

Sermon, November 29, 2020
Psalm 80:1-7 & 1 Corinthians 1:3-9
“The Shepherd Comes: The Shepherd Restores”
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I saw this picture the other day, and on the surface, it doesn't seem like it's that big a deal. Unless you are maybe a little OCD. The picture itself isn't that big a deal. Just a picture of a puzzle with a piece yet to be put in. Until you hear the story behind it.

Apparently, it was something insane, like a 5,000 piece puzzle. All one color. It took weeks and weeks, maybe months to put together. If you like to do puzzles, you know what that's like. You have the puzzle laid out and work on it sometimes longer, sometimes for a few minutes, so they take a while. And this one, because of all the pieces and it was one color, took even longer.

But finally, the person reached the finish line. They were about to finish the puzzle when they realized there was a piece missing. It was gone. Maybe it never made it into the box in the first place, or over the months of finishing the puzzle, it got lost, someone moved it, the cat knocked the piece on the floor and it got vacuumed up. What happened doesn't matter much. But can you imagine doing all of that work and having a missing piece. Do you feel as if all that work was done for nothing? Probably. When a piece is missing, we tend not to see what we have completed, we simply notice what we don't have. It's frustrating to have a piece missing from our lives.

Let me say that again. It's frustrating to have a piece missing from our lives. Many years ago when I was in Seminary, I had the privilege of going to a church in Louisville where we got to do a service and meal for a group of men in basic training at Ft. Knox. Only a certain group got to do this. It was a rare privilege to leave the base and have meal and do something different. We would do some entertainment, have a worship service, sit and pray with the men who needed prayer or counsel, and feed them a meal.

As you might imagine, they were all very young. Many of them had never been away from home. They battled being in basic training and homesickness. I always asked them why they decided to join the Army. I wanted to hear their story. I sat with one young man on crutches. I asked him how he got injured. During an exercise in basic training? He said, "Oh no. The day before I was to go to basic, I fell off the back of a pickup truck and broke my leg. I was so afraid they wouldn't accept me or would make me wait that I didn't tell anyone". This guy did the first three maybe or four weeks of basic training with a broken leg, no cast. Finally, he began to fall behind and he had to admit what happened. But he was so close to finishing training, and I think the Army was so impressed that he stayed on, they worked it out so he could finish.

So I asked him, why? Why was this so important to you? He said "all my life, I've felt there was something missing from my life. I've looked for something to make me happy, to help me make sense of my life, but everything I've tried was like a square peg in a round hole, it didn't fit. So I tried the military". Here is someone so desperate to find something that fit into his life he risked his health. We will go to great ends to find that missing piece in our lives, won't we? No one wants to be a puzzle with a missing piece. As we talked though, he said while he liked the Army, he wasn't any happier. He was still looking for something that fit and made him complete. So we began to talk about Jesus.

How far would you go to find the piece missing from your life? Do you know that young man's story? Is it yours? Have you spent a good part of your life actively seeking for the thing that completes your life? Have you spent a good part of your time trying to put square pegs in a round hole, looking for something that will complete your life only to find the piece doesn't fit the puzzle of you or that the piece is missing?

If so, I want to invite you into this Advent season as we prepare to meet the Good Shepherd. Advent, as we have noted, is a time of getting ready, a time of preparing as we celebrate the birth of Jesus The Incarnation of God himself, God made flesh. But this year, what we are going to look specifically at is the paradox that the one who is the Lamb of God is also the Good Shepherd. Are you preparing to receive the Shepherd this Advent Season?

I hope so. I want to draw your attention back to our Old Testament lesson as David writes about the one who is coming, the Shepherd. David says quite clearly that one of the roles of the Shepherd is Restoration. The Shepherd restores. And in His restoration, He makes us complete. The One who is coming is the One

who will restore your life and make you complete. He is the missing piece that makes the puzzle of our life complete, makes sense of our lives, He is that piece the young man searched for. It wasn't people or drugs or alcohol or money or position. None of that fit. It was the Shepherd who longed to come and restore him and make him whole.

The other day, I began to look at Jesus' miracles in a new way. I was struck by how virtually all of Jesus' miracles were about restoration, making something whole again. The lame are able to walk, the deaf hear, the dead live again. The demoniacs are given their mental and spiritual health back again. The multitudes are fed because Jesus wants to restore full and satisfied stomachs to the hungry. Jesus walks on water to restore and make whole the disciples' nerves that are frayed and anxious with fear. Jesus rises from the dead to restore all people who have faith in Him back into a relationship with His Heavenly Father. Little wonder the angels split the sky apart singing at His birth, little wonder they cried out this is Good News. The missing piece, the One who will restore the earth has come, the One the world has groaned for since the dawn of time, has come. We are complete, we are made whole. Jesus says "I have come to bring you peace, in Hebrew wholeness. Not as the world gives wholeness, but as I give it."

Have you allowed Jesus to restore you and make you whole? I think this is where many of us fall short of receiving all God wants to give us. We rarely approach God with a desire for wholeness. There is huge difference between *God help me not get irritated with these people, help me hold my tongue, and God give me a gentle and compassionate heart.* One is taking something away, the other prayer seeks restoration. Do you pray *God, please don't let this person in my family get under my skin this holiday season, or God, restore our relationship that we might be loving and complete?* Do you pray *God, take way this sin of which I am ashamed* or do you pray *God, restore this virtue that I so desperately need? God, help me, I am so dishonest, help me not to lie* or *God, make me a lover of the truth?*

I have to wonder at times if we fail to experience healing from God it's because all we want is for something to be taken away rather than to experience restoration. Maybe because we feel as if having something taken away is easier. But we know restoration takes work. Restoration can cost. Oh, but the joy when we are restored. We celebrate the One who comes to restore us even when restoration is seemingly impossible. My family will watch some of those home restoration shows, and it's amazing to see a house that looks like it's about to fall over and this master craftsman sees not the decay but what it can be restored. Are you allowing the master craftsman, the Good Shepherd, to restore your life?

I pray that this Advent season will be one of the best you have ever experienced. I believe it will be. The Shepherd is coming, the One who has promised to restore your life, put it back together even when you

feel as if it can never be restored. Or that is stolen or the piece will never be found. Let us look to the Shepherd who restores. And makes you whole. Amen.