

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**

Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on September 11, 2016 (Proper 19, Year C)

When I was in high school, a small group of us would often gather on the roof of my friend Matt's apartment building in Brooklyn. I'm *pretty* sure we were allowed up there, but to gain access we had to travel up a sketchy, poorly-lit staircase that led to an old, battered door. A few furtive glances to make sure no one was looking, you know just in case, and suddenly we had again attained access to our urban refuge. Nothing illicit went on up there, though we did haul up a hibachi at one point.

But what was so striking about this special retreat was the view. The building, you see, was on the last street in Brooklyn Heights. It overlooked the Brooklyn Bridge and the East River and it offered a panoramic view of lower Manhattan. You could see the Statue of Liberty, South Street Seaport, and, most prominently, the twin towers of the World Trade Center. I will always cherish the memories of being up on that rooftop, laughing with good friends and discussing life, as the sun set over that stunning skyline.

I've been thinking about that view and reflecting on the gift of perspective this week. Because today is a funny mixture of joy and anticipation and excitement as we return to the fall routine and embrace what we call Homecoming Sunday. It is such a joy to reconnect with familiar faces and welcome new ones; to hear the full choir return in all its musical glory; soon we'll watch the children march in from Sunday School — one of the great highlights of Sunday morning at St. John's. But given that this is the 15th anniversary of 9/11, it's also tinged with a nagging sense of despair that exists just below the surface, at least for many of us.

Like a skyline, our perspective changes over time. Buildings are erected and razed, morning breaks and the sun sets. The view changes sometimes subtly, sometimes dramatically. A skyline indelibly linked to the prosperity and confidence of a nation morphs into a symbol of humanity and vulnerability.

The story of the golden calf from Exodus reminds us just how easy it is to run after idols and false gods. You remember the story — Moses had gone up Mt. Sinai to get the 10 Commandments and he was gone for a pretty long time, the ubiquitous “40 days and 40 nights.” Out of fear that he wouldn't return and that they'd be abandoned in the wilderness, the Israelites demanded that Aaron make for them a calf of gold to worship in place of God.

It's a familiar human sin; the temptation is so strong to put our faith in things that are fleeting. Like money or the allure of success or tall buildings; seemingly impenetrable symbols of strength and stability. And that can work for awhile. At least until it suddenly doesn't; and our perspective changes once again.

Homecoming Sunday helps us to keep our lives in perspective. It helps us to be reminded that our faith is what matters and that everything else will pass away. Because by being here this

morning and committing yourself to your faith in a tangible way, you are playing an active role in the narrative of perspective. You are claiming faith as an integral piece of your perspective on life. You are opening yourself to the counter narrative of love and hope in a sinful, broken, and overcommitted world. And while *I* commend you for it, God *loves* you for being here, for answering the divine call, and for seeking to follow Jesus in ever deepening ways.

Now, I'm not unaware that we hear the Parable of the Lost Sheep on Homecoming Sunday. I didn't plan it this way, that's just how the three-year lectionary cycle of readings lined up. If you haven't been to church for awhile you may think Jesus is speaking directly to you; that you alone are the single sheep that has strayed. You're not. And if you've been coming all summer, you may feel like one of the 99. You haven't wandered away, you've endured those July and August sweat-fests, you've been faithful in your attendance, you've received spiritual nourishment, and that's great. But in some ways today, as the name implies, today is a time to welcome *home* those who may have strayed just a bit. We're not changing the name from Homecoming Sunday to Lost Sheep Sunday — bad marketing. But we are delighted to welcome those who haven't been here in a while and it's great to get everything cranked up again.

Yet in a very real sense, wherever we've been this summer, whether here or elsewhere or nowhere on Sunday mornings, we are all that single lost sheep. There's a vulnerability that comes from acknowledging that we, too, are the lost sheep. And this has absolutely nothing to do with church attendance. We all fall away, we all lose our way, we all go astray. That's the nature of humanity's relationship with God — the story of the Israelites and the golden calf is *our* story. And it's why Jesus calls after us again and again. Like that lost sheep of the parable, Jesus actively comes searching for us. He doesn't just say, "Whatever. I have 99 other sheep." Which, practically speaking, would have been the much more prudent course. It's risky to go after the one when you have 99 others to tend to. But we worship a risk-taking Lord. One who never writes us off but rather pencils us into his very heart and never, ever lets us go.

That's the miracle of faith: that God in Christ yearns deeply for you. You! Whoever you are, whatever you have done or failed to do, Jesus yearns for you and seeks after you like the Good Shepherd who goes to the ends of the earth to track down his single lost sheep.

Thinking about that view from the rooftop of my friend's place in Brooklyn, I realized that on that day 15 years ago, a certain perspective had been irrevocably altered; partly because a dominating piece of the skyline had fallen, but mostly because our sense of invincibility had been toppled along with it. What we see with our own eyes is not the full extent of reality. So often, what we hold up as idols of strength and stability are fleeting. And we are reminded that God is the only permanent fixture of our lives; that we can rely on nothing we build with our own hands or create out of our own sense of self. Everything that is earthly will pass away. Everything. No matter how tall or how wide, no matter the cost or the beauty. And what remains is our relationship with God, our relationship with the eternal ruler of all creation. That is the bedrock upon which all else stands. And I am delighted you are here to recapture and recommit to the divine perspective.