text: Isaiah 53:6 (Matthew 18:12-14; 1 Peter 5:6-11)

There is perhaps no sight sadder than that of a baby or young child that has wandered off or been separated from its mother. A child in the mall crying for its mother. A baby animal calling for its mother, but getting no reply. Maybe it was the child’s fault, maybe it wasn’t. But at that point, fault isn’t the issue – being found is. For a young child on its own will not last long. There are too many predators in the world, looking for an opportunity; looking for the vulnerable; looking for prey.

The words that we heard from the prophet Isaiah tonight described us in that way. ***“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way.”*** We have wandered off from our God and Father. All of us. Turning to our own way. Maybe our separation was deliberate and willful, because our way looked more exciting, or more fun, or what everyone else was doing. Or maybe it was that we wandered off innocently, being deceived by others, seduced and enticed, not realizing the danger. Perhaps both of these have happened to you. But we all have gone astray, and continue to do so. Astray in sin that separates us from our Father and His love. And astray, we are lost. Astray, we are vulnerable. Astray, we will fall prey to our adversary, the devil, ***“the roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”***

And it is our fault. The guilt and blame can be laid no where but at our feet. Oh, we like to blame others! She made me do it! Or, the devil made me do it! But no. The truth is that we did it. I have sinned for pleasure; I have sinned for pride; I have sinned in weakness; I have sinned in anger; I have sinned in fear; I have sinned in mistrust; I have sinned to be part of the crowd; I have sinned because others wanted me to; I have sinned because I wanted to; I have sinned thinking that it really doesn’t matter. *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*. It is my fault, my fault, my own most grievous fault.

And during this season of Lent – not *only* this season, but *especially* this season – we acknowledge that, and cry out. We cry out in tears like the child at the mall. We call out in fear like the baby animal that finds itself alone. We cry out *“Lord, have mercy! Have mercy on me, a sinner.”* We are lost; we are vulnerable; we will perish if left alone.

And so how good to hear the words of the Gospel. The words that we heard tonight. That when we are lost, when we go astray, our Heavenly Father does not simply wipe His hands and say, “*Well, good riddance! Good luck!*” No, it is He who comes searching for us. For us too scared to move; too lost to find our way home. . . . ***“What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went away. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of [us] little ones should perish.”*** No more comforting words could be spoken! Than to know that your Father is coming for you. He is searching for you. Before you even call out for Him, He is coming to you. And when you call, He hears. And He has mercy, and rejoices in finding you!

But what makes our Father’s searching love even more remarkable is the second half of our verse from Isaiah this evening, that because ***“all we like sheep have gone astray; [and] we have turned every one to his own way; the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”*** You see, that is the difference between a child or baby animal wandering off, and our wandering in sin – for our sin there is a price to pay. It is our fault, and if we were to die in our sin it would be our fault. But our Heavenly Father, in His perfect love, does not want that! And so He sends His Son, to not only be the Good Shepherd who comes and searches us out, but even more – to become a sheep like us. To become a sheep for us. A sheep who never wandered from His Father’s way and will, that He might go to the cross in our place, as our substitute. There to be the devil’s prey; to enter the mouth and jaws of death and grave, which were coming to devour us. And so it was that on Him, on the cross, all our iniquity – all our guilt and shame and fault and sin – all was laid upon Him. All to be paid for by one man, the God-man, our suffering servant. As we just sang: *“How strange is this great paradox to ponder: The shepherd dies for sheep who love to wander; The master pays the debt his servants owe him, Who would not know him.”* (LW #119 v. 4)

And because He has, because He died for us and then rose for us, leaving all of our sin and death in the grave – we are restored. Because He has, we are forgiven. Because He has, our prayers and cries and calls for mercy are answered. Our Good Shepherd has come for us, and saved us from our enemies. He has found us, and brought us into the fold, and rejoices over us. And no sin is too great, no wandering too far, no guilt too deep – that He cannot find and forgive. For each and every sheep is precious. You are precious. He wants not even one to perish.

And so while this season of Lent is a time of sorrow and repentance, Isaiah teaches us that it is also a time for us to rejoice in the love of God. The love of our Saviour Jesus,

the suffering servant, the perfect Lamb of God, who took our place in sin, that we might have His place in Heaven. ***“All we like sheep have gone astray,”*** it is true. But we have been found. We hear His voice. We have His Word and His gifts. And we are forgiven. . . . So no matter where you are in this life now, your Shepherd, your Saviour, is calling to you. Searching for you. Whatever the fear, whatever the pain, whatever the care, whatever the sin, whatever has led you astray and has you in its grip, your Saviour is here for you. To join you to Himself. To keep you through this life, and even through death, and bring you with Him into His heavenly fold and to eternal life. There, safe and secure and home, *forever*.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.