



Theme: The Ark – God and the Animals
“Animal Waywardness”

Jeff Huber, August 29-30, 2026, at Summit Church, Durango

Weekly Memory Verse:

¹⁶ I will search for my lost ones who strayed away, and I will bring them safely home again. I will bandage the injured and strengthen the weak. But I will destroy those who are fat and powerful. I will feed them, yes—feed them justice! – Ezekiel 34:16

SLIDE Animal Waywardness

Today we begin a new series of sermons on God and the animals that we're calling, "The Ark." We are hoping to have some fun the next 4 weeks thinking about how we see **God reflected in the animals that we find in creation**, including humans. This is a major theme in the scriptures and sometimes we miss it and we forget how **important animals are to not only our existence** but to the purpose of creation. Last week I encouraged you to remember that God loves variety and that is why there are so many kinds of animals and humans in the world and that we need each other. We see evident in the creation story how it is that God made humans to be stewards of God's creation and the

animal Kingdom AND we humans need the animal Kingdom and God's creation to survive.

We remembered that we find animals named in many places in the Bible, including Jesus telling us in his most famous sermon in Matthew 6 that we should look at the birds. I encouraged you this last week to spend some time looking up at the birds and so I thought I'd better do the same thing. On Thursday night I met a friend who I have known since college and is now a pastor in Delta, Colorado along with her son and his wife while they were camping looking over Molas Lake. We were able to have a campfire because they had gotten so much rain up in the high country and we had dinner and we're waiting for the lunar eclipse with Ben's amazing telescope which allowed us to see up close things that are very far away and you can attach your phone and take pictures.

GRAPHIC Molas Lake 1

GRAPHIC Molas Lake 2

As the sun was setting, we saw these beautiful images, and we saw an amazing bald eagle land in a tree not far from us which we could see up close using this incredible telescope.

GRAPHIC Bald Eagle 1

GRAPHIC Bald Eagle 2

GRAPHIC Bald Eagle 3

As the sun finally set, the moon began to rise, and we saw this amazing scene. Ben was able to take several photos of the lunar eclipse which I thought you might enjoy.

GRAPHIC Molas Lake 3

GRAPHICS Moon 1 THROUGH 6

I loved seeing all these images and being reminded of how small

we are and how big the earth is and the moon and the sun. I loved being able to see the detail in the moon and in the eagle. As I was looking at the eagle and the moon pictures this week, I was reminded of several things that I wanted to talk about this week when it comes to God's Kingdom and the animals. The eagle seemed to be clearly looking around for something it the moon lit up the night until the eclipse began and then things got very dark. Let me start by asking you a question.

SLIDE Have you ever felt lost or in the dark?

This theme is one we find in the scriptures when it comes to the animals that we read about. There are multiple stories about animals being lost, especially sheep. We find this true in our community as people lose pets and then place posters around like these, I found in the window at Aspen Tree Animal Caring just down the road from us.

GRAPHIC Lost Pets

It's heartbreaking when we lose a pet and that's a powerful image because I believe God feels the same way about us. This week I found myself thinking about all the dogs that we have adopted over the years, many of whom were abandoned and some of whom got lost when they belonged to us. When we were able to move into a home in Denver while serving my last church, we decided to get a dog again after moving from a small apartment. He is the dog we had when we arrived was Mikah, a 90-pound Alaskan malamute and saluki mix. Like many of you, he was a dog that was a character and had character. I have used him in stories before and particularly his propensity to get lost. This is a picture of him on our first hike up to Spud Lake in the fall as the colors were changing.

GRAPHIC Mikah Durango 2002

GRAPHIC Mikah in Wheat Ridge Yard 1999

This photo is from just after we adopted him from the Humane Society when we lived in Denver. He had this habit of being able to sneak out of the smallest of openings in a window or door. Getting over that fence you see in this photo was a breeze for him. Several times I had to go and get him from pound after he had escaped. It was especially scary in a big city like Denver, and it really is amazing we always found him. Eventually I built a 6-foot fence, but even then, he poked a hole in the bottom so he could look out!

GRAPHIC Mikah at Gate

Have you ever lost a pet or a dog or something important and then you find your heart racing a bit until you find it? Again, I think these experiences teach us much about the heart of God. I will never forget a young boy coming up to me after a service many years ago with tears in his eyes and asking if I would pray for his turtle which had escaped from his yard and they were looking for. The turtle's name was Rufus, and I still remember the in the young boy's heart as he was worried it would get squashed by a car or be eaten by a predator. I didn't have the heart to ask him how it's possible to lose a turtle because they don't move very quickly, and the good news was they did find Rufus the next day. He made his mother call me so that I could take him off the prayer list.

