

Sermon, Proper 19C

Luke 15:1-10

Exodus 32:1-14 & I Timothy 1:12-17

Preached Sunday, September 16, 2007 at St. Philip's, Brevard by RDF

Imagine being so lost ... that you don't even know you need to be found!

For one man in England, it took an entire television crew to convince him that he really was lost. A few years ago, this man was featured on one of those documentary news shows. He had a disorder known as "fugue syndrome," in which he periodically suffered from partial amnesia and just disappeared. Without warning, he would lose his memory, forget who he was, wander off, and "go missing." For some time, no one knew why this was happening. Unbeknownst to him, a TV camera crew did some secret investigative work, and followed him for months. Eventually, the following things were discovered: that, at one point, he had joined the circus; that he had lived as a homeless man on the streets of London; and that he had been the boyfriend of a woman who did not know he was married — which made two of them, since he didn't know it because of his temporary amnesia!

To make for a high-ratings drama, the producers did not reveal what they had found out about the man until the camera was rolling and he was watching the footage of himself taken by the hidden camera. The look on his face when he discovered some of the details of his secret life was the essence of shame, remorse and contrition — especially for the pain that he caused his wife and children. Once he understood his condition, a system was put in place to help the man whenever he had another episode of amnesia.

"Rejoice with me," says the woman, "for I have found the coin that I had lost." "Rejoice with me," says the shepherd, "for I have found my sheep that was lost." Like the lost coin and the lost sheep, there is great joy in heaven over one lost soul who repents. That's what Jesus tells us in our Gospel reading today.

"Thank you, Jesus," we might say. "Thank you for leaving the 99 to seek out that one lost soul. Thank you for picking him up and putting him on your shoulders and carrying him back to safety. We're glad to know that's part of what you do as our Savior."

But there's another part of this story that we might not be so quick to affirm. That's the idea that, at some time or another, all of us will be lost souls. Of the many sheep, there's not just one in the flock that keeps getting lost. Eventually, all 100 of them take turns wandering off and discovering that they don't know where they are or how they got there. Most sheep — and most people — don't get lost on purpose.

Willful disobedience to God is one definition of sin. But we seldom hear about this other kind of sinfulness, which is stumbling unintentionally into lostness. The General Confession from the old Morning Prayer liturgy says, "we have ... strayed from thy ways like lost sheep" (BCP, p. 41). An Episcopal priest once wrote a book with the interesting title, "The Art of Being a Sinner." Commenting on this phrase from the Confession, the writer says this:

The Bible suggests that human beings sin "more out of weakness and folly than ... out of a resolute desire to assert [their] freedom.... There is not much opportunity to observe sheep in our urban society, but there is no report of their ever staging a brilliant defiance of the shepherd's authority. They just wander along, heedless of danger, seeing one tuft of grass over there that looks better than this tuft right here, never looking up to see where they are going, and finally ending up on some precipitous mountain ledge or in some menacing swamp where they never in the world intended to be."*

Many years ago, a preacher named Francis Peabody wrote about the similarity between us and the lost sheep: "Each one of us is sometimes a lost soul," he says. "We miss the way to truth; we lose our grip on duty; we take the wrong path of desire; we try a short-cut across the plains of life; we are overtaken by the storm of temptation or by the night of fear."

Sound familiar to anyone? I know this description has applied to me in the past and undoubtedly will again. Sometimes, we wake up and discover that we're not sure where we are or how, exactly, we got there. In this case, repentance simply means owning up to the fact that we are lost and allowing the Good Shepherd to carry us home on his shoulders.

Last Sunday, I began talking about covenants. I spoke about the three necessary elements of a covenant as sacrifice, commitment and love. Today, we have reminders of why we need covenants in the life of faith. The readings remind us that it is our human nature to find ourselves in strange places from time to time — sometimes of our own choosing, and sometimes not. In the Book of Exodus, the Israelites don't know what's become of their leader. Moses has been up on Mt. Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights, and his followers are starting to feel like sheep without a shepherd. So they make for themselves a golden calf to worship. God becomes so angry that Moses has to call to mind the covenant between God and the Israelites. "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self," says Moses. And after being reminded of these promises, God forgives the Israelites and decides not to destroy them (32:13-14). Covenants are powerful things!

In our second reading, St. Paul remembers that he once was lost to God. "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence," he says in his First Letter to Timothy. "But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus" (1:13-14).

Whenever there is baptism or confirmation in our church (as we'll have a few months from now), we stand and recite together the Baptismal Covenant. And the Baptismal Covenant includes this question: "Whenever you fall into sin, [will you] repent and return to the Lord?" And the answer is, "I will, with God's help" (p. 304). In our Soul-Journers program, the Baptismal Covenant is our curriculum. When I speak to them about this part, I ask them to notice the choice of words. It doesn't say, "if you fall into sin." And it's not, "should you happen to fall into sin once in a blue moon." No. It says, "whenever" we fall into sin, we promise to repent and return to the Lord as part of our covenant with God. We recognize that it's going to happen, and we know that, sometimes, our falling into sin will look a lot like being lost.

When this happens, there are two things to keep in mind. First, there is a way out of our lostness. Through Christ, God has given us a path to return to the right road — even when God has to lead us to that path. Second, when we are lost, Someone is looking for us even before we know that we need to be found. And the Good News is that Someone finds us first:

"[This] is not an empty, silent universe," says Francis Peabody. "But [it] is resonant with the call of God to those who are lost.... What we call repentance is ... the hearing in the darkness [of] a call to the right way; and as one answers this call, across the darkness comes the ... voice [of God]: "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost."

To paraphrase the words of that familiar hymn, "I once was lost — and probably will be again. But now I'm found, and I know the Good Shepherd will lead me home again."

AMEN.

* John M. Krumm (New York: Seabury Press, 1967), p. 43.