

As you heard earlier — and as you perhaps could have guessed this morning based on the decorations that remain — this past week, we held our community Vacation Bible School here at Evergreen.

Vacation Bible School is one of my favorite weeks of the year. It is exhilarating, adventurous, full of laughter and joy, and, of course: exhausting for the countless adults who work hard to make it happen.

Best of all, though, I love VBS because our kids love it. Because our kids love coming together to sing songs about Jesus, to learn stories about Jesus, and to find ways to share Jesus with others.

This year, one of the activities we did every night was an invitation for them to look for God sightings throughout the week, be it here at VBS, or elsewhere. Continuing with our “Shipwrecked” theme, anyone who had a “God Sighting” could write down where they have seen God on a sticker, and then use that sticker to “patch” our sail up here. If you haven’t yet, I invite you to take some time after worship to read through some of these. While they are summaries of the God sightings in our midst, I hope they’ll give you even a snippet of insight as to how God is truly working in and through these children’s lives.

For example: on the first night, I was asked to share a God sighting. As you know, we share God sightings here in worship regularly, and so I love a good challenge to look for and share God sightings. I wondered when God might surprise me... but the truth is, God it happened in the first 10 minutes we were gathered together.

It was opening worship on the first night. I was standing in the back, and noticed a little girl standing alone, looking sad, and clearly unsure whether she even wanted to be there. I walked up next to her and tried to engage her. I tried dancing and singing and all the usual things to get her to join in: but she *wasn't* having it. After less than a minute of my failed attempts, I saw a small hand come from behind us.

The little girl behind us reached up and tapped her on the shoulder. “Do you need a friend?” she asked.

There was a sad, teary-eyed head nod that went with her quiet, “yes.”

and just like that: I was all but pushed out of the way, and the girl behind me took my spot as they sang, danced, and played together.

all I could think, was: YES. THIS, is what the kingdom looks like.

It looks like people coming together. Strangers seeing one another’s needs and stepping up to meet them.

It looks like confidence that in Jesus, we are all friends, and all equals, and all loved.

It looks like knowing that no matter who we are, who we know, what we have done, or what we have left undone: we are beloved, and worthy, and welcome.

These lessons were not only evident in this moment of our opening worship at Vacation Bible School: they were open all throughout it. and they were explicitly evident in our nightly lessons, too, which sought to remind the children of what we would all do well to remember, to celebrate, and to embrace more often: that Jesus longs to rescue you — to walk alongside you and to carry your burdens and to set you free from that which holds you back. Jesus longs to rescue you from *all of this* — and more.

The themes of each of our nights are outlined in the Call To Worship we said together earlier this morning. Won't you say them again with me? **[Slides]**

Leader: When we are lonely:

Jesus Rescues!

Leader: When we worry:

All: Jesus Rescues!

Leader: When we struggle:

All: Jesus Rescues!

Leader: When we're powerless:

All: Jesus Rescues!

Jesus rescues.

One of my big take-aways of the week, came from an intentional choice of language.

Usually, I find comfort and hope in the Good News that Jesus is *with us* when we go through these things. Whether we are lonely, or burdened with worries and struggles, or feeling powerless... God is with us.

That's great news, isn't it?

and yet this week, our message takes it one step further. Jesus isn't just *with you*, it tells us... Jesus wants to *rescue you!* To free you from that which is holding you back: and to rescue you from it, in order to live life freely and joyfully!

Each evening, our lessons focused on times in our lives — and times in Scripture — when people feel burdened in these ways, and how we can trust in Jesus to overcome that. To give over our fears and worries and struggles to Jesus.

Today, I chose yet another Bible story that I believe ties many of these together well, for it reminds us that sometimes, we aren't just one of these things. In our story we heard today from Luke 15, the main character feels *all* of these things — some of them, at the same time.

At first, these burdens don't take the expected form. Instead, they are self-inflicted, as his own sin of selfishness and caring only about himself puts him there. He feels alone in his desires and understandings of the world... he worries about what that might bring. He struggles with being respectful and minding the ancient — and present — tradition of living in community and helping one another out. Instead, he wanted his inheritance from his father *now*. He essentially said he would rather his father be dead, for it would mean he could have the property he felt was owed to him.

The sins and shortcomings of this young man were many. We could go on and on with the ways they ran deep until he eventually squandered off everything he had, and everyone who loved him.