We find this image repeatedly in the scriptures as one of the main animals talked about is sheep. I have done several sermons on the idea of sheep and learned much about them over the years as a pastor since the word pastor means “shepherd” and the idea is that my job is to care for the flock. Don't take it personally, but I did learn through my research and spending time with farmers who raised sheep that they are sometimes a bit spacey. They typically get lost because they nibble their way lost by wandering from space to space without really looking up and checking for danger. Sheep also have other characteristics that

you might find helpful to know.

GRAPHIC Sheep

- **Flocking Instinct:** Highly social animals that prefer to stay close to a group for safety, experiencing distress when isolated.
- **Cognitive Skills:** Capable of recognizing up to 50 individual sheep faces and human faces, retaining these memories for up to two years. Scientists have shown that they have specialized areas in the brain for face recognition, much like humans. That's better than many of us humans!
- **Emotional Complexity:** Capable of experiencing diverse emotional states like happiness, fear, boredom, and despair.
- **Self-Medication:** Able to ingest specific non-nutritive plants to treat or prevent certain ailments.
- **Sheep communicate.** Despite the belief that animals can't speak, sheep (and other animals) do, in fact, communicate vocally. They use different sounds to express different emotions and recognize emotions through facial expressions. They cry out when in pain, and — like humans — have an increase in cortisol (the stress hormone) during difficult, frightening or painful situations.
- **Sheep are doting mothers.** They form strong bonds with their lambs and can recognize the sound of their individual calls when they wander away.

All of these are reasons why we are compared to sheep often in the scriptures. One of those places we find is in what we call the major prophets in your Old Testament, also known as the Hebrew Bible. The prophetic books are written when the people of Israel have been taken off as slaves both to Assyria and Babylon. While in captivity, the prophets took it upon themselves to remind people of who they are and that they belong to God. They wrote books to bring people hope and to encourage them during times when they were lost or when life

felt dark. Ezekiel 34 is a great example of this image that is used of sheep to encourage people, and I think can still be powerful today.

BIBLE

¹¹ “For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search and find my sheep. ¹² I will be like a shepherd looking for his scattered flock. I will find my sheep and rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on that dark and cloudy day. ¹³ I will bring them back home to their own land of Israel from among the peoples and nations. I will feed them on the mountains of Israel and by the rivers and in all the places where people live. ¹⁴ Yes, I will give them good pastureland on the high hills of Israel. There they will lie down in pleasant places and feed in the lush pastures of the hills. ¹⁵ I myself will tend my sheep and give them a place to lie down in peace, says the Sovereign Lord. ¹⁶ I will search for my lost ones who strayed away, and I will bring them safely home again. I will bandage the injured and strengthen the weak. But I will destroy those who are fat and powerful. I will feed them, yes—feed them justice!

There is this powerful idea in this passage and in many others, reminding us that God comes looking for us when we are lost. Not only that, but God is the one who has the ultimate raw when it comes to justice and that when people are being mistreated, even though it might not feel like justice happens in this life, eventually the fat and powerful who mistreat others we'll be fed justice by a God that cares for the least and the last and the lost. We can take heart when we feel like we are struggling in life or we have wandered away from our faith or we feel isolated because of the world in which we live.

SLIDE God comes looking for us when we are lost.

I love these powerful images that we find in Ezekiel 34 which talk about God coming to rescue when it is dark and cloudy and we find

ourselves far away from a place of safety. We are meant to feel a sense of peace when we think about being by the rivers and having good pasture and places where we can lie down and take a breath. What's most important I think about these scriptures is that God says he will come himself and we'll go looking for us. He says he will search for his lost ones who have strayed away and bring them safely home. He will bandage those who are injured and strengthen the weak.

I think it's helpful for me to remember that in this image there is a sense of dependency. We need to be willing to trust in God and recognize that we can't always do things on our own. I think one of the reasons we find ourselves lost in life is because we think we can do everything without other people and without God. We are encouraged to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and to take charge of our life and to be in control. The truth is that sheep are not in control. They need a shepherd to both guide them and protect them in life. The key is to stay close to the shepherd because that is where we find security and safety and food that will truly satisfy our aching hearts.

I was visiting recently with someone who was struggling with an addiction, and we talked about those first few steps of the 12-step program where we must admit that we are powerless over this thing that has happened to us, especially in addiction. Too often we try to fight fire with fire and that doesn't work. We need to fight fire with water and other materials which will put fire out when they start in our lives and that means inviting God in to do what we can't do for ourselves. When we are willing to turn our lives over to God is when we can finally discover that we are no longer lost because there is a piece inside of us that was made by God because we are wired to be in relationship with God and when we don't feel that relationship and stay connected to it, we easily get lost.

