

“Lost and Found”
Luke 15:1-10

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Everyone has a story of being lost. Sometimes they are family stories that are told with nervous laughter years later, about young children who wandered away in shopping centers and a frantic parental search that last three minutes, twenty minutes, an hour. Sometimes they are family stories that are not talked about, of relationships that were lost in a rift that could not be bound back together. Sometimes our stories of being lost are all our own - the people around us might know the beginning of the story - the major life event or loss that began that led us into an unknown wilderness - but we might keep the resulting struggle to find our way back to healing to ourselves, not able to find the words or the vulnerability to share with the people around us.

Sometimes that feeling of being lost comes from metaphorical woods and sometimes we're really in the woods - on a hike gone terribly wrong where you wonder if you'll ever find safety or your car again. I had a hike like that once upon a time, when I lived in Boston and wanted to impress a girl by taking her on a stroll through the woods far outside the city. It was great until she caught on that our planned 45 minute hike was heading into its third hour and we no longer passed trail signs or other people. She was thoroughly unimpressed. This was in the days when we only dreamed about having a GPS guide in phones so we kept forging our way, hoping that it was the right direction, hoping to beat the setting sun back to the parking lot.

In hour four we found a break in the woods that led to an unfamiliar street, lined with big, beautiful homes set far back from the road. My date had completely given up on me hours ago, and finally I gave up on myself. I felt that sure that inside those houses were faces of judgement or condescension or discomfort at the visibly queer people walking by, but I had no other choice

but to turn to them for help. I worked up my courage, walked up a long driveway, and knocked on a door for help. A man answered and we could hear signs of a big family dinner taking place in another room. When we told him where we were trying to get back to, he couldn't believe us because apparently we had wandered off the trail a lot earlier than we suspected and were nowhere near where we needed to be. The man was very kind and took compassion on us, leaving their supper to drive us all the way back to our car. It was not a short drive.

It was a long while before I started hiking again, because I remembered the heart-pounding, stomach-aching, skin-sweating, mind-freezing fear that took over my body when we were lost. I avoided hiking because I knew that as sure as I was human, those feelings would come to me in the inevitable metaphorical woods - in those seasons when I felt lost in relationships that had once steadied me, when I wondered what I was doing with my life and how I would find my purpose, when I felt lost in the weight and responsibilities of living in alone in a new place after Boston, entirely sure I had made the biggest mistakes of my life because each day brought heart-pounding, stomach-aching, skin-sweating, mind-freezing fear. I didn't need to hike to feel lost - those same feelings found me in the safety of my home and in my first job and in the uncertainty of new relationships.

And each time I felt that familiar sense that I didn't know which direction I was supposed to go, I remembered this: often, when we are lost, the harder we try to get back to where we are going, the more lost we become. And often, when we are so lost that we give up on ourselves or our situation, this is when we are found.

That's what the sheep in Jesus' parable discovered. It's not a story of a sheep that gets separated from the 99 others in the flock and finds her own way back home. It's not a story about courage or survival skills or ingenuity from the lost sheep. I imagine that the lost sheep was the

opposite of all of those things. She was more likely to be frightened and disoriented and concerned for her safety. The one who saves the day in this story is the shepherd, who sets out to find the lost sheep and bring her home. That sheep and her shepherd are a reminder to us that when we are lost, not only are we **not** expected to find our own way back, but we will probably have to rely on someone else to find us. We can't always do it ourselves. We need help. We need our own shepherd.

God as our shepherd is found throughout scripture. I've been thinking lately about this, how God is our shepherd but we still spend a lot of our energy trying to find God. We go on spiritual quests, we read books, we take up meditating, we study saints and theologians and listen to people who seem to have found the meaning of life and have all the answers. We are a seeking people—rarely at our destination and always looking for the next place on our journey. This search for God and for meaning becomes most urgent when we are lost—we hope that by finding God we will in turn find ourselves and all will be well. I have to wonder...how might we be transformed if, instead of searching for God when we are lost we allowed God to find us?

It's hard to explain the difference between being lost and seeking God, and being lost and letting God find us. It has a little something to do with giving up control and being willing to say, “I'm over here, and I need help!” instead of just barreling through, with no real idea where you are going. When you're lost in the woods, it might mean knocking on someone's door and saying, “I don't know how to get home from here.” But we know that being lost doesn't always mean literally wandering in the woods or walking away from the rest of the flock.

Feeling lost is a state of being that can hit us at any time. It can come in the midst of a difficult discussion with a loved one. We can feel lost when we realize we are compromising our values or when we feel pulled in so many directions that we no longer know which way to go.

Being lost can feel like being in the middle of a huge life transition, uncomfortable, unhappy, and unwilling to think of anything but a way out. In those moments, asking for help begins with admitting that we need help getting to the next point. It means admitting that we are not perfect and that we don't have all the answers on our own.

By naming where we are at—especially when we are lost—it creates an opening for God to find us. Confessing who we are and what we aren't is like sending up the emergency flares, so that God can better reach us. It is a symbolic lowering of our armor, so that God might better recognize us among the crowds. There is something in the honesty and vulnerability of admitting that we are lost, of crying “take mercy on me!” that makes us more susceptible to being found by God. I think it allows us to get out of our own way enough to let someone else in. Admitting when we are lost is an indication that we are finally ready to be found.

The heart of the Christian faith is that God wants to be in relationship with us and to love us. However you define God, or however you experience God, we believe that there is an opportunity for an encounter with something greater than us—something that can give us guidance and clarity and transform us when we feel lost, and dazed, or are at a dead end. Being found isn't about having all the answers, or receiving a perfect road map, but it's about being loved and received with kindness when we are at our lowest points. It is about being open to that love. It's especially about being loved when we get to that low place by our own accord and because of our own actions. That's the miracle to me.

Being found by God includes the things that happen to us that we can't control—the diseases, the deaths, the disasters, and the accidents. It also includes the middle of the night painful places, and the empty spaces we find ourselves in because of actions that we could have controlled. Maybe they weren't intentional—maybe we just kept our head down, pushed to get

ahead in our own life, and didn't have time to stop and look around, until we realized we are alone somewhere, separated from those who once surrounded us, uncertain of how to return.

Maybe it is somewhere between willful and accidental—somewhere between a conscious action and a series of unconscious moments that led us away from safety and found us alone in the wilderness. But whatever it is, no matter what it is, God wants to find us. God wants to love on us and welcome us home. There is a quote by Desmond Tutu that says, “In the end what matters is not how good we are but how good God is. Not how much we love God but how much God loves us. And God loves us whoever we are, whatever we’ve done or failed to do, whatever we believe or can’t.”

In the parable, this translates to the shepherd rejoicing when the lost sheep is found. There is no scolding, there is no shaming, there is no questioning why they got so far from the flock. There is only rejoicing. This is a joy that comes from love that doesn't ask why we are lost, it only asks where we are, so that we might be found. This message is the heart and soul of the Gospel; it is the one many of us spend our lives struggling to believe, and to accept for ourselves.

Everyone has a story of being lost. It doesn't matter how lost we are, or how long we have been lost. God wants to find us, to offer us unconditional love. God loves us so deep that God rejoices in our lives, in our very being. God rejoices in loving us, and walking with us when we are alone, when we are lost. It's up to us to accept that love. It's up to us, no matter what shape we might be in, to open ourselves up and allow God to find us.