Except, of course: that he only *felt* he had. The truth is: Jesus was with him all along. Even as he did wrong, Jesus longed for him to turn back. To repent. To make things right. To do so, would be to be *rescued* from this terrible life he had stepped into.

It didn't guarantee a rescue that meant everything would be great and perfect again, of course. But it *would* mean he could be sure he wasn't alone. He could find space for forgiveness, starting with forgiveness of himself. and it meant that he could start to make *good* decisions, albeit hard ones... and those decisions had potential for new beginnings.

It was only upon reaching his deepest, darkest bottom... what we call "rock bottom"... that the son began to realize, maybe turning back was his best choice. He decided to swallow his pride, and to humbly ask for forgiveness. Even amidst certainty his life wouldn't be perfect or grand, he knew to ask for forgiveness and to repent of what he had done wrong, was his best chance of being rescued from his lonely, life of suffering. and so: he went.

Meanwhile: back at the farm, he had no idea that his father had never stopped loving him.

Have you ever been there: so lost and alone that you're *sure* no one could forgive you, or embrace you, or love you?

Like this lost son: you, too, are wrong.

For you are loved — Beyond measure.

Or to quote our theme song for the week...

We know that God holds your future, all your dreams.

So [let us hold] on: [God]'ll never let go of [you]

God will never let go of you.

This is so hard for us to comprehend when we're feeling lost or alone, isn't it? Yet most of us have been on the other side, too, haven't we?

// It was 5 years ago, but I'll never forget the tone of my mother's voice when she called to tell me that my nephew, her only grandchild at the time, had gone missing.

By the time I got this phone call, he had been found, but she was no less shaken. Quintin was all of 3 years old, and he loves to visit his grandma and grandpa. On this particular morning, she got up early and out of habit, poked her head in the room where he was sleeping to check on him.

Only he wasn't there.

Can you imagine that feeling of panic?

A few things to know about Quintin: he loves to be outside and *really* loves to play in water... and my parents live on a lake. Frantically, she searched the house, even the yard, looking for him. She thought about how she didn't think he could open the door to the outside by himself, but he's getting bigger every day and that could have changed.

Panic washed over her as she imagined what she was going to say when she called my sister to say she couldn't find him.

He wasn't quite 3 yet: how far could he have gone?

The search that took a full 20 minutes that felt like 3 days. Eventually, she moved to sit with the phone on the couch, tears running down her cheeks as she began to dial my sister's number. She picked up a blanket to sit down, only then to discover that her favorite toddler in the world was curled up in a ball under them.

What she had lost, had been found. She couldn't even be mad about him having been up and into things in the middle of the night because all anyone could think about was how great a celebration they would have for knowing he was ok.

Those 20 minutes changed their lives. Changed their perspective on everything.

That which was lost, had been found. The greatest of all gifts, is a life of someone we love, drawing near to us.

// This week, surrounded by children who came to be reminded that they are loved, that Jesus is with them, and that Jesus will *rescue* them — I kept thinking about this story.

I thought about it as I watched this lighthouse flash around the sanctuary. (*hook it up*)

I watched the light go round and 'round the room... and I thought of it as representative of Jesus, and how very much God loves us — and looks for us — every moment, of every day.

Sometimes, God knows, we will wander away. But even when *we* turn away... God has never stopped searching for us. Loving us. Looking for ways to support and encourage and *rescue* us. Rescue — *you*.

Sometimes, we feel all alone. So deep in the darkness that the light can't find us. So deep in the darkness of loneliness or fear, we're sure we can't be rescued.

But that, friends: that... is when Jesus shows up for us in unexpected ways. Shows up in those life-changing ways we're all capable of, but too often think ourselves unworthy of. Things like... the simple act of tapping a stranger on the shoulder and asking, "Do you need a friend?"

Jesus, is that friend longing to be at our side.

and as you look around this room today: I hope you'll be reminded that today, as new members joined and took membership vows for the first time, many of the rest of us renewed our commitments. Our commitments — to be by your side.

To be among those who will hold you up, when you are lonely. Who will pray with you, when you are worried, or struggling, or feeling powerless or afraid.

Who will be here, each and every week, that you may always know: that you, are not alone.

For Jesus, is by your side. and so, too, will we be: if you'll let us.

May it be so.

At this time, as I invite our ushers to collect our tithes and offerings, I invite you to reflect on the ways God is with *you*, as we play our VBS theme song,

“Never Let Go Of Me”