SLIDE Discipled by Algorithm

This idea of nibbling our way lost is a powerful one in today's world because it happens for many of us on our phones or while we are scrolling on our computer. We look at one thing and then another and then another and pretty soon the algorithm takes over and it keeps taking us farther and farther away from the thing that will bring life, which is a relationship with God. We easily get convinced that we should have this thing or that thing or we should envy this person or their life and we end up with that FOMO, fear of missing out. Pretty soon we are depressed and anxious because we feel like we don't have what we really need to survive, yet God knows what we need and it is simply to rest in that God that longs to bring us peace.

I found myself thinking about our current dog Jack who we adopted from the Humane Society in Pagosa Springs about 10 years ago. We were his third strike meaning that if it didn't work with us then he was going to be probably euthanized. He had been adopted out of a puppy box at the grocery store by someone who wanted to make him into a therapy dog but he's part border collie and that's just not going to work for that breed. He had too much energy and he was a problem in terms of knocking over their kids and he became very aggressive on a leash. He was turned into the Humane Society and then adopted by someone who didn't know how to deal with his aggressiveness on leash. We had to work with him for many months and we had to deal with his behavior which was rather naughty at times.

I shared this picture with you about 10 years ago because his main habit was getting up on our counter and pulling food off which included the butter. Here is Jack with the butter dish in front of him and he literally acted like it was no big deal and it was what he was supposed to do. The problem is that butter goes right through dogs and so then we had all kinds of other issues to deal with around the house. It was not pleasant to clean up after Jack when he had gotten in the butter.

GRAPHIC Jack with Butter Dish

GRAPHIC Jack

One of my favorite pictures of Jack is him in the snow because we think he is also part Burmese mountain dog. He loves the snow and he's turned into a great dog as long as he gets good exercise. We used a great dog trainer named Liz who goes to our church and she helped us with him when it comes to being aggressive on a leash and over time I was able to bring him to church on Christmas Eve a couple of years ago and use him as a sermon illustration. What I know is that he was not always easy and if we had simply tried to take the easy route we probably may have returned him and then who knows what would have happened to that cute face.

What I really love about Jack now is that the minute we get home he is looking for us. He wiggles all over and almost knocks us down because he wants us to know that he has found us and that he is glad we're home. Sometimes when he is off leash on a walk and he's gone for a while we get a bit worried but he always comes running back and when he gets to us he makes sure that we know that he is back. Jack is back and it's an awesome thing and I find myself thinking about God and how God longs to meet us and greet us when we've gotten far away. He comes after us looking for us and I think that's a powerful idea that we can learn from the animal Kingdom.

GRAPHIC Smoky Joe

You might have other kinds of pets which enjoy you coming home or you may have cats which could care less, but I think they really do. My wife is allergic to cats, but we did have one for a while that was always waiting for us when we got home. Her name was Smokey Joe, and she was awesome and she was more of a house cat I didn't like being very far away from us. We had a couple of times when Smokey Joe got lost after we moved to a new house, but she always managed

to find her way home for which we were grateful.

Jesus uses this image of sheep being lost and how they need a shepherd in Luke 15.

BIBLE

1 Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. ² This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!

³ So Jesus told them this story: ⁴ “If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won’t he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. ⁶ When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’ ⁷ In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven’t strayed away!

This beautiful story begins with Jesus meeting and eating with those who felt far away from God. They often were in dark places. I remind you that the word sin is about being separated from God and from others and those who are tax collectors and other notorious sinners were the ones that found the teachings of Jesus compelling because he used images like lost sheep. He also talked in this chapter about lost coins and then he talks about a lost boy who goes off and experiences painful things in the world before finally returning home to his father. But the father is waiting patiently and longing for the boy to return. We call it the parable of the prodigal son, but it can apply to both men and women and boys and girls.

There is another powerful idea in these stories of lost animals that

I hope we won't forget and I found myself thinking about my first dog I got as an adult from the Humane Society in Boulder. My final year in college I had three roommates and we all decided to get a pet. We were going to get a cat but the only cat they had at the time was a blue point Siamese who was psychotic and bit one of my roommates on the head. We unfortunately had to return the cat and while I was walking through the dog section I came across a golden retriever which had a band edge on its head and also one wrapped around its midsection. She had been beaten by her previous owner because she chewed on things to which I felt like saying, "Doesn't every golden retriever chew on things for the first two years?"

I asked about adopting her and they told us it would take two weeks until she was fully healed and so we came back and we spent time with her and we fell in love with this beautiful dark red golden retriever. She ended up being an amazing dog that traveled with me from Colorado to California and then to Iowa and back to Colorado. My wife met Tess before she met me and I'm pretty sure that she only went out with me because I had a great dog. I was working with college students at Iowa State University and Tess would hang out with students who were lonely and homesick and she would comfort them by sitting down next to them and putting her head on their lap.

GRAPHIC Tess

I found it interesting that we rescued Tess but then she became a rescue animal and a companion animal before that was popular for students and others. I would have students show up at my door and want to walk Tess so she became the unofficial mascot of our college ministry. I think about her life of being abused and mistreated and then having to spend several months in a shelter recuperating and healing from her wounds until I showed up only because it didn't work out to adopt a cat.

