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“What is your opinion?” (Matt 18:12)

Isaiah 40:1-11; Matthew 18: 12-14

Today’s first reading from Isaiah begins with “Comfort, give comfort to my people,” and ends with “Like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs.” The Gospel links this scene with Jesus’ parable of the “Lost Sheep.” A merciful God will not abandon a single stray in the wilderness but will go find it and carry it home with joy.

The short parable consists of two questions put to the disciples. Jesus asks them, “What is your opinion? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them goes astray, will he not leave the ninety-nine in the hills and go in search of the stray?” In a world familiar with sheep and shepherds, Jesus tells a story that defies human logic and stretches the limits of our images of God. The honest answer to the questions is that none of us would leave ninety-nine sheep unguarded to go looking for a stray?

God’s love is unconditional, limitless and radical. Other parables stretch our small notions of God. What is your opinion? Which of you would cast three-quarters if the precious seed grain on the path, the rocks, among brambles, in hopes of getting some of it into good soil? Which of you would turn the other cheek, give away your shirt as well as your coat, love your enemy and good do to those who hurt you?

As we approach Christmas, we are being prepared for an outpouring of love, and extravagance of gifts we cannot earn, deserve or purchase with our virtues and sacrifices. A chance at life would have been enough, but we are being offered life everlasting. By sharing our human flesh, including its suffering and burdens, Jesus opens the way for us to a divine destiny, life with God.

How are we to respond to this kind of love? There is nothing we can return to God except to imitate the divine mercy Jesus demonstrated by risking his life in an unforgiving and violent world. How vulnerable we become in the culture that competes for everything and leaves the disadvantaged behind as losers in a winner-take-all game of survival of the fittest.

The Christmas story only makes sense if love is stronger than fear and if compassion is deeper than indifference. The lost sheep sets the tone for the arrival of newborn child and his homeless family fleeing official terror. Yet this is how God slipped into the world and how we were saved from sin and death. What an extravagant mystery

this is, so worth exploring and risking in this holy season.

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