Don't those words sound familiar? Like Ezekiel's version of the 23rd Psalm. So comforting to hear how God seeks out the lost, provides food and shelter, protects the flock from intruders! How soothing those words must have sounded to the ears of the people of God, now scattered and living in exile! Indeed God's message had made its way through a maze of corrupt political and religious leaders, through the terror of domination by violent and cruel oppressors, through the loss of all that had held them together to touch the people of God with hope. God told them, 'I have not forgotten you, not at all.' Not only did God remember the people, God now set out on a mission to rescue them, to restore them, to bring them home once more.

This, however, was no ordinary search and rescue operation, though I am not sure there is such a thing as ordinary when referring to search and rescue. For all such endeavors, there is always risk and danger. It is physically, emotionally, and mentally laborious and detailed. Think of the images of the days after Katrina when the city of New Orleans was flooded and people trapped on top of overpasses, rooftops, inside homes about to crumble. Of rescuers sifting through the tangled debris after the attack on the Twin Towers. Of firefighters being dropped into wildly raging infernos. All those very noble efforts are not for individual gain but for others, for those people trapped who have no way out, no hope of survival without someone coming in for them. People, not numbers, but people. People and the precious holiness of life are at the center of all search and rescue. And those people who were so lost and alone were now the center of God's search and rescue operation:

I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak,...

1 Ezekiel 34: 13, 15-16a, NRSV.
Imagine that. God, creator of the universe, taking people by the hand, gathering the lost and stray, tending to the hurt, building up the broken and weak, leading them to lush land, feeding them, helping them find much-needed rest. Like the most loving of parents. As one of the creeds in our Reformed tradition states, "Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still."\(^2\)

These are the words we fall back on when we are so lost and alone, when the world has completely overwhelmed us. These are the pictures of comfort that fill us with peace and security when we feel the world against us. This is our hope - we are not and will never be alone. God is here, always here. As God told the people through Ezekiel, "They shall know that I, the Lord their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, says the Lord God. You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, says the Lord God."\(^3\)

Yes, God is with us, and for that we are grateful. Exceedingly grateful. And it is good to express our appreciation as we will this Thursday on the day we have come to call Thanksgiving. Grateful to God, or gods depending on the culture, from the beginning of the time when people's lives began to revolve around agriculture, there has been much rejoicing at harvest time. The crops are in! Thanks be to God! For the Jews of Ezekiel's day (and for Jews now), it is Sukkot, the Feast of Booths. Walled structures, which indicated the fragile dwellings that were home for God's early people and also a reminder that all that we have is temporary, are erected. Special prayers of thanksgiving, rituals of sharing food, music proclaiming God's goodness - along with the booths - all these serve to create a sense of community of gratitude for God's blessings. The celebration of Thanksgiving in this country, as well as Canada and other countries, is also a similar reflection of the intertwining of theological and historical threads. \textit{Erntedankfest} in Germany, \textit{Benichon} in Switzerland, \textit{Lammas} in the Celtic tradition,

\(^2\) A Brief Statement of Faith. The Book of Confessions, Part II of The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., Louisville, KY.

\(^3\) Ezekiel 34: 30-31, NRSV.
Pokrov in Russia, or Crop Over in Barbados - all centered around thanksgiving, gratitude for divine intervention.

To be grateful is good. But God's search and rescue does not end with warm, fuzzy feelings of gratitude. The awareness that what we have and are is not because of ourselves or our own efforts but due to a force greater than ourselves is the way to begin living as people of God. It is not the end result and was never meant to be. Gratitude is not a one-day, or even one-season, expression of thanksgiving but an attitude that spills over and shapes all our living.

This beautifully crafted image of hope and promise found in the midst of the writings of the prophet Ezekiel is surrounded by darker rumblings from God. God warns and judges the leaders, those who had been entrusted with the loving care of the people. They had failed, an epic fail. God said to them:

Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them. 4

All those bountiful harvests that should have been used to support and nurture God's people? The leaders had used them to better themselves, to make their own lives cushier, all at the expense of the most vulnerable, at the expense of the very existence of the entire nation. Instead of reaching out to the world in gratitude, they lavished the fruits of the hard work of others upon themselves. And God's heart was broken for those who could not defend themselves.

Now there's a message for leaders! For our political leaders, corporations, for all those with vast resources - take heed. God is watching. Put the plight of others, and not your own interests, at the forefront. Like a CEO refusing a bonus or raise so that money can go to give lower-paying workers a bit

4 Ezekiel 34: 2b-6 NRSV
more. Or like a government official admitting that the benefits he or she receives is far more generous than most experience and then choosing to work to change the inequity. Happens on occasion, not often, but it does happen. There does need to be accountability for our leaders, and, heaven knows, change is desperately needed, but it is far too easy to let our gaze turn toward their abuse and away from our own responsibilities, our own misuse of God's creation, our own ignoring the needs of others. I had one of those epiphanies this week as I worked with this text while the winds howled and the snow swirled around the house. You know, those moments when God uses a not-so-subtle sledge hammer to get your attention? That became this text for me. We are the people of God. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "In life and in death we belong to God." God has brought us to safety in green pastures, but we are not here simply to say 'thank you, thank you' and then skip out to run and play in those verdant fields, kicking up our heels in glee over what we now have. Oh, we can - and should - revel in God's beautiful creation. Appreciate it, cherish it, love it, but don't stop there.

Yes, we are the people of God, the sheep of God's pasture, and that makes us, each one of us and us as the Church, leaders. We've each individually and collectively been given so much. So we don't have our own Lear jet ready to take us to exotic vacations on the other side of the world. But we have much, we have so much. I am not talking about wealth or possessions or particular talents or anything of that ilk. We have something far beyond all that - we have the love of God in Jesus Christ, a love that we are to share freely and generously with the world. We are leaders in that we are to live and love as God has called us to do - in the myriad ways of God's own justice, grace, and peace. We are the ones who are to seek the weak, the sick, the broken, the strays. We are to protect them, cherish them, call them our own, love them as the most precious things in the world because that is what God has done for us. No, life is not about us and what we have acquired and accomplished. That was something those leaders of Ezekiel's time had forgotten. That is something that has been forgotten by many in

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5 Romans 14: 8 NRSV
authority. This precious gift of life so lovingly resting within each of us is about the ones who have no voice, who cannot fend for themselves, the ones who need God. Certainly, we are also in need of God and God's grace. But as those who claim to follow God, we know that God is here. We know that together we can hold on to one another and look for God's hope together. We know that, with God, somehow, some way, we will get through it all. We can never, ever, forget, though, that we are here, not merely for ourselves, but for the world.

The gratitude we feel when we stand in awe of God and God's graciousness pulls us out of ourselves and points outward to the world with all its messiness and brokenness. Because, my friends, that is where God calls us - out there. Gratitude, true gratitude that is other-centered, radiates out and transforms the world. "Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend."6 The Thanksgiving holiday is filled with rich tradition and meaning. So as we go to celebrate with our friends and families this week, let us keep that in mind. Don't live with gratitude locked deep inside. Live as the people of God, ones God has sought out and rescued, ones who have received much, and ones now being sent out to share God's own love, grace, and justice with the world. Amen.

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