I found myself thinking about the dark places that we end up sometimes in our lives. I visited this week with several young adults who were wrestling with the death of a friend who had ended up in a dark place and no one knew. It happens for all of us where we get into a place where we can't even see outside of the walls that we sometimes create. We feel we aren't living up to expectations or we feel pressure to succeed or to look a certain way based on everything that we watch and view online. We nibble our way lost and then we end up in a cave and sometimes that cave has a predator that wants to destroy us. Here is the powerful idea from these images and metaphors about sheep being lost and how God cares for them and will come and look for them. God doesn't ever promise that life will be easy or that everything will go our way, but God does promise to be with us and to be the ultimate source of rescue from the darkness.

SLIDE God rescues us from the darkness.

Those Israelites that Ezekiel was writing to who were slaves and captives being forced into exile far away from their homes were given a promise that God was with them in those moments. I have to remind you as your pastor that we don't always get to choose what happens to us. We can be mistreated like my dog Tess by people that are supposed to care for us. We can experience disease or illness that we weren't expecting and that can come upon us slowly or quickly. We can lose financial security or a job sometimes by no fault of our own but just because somebody is downsizing.

What we can do in those moments is choose how to respond. We can choose to remember that we have a God who made us to love us and is searching for us when we feel like we're in the darkness or we are alone. We can hold on to hope by reading these scriptures in Ezekiel and in Luke reminding us that God cares for the lost sheep who are in danger and longs to offer green pastures and a sense of peace

even amid storms. We can learn to respond by recognizing that sometimes getting found and getting out of the darkness entails serving others to help them in the darkness.

We say in this church we want to be the presence of Jesus Christ in the world and if we want to do that then we must remember that we are called to be shepherds. It's not just my job as the pastor but it's all our jobs to be in ministry and to care for those who are the least and the last and the lost. We are invited to meet people in those places.

SLIDE We are called to look for those lost in the darkness.

Our church sponsors a missionary Catherine Parker who serves in Nepal and especially provides ministry to women and young girls who need education. She has been to our church before and she currently is here in the United States meeting with churches that support her ministry and in the middle of that there has been this massive disaster where **a catastrophic glacial collapse and rock landslide triggered massive, fast-moving flash floods along the Nepal-China border region, killing at least 469 people and leaving more than 1,300 missing.**

GRAPHIC Nepal 1

GRAPHIC Nepal 2

GRAPHIC Nepal Recovery 2026

We have missionaries like Katherine serving in these communities now trying to help with recovery and if any of us want to make a gift to that we can do so through our church and 100% will go to those recovery efforts because we have one of the largest relief organizations in the world, the United Methodist committee on relief. They are already on the ground providing water and clean-up crews. Those working on recovery do so because we are called to look for those lost in the darkness of floods and those who feel like no one sees them or their pain and suffering.

We had a team return from Africa this summer which had several families and youth that were part of that team. They worked with widows and orphans who often are left with nothing when the men and their family die of the AIDS pandemic. Often, the man's family will take all of the resources and leave the women and children with nothing. I wanted to share with you a bit of what that team did because we did that together as they went as part of this church and they took funds that you provided for those who felt lost and in the darkness.

VIDEO Restoring Hope WITH SUB-TITLES

My prayer today for each of us is that we might remember that we have a God who is always looking for us and longing to meet us in the darkest of places. We are not alone and we are meant to be the presence of Jesus Christ for friends and family and others halfway around the world who need to know the truth of these stories about animals who get lost. God gives us these stories for a reason, so we can know the heart of God and we can reflect that heart in the world. We are meant to receive that gift and sometimes it's as simple as reading the stories which you will get to do this week. Once we receive that gift and we say yes to God, we then are filled with the truth that we are meant to take that message to those who are lost and in darkness.

Let's close with the words from our memory verse this week from the prophet Ezekiel.

BIBLE

¹⁶ I will search for my lost ones who strayed away, and I will bring them safely home again. I will bandage the injured and strengthen the weak. But I will destroy those who are fat and powerful. I will feed them, yes — feed them justice! — Ezekiel 34:16

Let's pray.

SLIDE Prayer

August 29-30 Order

1. Countdown
2. Ryan welcomes people, inviting them to stand in body or spirit.
3. Song – “Holy Spirit Come”
4. Song – “Build My Life”
5. Jeff welcomes and shares:
 - A. QR Code
 - B. Connect Card and Spotify List
 - C. Invites people to greet each other
6. Announcement Video
7. Sermon Video Intro
8. Sermon
9. Med Moments
10. Offering (Nepal and Africa)
11. Song – “The House of the Lord”
12. Prayer and Lord’s Prayer
13. Care Ministers
14. The Bridge
15. Closing Prayer