

Like Sheep Without A Shepherd, a sermon on Matthew 9:35-38

First Baptist Church Jefferson City, Missouri

Preached by Hannah Coe on June 14, 2020

WATCH/LISTEN: <https://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/like-sheep-without-a-shepherd/>

One thing we've noticed in our house during this time of social distancing is that we have more messes than usual. Our house feels really "lived-in" right now.

We are indeed in a mess of a time. At one time or another these last few months, "harassed and helpless" and "like sheep without a shepherd" describe how we've felt.

Throughout the scriptures, mountains are significant places of God-encounter. They are significant in Jesus' ministry. Jesus delivers his most well-known sermon from a mountain. He and the disciples often crossed the sea and went up on the mountain to be together, often to rest, process, and pray. From the mountaintops in the area of Jesus' ministry, it is easy to imagine him looking out over the crowds who followed him in search of hope and healing.

I've been thinking about the mountains lately and how much I wish all of us could physically go together to a mountain to rest, process, and pray. I can hear your voices, I can smell the fresh spring air, I can feel the coolness of rocks and the ground beneath my feet. I can see us, following Jesus up the mountain a little ways so we could sit and talk. We need to be with our Good Shepherd, because (boy) we need to be in God's presence, we need hope and direction.

I have been with you here at First Baptist in Jefferson City for a little more than five years. One of the things I've observed is that you care deeply for your community and for the world. You are gracious and thinking people. As I imagine standing together on the mountain, looking out over all we've seen on the news, on social media, on our city's streets these last four months, I can imagine the sadness and heaviness you carry because this is a time in which our thinking is challenged by questions without answers and when graciousness isn't exactly making the top of our Apple Newsfeed.

On the mountain, we hear our Good Shepherd speak these words from Matthew 9. He tells us two things we're not expecting to hear. In verse 38, Jesus says, "Pray for the Lord of the harvest to send laborers."

That's like me standing in the doorway of that messy room I showed you earlier and saying to my children: we need to pray for someone with hands and legs and feet with blue eyes and cute chubby cheeks who knows where everything goes in this room to come and clean it up. Do you see what Jesus does here?

In the political, religious, and societal mess of first century Jewish Christianity in the midst of Roman occupation—a time in which the tension was so great, the air could explode with a single spark-- Jesus already had a group of laborers he was sending into the harvest. In the political, religious, and societal mess of our time and place, Jesus already has a group of laborers he's sending into the harvest. Jesus is not counting on some other god to send some

other group of disciples at some other time. Rather, he is suggesting as did MLK Jr. in his prayer for the church that the disciples “go out and live as though they are the answer to their very own prayers.”

But since we are feeling heavy and broken and not ready to walk down the mountain yet because we’re a little out of shape from not going to the gym these last four months, we’re gonna need a little more from Jesus to help us understand where to go from here. So he’s sending us out to labor in the harvest, but for what do we labor and why?

The Gospel of Matthew often uses phrases like the *kingdom* or *reign* of God. Today’s passage begins with Jesus going from village to village proclaiming the “good news of the kingdom.” In the prayer Jesus gave us, we are to pray that God’s kingdom may come on earth as it is in heaven.

Notice Jesus did not ask us to pray for bigger buildings or budgets. He did not ask us to pray for bigger membership roles or fuller church bank accounts. Jesus asks us to pray for the kingdom. The reason we are laboring is that God’s kingdom may come. God’s primary work in the world is to bring the kingdom. There are two things about the scriptural understanding of God’s kingdom I want to remind us of today. The first is that the reign of God confronts evil by replacing evil with the power of God. (Bosch, 32) “We don’t have to look too far down from this mountain to see evil on display. Yet, Jesus says to us: “If human distress [if evil] takes many forms, the power of God does likewise” (Bosch, 33). Jesus’ kingdom ministry does not shy away from evil.

The second about God’s reign I want to remind us of today is that with God’s reign comes a state “justice-righteousness” that is extended to everyone. In God’s reign, people live in a way that is acceptable to God, they are spiritually, physically, mentally whole, and people live in right-relationship with one another. In other words, people seek on behalf of one another that to which they have a right through the riches of God’s grace (Bosch, 71). The kingdom of God is physical and spiritual, horizontal and vertical—not one or the other.

Church, this is a time for us to examine our tendency to focus internally and to habitually refocus on partnering with the kingdom work God is already doing.

As we look out from our mountaintop view, Jesus tells us that the crowds are harassed and helpless. Harassed and helpless. These words in verse 36 translated literally mean “oppressed and thrown to the ground.” In Jesus’ time these were folks who were failed by the system. The poor, the sick, the unclean, the unlucky, the unsavory—none of whom were welcome in the religious system. The Roman empire welcomed these folks into their advanced system of slavery in which the poor labored to build an economic and political system that did not benefit them. Neither of these realities had a place in God’s kingdom.

We must ask ourselves how we as people of faith are failing those who are in need, especially in this time of great vulnerability.

This is a moment in which it's hard to know what to do. We are both stuck and unsettled. People of faith are feeling stuck on the journey toward racial reconciliation. People of faith are feeling unsettled by the pandemic. We are asking ourselves how to be the presence of Christ as we face an unknown future. All of this makes me wonder if what might be more important than knowing what to do right now, is knowing where to look. (Liturgist podcast)

The time has come for us to walk down the mountain together. Before we turn to go, we remember another mountaintop moment in scripture—the transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-13). The form of Jesus' being changed in the presence of his closest disciples, and they came to understand in a new way the true essence of Jesus. As we begin to walk back down the mountain, maybe this can be true for us. While we walk, Jesus brings to our attention again the crowds. Jesus talks with us as he has many times before about compassion. When Jesus looks over the streets, scrolls Facebook, and reads the headlines, he is moved to compassion. When Jesus sees those who are vulnerable to illness and injustice, he is moved to compassion. When Jesus hears our personal and collective cries of pain and anger and loss, he responds with compassion.

When we look to Jesus, we do not receive rose colored glasses or a ruler by which we can judge the world or some escape hatch. Rather, when we look to Jesus, our vision is changed so that we see the world the way God sees the world—with compassion. The very presence of God is, in its essence, compassion. God is not hovering above us in a gold-plated helicopter, sipping coffee in a white suit. Our Good Shepherd is walking with us, equipping us with compassion, which is what we need to keep putting one foot in front of the other right now.

Lord...

We thank you for your church, founded upon your Word, that challenges us to do more than sing and pray, but go out and work as though the very answer to our prayers depended on us and not upon you.

Help us to realize that humanity was created to shine like the stars and live on through all eternity. Keep us, we pray, in perfect peace. Help us to walk together, pray together, sing together, and live together until that day when all God's children...will rejoice in one common band of humanity in the reign of our Lord and of our God, we pray.

Amen.

- The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

(accessed from <https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/mlk-prayer-for-the-church> June 9, 2020)

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