

St Margaret's Barming – Online Sermon

Sunday 22nd November 2020

Ezekiel 34 v11-24

The Good Shepherd – The God Who Never Leaves Us

Lost on Zoom

Have you ever been lost or felt abandoned?

I had a strange experience on the Zoom the other week!

I had set up a meeting, but when the day and time arrived, I appeared to be the only person logged in. As I was contemplating phoning around the different members of the group to see where they all were, one of them suddenly appeared on my screen.

It transpired that I had used an old link to log on, and so whilst I was waiting for my colleagues to appear, they were all gathered in another chat room waiting for me, thinking that I had stood them up.

Fortunately for me, one of the group who is much more tech savvy than I am realised what had happened and came looking for me!

God Does not Leave us or Abandon Us

In our bible reading we were introduced by the prophet to 'The Good Shepherd' This shepherd is one who cares for and goes looking for his sheep that are lost and scattered.

If you were to take just one thing from this passage, it should be this:

'No matter what we are feeling or going through, our God does not leave us or abandon us!'

This is a message that God repeats, numerous times throughout the scriptures:

Deuteronomy 31 v6

Deuteronomy 31 v8

Joshua 1 v5

John 14 v17-19 and Hebrews 13 v5

Easy for You to Say

When the going is good, it's an easy message to accept, but when struggles and trials hit our strength and resolve to believe that God is there with us, gets tested and we can find ourselves faltering.

We can find ourselves subscribing to the lies of the devil, where he whispers into our mind:

“Your God can’t be real, or if he is, he obviously doesn’t care for you, a loving God would not let you suffer like this!”

My own journey into faith was born out of a time of great pain and grief, and I can still remember uttering those words:

“God can’t be real because he would not have let this happen, and if He is, then I don’t want anything to do with Him.”

Fortunately for me, God did not leave me, or abandon me, or give up on me! He could see beyond my words, into my pain, and gently took me on a journey of healing.

Years later I can now look back, and recognise that God was there, watching over me, even though at the time, my grief and anger blinded me to his presence!

Rob Bell an American author and Pastor tells a really good story called Rain, in his Nooma series to make this point.

Rain

When Rob’s son Trent was not even a year old, he decided it would be a great idea to go on a camping holiday. He was so excited, the first family holiday with his son and he wanted it to be perfect. He had this idea that they would get back to nature, camp out in a secluded area, enjoy the peace and quite and just enjoy the beauty that nature, has to offer. It was going to be a time to escape the phone, emails and the general hustle and bustle of life.

Rob’s wife was not quite so excited about the idea, however a compromise was reached! They hired a caravan and headed off to the hills.

On the first morning of the holiday Rob was woken early by the sound of birds singing and the sun streaming through a crack in the curtains. He could see Trent in his cot across the caravan happily wriggling around and smiling to himself. Next to him his wife appeared to be sleeping peacefully. Rob thought to himself, I will let my wife sleep and take Trent for a walk down to the lake and through the woods that were nearby. The route was circular and no more than three miles, so he planned to be back in time to wake his wife with breakfast in bed. Rob wrapped Trent up, placed him the baby harness on his back and set off. As they walked Rob would pause to point out the birds and the sounds to his son. About a mile into the walk it started to cloud over, and the temperature began to drop, but undeterred Rob strode on, he wanted to make it to the lake.

Just as they reached the lake Rob noticed it was starting to rain, enthusiastically he pointed out to Trent the pattern that the raindrops made on the water. As the rain started to get heavier, Rob decided it was time to head home, he took Trent off his back to make sure his jacket was done up and to put his hood up, before heading back to the caravan.

As Rob took great strides to cover the mile and half home the rain got heavier and heavier. Strapped to his back, Trent wanting to see what was going on had knocked down his hood. The rain crashed against the child's head, causing him to wince in pain. Then he began to cry, he didn't like this. All Trent could see was the darkness caused by the clouds, and the cold hard rain that was stinging his tiny head. At first Rob, ignored the crying, intent on getting his child home, and then came the thunder and lighting. This was the first time Trent had been out in a storm, the noise was terrifying and so his cries turned to screams. Rob stopped under a nearby tree released Trent from the harness and cuddled him, reassuring him, it was ok. At first the Fathers reassuring words had little effect on Trent, what he was experiencing far outweighed the soothing words of his father. Rob realising the storm was not going to cease in the near future, strapped his son to his chest and inside his coat. He then cuddled his child and continued taking the large strides towards the safety of the caravan. All the time as he walked, Rob spoke to his son, 'I love you, it will be alright little buddy, it's just a storm, Daddy will protect you'. Of course, they made it back to the caravan and apart from being a little wet no harm was done.

The Storm from Trent's Perspective

I want to look at the story from Trent's perspective. His father, a man that he loved and trusted, promised to take him for a pleasant walk, and it all started so well, the sun, the birds and his dad talking to him. Then it changed, at first it was just a little colder and darker with a few drops of rain. Then the water got heavier, his dad had stopped talking and there were loud bangs surrounding him, Trent did not know what made these bangs, but they did not sound good.

I just wonder whether life is sometimes like that. Everything appears to be going ok; the sun is out the birds are singing and we feel safe. Then something happens to change all that. Maybe there is no warning, or maybe there is and we just don't recognise the warning signs. Would Rob have carried on walking if he realised that the rain was going to be more than a shower? Or had he reached that point of no return? Where he was so far from the safety of the caravan that he knew he may as well continue through the storm. Poor Trent did not understand what was going on, how could his dad let this happen to him, how could his dad desert him at a time like this? We of course know that Rob never left his son; he was actually carrying him through the storm, trying to get him to safety. Rob was actually there all along whispering words of reassurance, but for Trent those words were compromised by the physical reality.

In life when those times of trial come how do we respond. Do we allow ourselves to be overcome by the circumstances, feeling desperate and helpless? Do we believe that God has bailed out, and left us to it? Or maybe we use those circumstances to justify our belief that there is no God!

Ezekiel 34 – The Good Shepherd

Returning briefly to our bible reading this morning, the Israelites must have been beginning to wonder if their God had abandoned them.

From the passage we can see that those God had placed over them, Religious leaders, political leaders, those in authority, were failing in their duties. The reference to fat and lean sheep, suggests that they were abusing their positions, looking after number one!

But all this has not gone unnoticed, and God promises to send a new shepherd, a Good Shepherd who will make amends!

A shepherd who, "will search for the lost and bring back the strays... bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, who will shepherd the flock with justice." **Ezekiel 34 v6**

In chapter 10 of John's gospel, the identity of the Good Shepherd is revealed, as Jesus declares:

"I am the good shepherd." **John 11 v11**

Cling to God

Jesus never promised that there would not be storms in our lives; in fact he knew there would be, so he challenged us as to where to build our foundations! Jesus knew that building our foundations on him, putting our trust in Him is all that we need to do, to weather the storm.

Yet in the west we have so often been lured by the very wolves that Jesus warned us about in Matthew 7. We have come to rely on human wisdom and development, regularly pushing God to the side lines.

Baby Trent did not understand why the storm was happening, and was scared but he clung to his Father who carried him through the storm. We too must learn to have that childlike faith, where we cling to our father in heaven and trust that he knows best. Sometimes our faith in God may appear foolish to those more enlightened ones around us, but we have that promise of Hope, that Christ will never leave us nor forsake us, that ultimately through the gift of salvation that we have in his name, he leads us into green and pleasant pastures.