

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I sometimes come into my office on a Sunday afternoon when it's quiet and there's no one around, just to gather my thoughts, plan the coming week, look over the reading set for the next Sunday's sermon. I did that last Sunday and read the Jeremiah that was set for today. I read that particularly closely. As you may know, we're having this series looking at the readings from the Prophet Jeremiah.

Except last Sunday afternoon this didn't go well. I arrived in my office to find a bagpiper playing his bagpipes outside my office window. There was a reception going on in the courtyard and the piper was stationed in the corner, right underneath where I was trying to quietly gather my thoughts. Which made me wonder. My first thought was, "What is it with Americans and bagpipes?" The last three times I have been to the cathedral there's been a bagpiper involved in the service. Not only does this offend my English sensibilities, but also even people who like the sound of bagpipes agree they should never be played indoors.

The bloke outside my office, however, he was outdoors but he was still driving me crazy. But he did get me thinking. I made a connection between the fact that I was trying to find a bit of peace and quiet whilst battling with this piper outside, and the fact that I was trying to write an upbeat sermon for Rally Sunday with a positive message of hope and encouragement whilst battling with this text from Jeremiah with all its gloom and despondency.

Jeremiah is an inconvenient prophet. Whilst I was trying to be bright, happy, and optimistic, I was wrestling all the time with Jeremiah droning on in the background.

He's there in the scripture as a prophet preaching a message that nobody wanted to hear. He was a loud, in-your-face prophet who was impossible to ignore. There's one story of him standing literally at

the door of the temple in Jerusalem, and as people were coming to service he mocked them as they came in.

The message God gave Jeremiah to proclaim is summed up at the beginning of the passage that we had read to us today. "For my people are foolish, they do not know me." Jeremiah's message was blunt. "You foolish people," he said, "you think you know best. You've wandered away from the God who made you, you've ignored the God who brought you out of the land of Egypt. You don't know him. You've constructed your own religiosity. You've got your own rituals." Do you remember the prophetic message "I desire mercy, not sacrifice"? And Jeremiah made it very clear. "You've wandered away, and there will be consequences."

And there's something about Jeremiah's message that we all need to hear. We all have a certain tendency towards foolishness. We're all prone to wander off into foolishness, ignorance, and sin. And thank goodness that whilst Jeremiah was used by God to set out the problem, he didn't have the last word on the whole story. Even in the midst of Jeremiah's doom-laden prophecy of destruction and despair, even Jeremiah saw a glimmer of hope.

We read this. "For thus, says the Lord, 'The whole land shall be a desolation, yet I will not make a full end.'" And this glimmer of hope in Jeremiah becomes a radiant light in the Gospels and the New Testament, as we see how God works things out in his great plan of salvation.

Jesus tells a parable to show how God deals with those who have wandered away. We call it the Parable of the Lost Sheep, but I think that's something of a misnomer. It should really be called something like the Parable of the Searching Shepherd. This parable is not about the sheep. All the foolish sheep does in the story is wander away from the other 99 in the flock.

The attention in the story is focused completely on the shepherd. We're not even aware in the story that the sheep knows that she's lost. It doesn't say,

"The sheep was delighted to be found by the shepherd, who put the joyful sheep on his shoulders." No. It says, "The shepherd lay the sheep on his shoulder and rejoices." It's the shepherd that rejoices.

It is God, the divine shepherd, who is the focus of the story. The sheep did nothing to aid its finding. It didn't bleat, cry out, or send up a flare. The initiative all lies with the shepherd. The shepherd sets out to find the sheep that has wandered off.

The Bible can be read as the story of knowing God, or rather God making himself known, God's search for his wandering people. Remember God's complaint in Jeremiah. "The people don't know me." And knowing here is a relational term. God wants his people to know him, to be in relationship with him, so he took the initiative. God came in Christ to search his people out, to bring back those who've wandered off. He took the initiative.

God made himself known to us supremely in the person of Jesus Christ. God didn't wait for us to work our way back to God. He came to find us. He came to seek and save the lost, which was something that scandalized the religious people who knew Jesus. They thought that God should come to those who tried really hard to be good, those who were pious and devout. And it was them that pointed to Jesus and said, "Look, this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Saint Paul, who wrote our epistle for today, knew himself to be one of those sinners welcomed by Jesus. He admits in that reading, "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, a man of violence." He goes on, "This saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am foremost."

And Saint Paul changed the world with his preaching and proclamation of the Gospel of Grace. No one could outdo Saint Paul in his religious zeal, but he came to realize that that wasn't what saved him, that wasn't what counted. He says, "I received mercy because I had acted

ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord Jesus overflowed for me with the faith and love that is in Christ Jesus." That is good news.

The message of Jeremiah is part of the story, but when we see it in the rest of scripture, when we put it in the context of the rest of the Bible, as we look at it in the context of the reading set for today, we see that Jeremiah and his fellow prophets, that their message was not the whole story. The lost have been found and God has made himself known to those who didn't know him. And we don't have to strive to be good and save ourselves. God has reached out to us in grace and accepts us as we are.

We have good news to share. So, let's be sure to share it. And today's Rally Sunday kicks off our season of invitation, and there's several brochures around laying out what's happening this year in the church's program and in our ministries. And as I read them this week I was amazed and pleased and proud to see how much we are doing, all the good things that are on offer here at Saint James.

So, let's look at those. And as we read them and think about them, think who might we invite to share in them? Who are we sharing the good news that we see proclaimed throughout the whole of scripture? Amen.