

“God’s Lost and Found: The Parable of the Lost Sheep”

Ezekiel 34:11-16; Luke 15:1-10

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I don’t become afraid very OFTEN but probably the MOST fearful I’ve ever been in my life was around thirty years ago. It was the summer of 1994 and I had taken my young nephew Kelly to the Shenandoah National Park in western Virginia for what was to be a week of fly-fishing. For years, it was my dream to flyfish the Rappahannock River, one of the premier trout streams in the country. On the day of our arrival, we found a campsite along Skyline Drive, the only public road through the park which runs for more than a hundred miles north and south along the crest of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The following morning, we arose early, had breakfast, packed our lunch, and grabbed our rods for the busy day of fishing that lay ahead of us. Just before jumping in the truck, something told me to go back to the tent and grab our flashlights even though I was confident we wouldn’t need them as we’d be back to camp long before nightfall arrived anyway.

Once we located a path to the river, we parked the truck, put on our waders, grabbed our gear, and then began the hour-long trek down the side of the mountain to the Rappahannock which ran along its base. For the next six hours, we fished at various spots with some luck until at one point, I noticed that the sun beginning to lower behind us, behind the same mountain we had descended hours earlier. Knowing it would get dark much quicker at the bottom of the ravine than at the top, I said to Kelly that it was time for us to pack up and begin our return ascent. We began retracing our route along the stream but after a half-hour, nothing seemed familiar to us anymore as we must have passed the narrow path that would take us back up to the summit. It was now getting dark and I was so glad that I had thought of grabbing our flashlights before we left the camp. Once again, we reversed direction and tried to retrace our steps but to no avail. At that point, I knew that if we DID find our way out of there, it would now have to be done in the dark.

Throughout the night, we walked and walked and walked SOME MORE until it seemed we didn’t have the strength to take another step. Utterly disoriented, we were unable to tell any longer where either the stream OR the mountainside was and yet we knew we had to keep on going. Then, to ADD to our worries, we became caught in a torrential downpour. Although we had plenty of water, we were both tired, completely out of food with the batteries in our flashlights beginning to fail, and now we found ourselves soaked to the bone. Believe me when I tell you that I prayed and prayed until I didn’t think I could pray any longer. Finally, the sun came up and the rains ended. With the daylight, we could, of course, see but we STILL couldn’t tell where we were relative to either the river OR the road. I could only hope that we would eventually find a sign or encounter someone else along the path to give us some direction. Finally, after almost twenty hours lost in that wilderness, we happened upon a feeder trail we hoped would lead us back in the direction of the mountainside and take us out of there; fortunately, it did. After a two-hour ascent (which seemed more like ten), we arrived at Skyline Drive where we then had to walk another mile or so until we reached the truck. When we DID

get back to our camp, we were so exhausted that regardless of how hungry we both were, we immediately crawled into our sleeping bags and slept for an entire day. Although my nephew and I can laugh about it NOW, it was as close to being in hell as either of us had ever felt- before OR since.

It is a fearful thing to be lost, ISN'T it- to become SO disoriented that you no longer know which way is up from which way is down, or to not even know how to get back home any longer. My grandfather died from Alzheimer's disease back in the early '70s—the same disease that would later claim my mother--but in the final decade of his life, he was constantly wandering away from the nursing home in which he'd been placed. The police would have to be summoned to go find him and bring him back to the facility time and time again. My grandmother told me she died a thousand deaths every time it occurred; it was all so very sad.

But such stories don't ALWAYS have to end on such a down note. A couple of years ago, I had dinner with Dr. Jana Childers, who was then the Dean of my seminary- San Francisco Theological Seminary. She had come to speak to a group of us at the Omaha School for Presbyterian Pastors in Hastings, Nebraska. During the course of our meal, I mentioned to her that I had spent a couple of years at a Christian college in Santa Cruz, California called Bethany before coming to SFTS. At the mention of Bethany, her eyes light up. "Bethany! I used to go there all the time. I was raised in that denomination and my aunt was the manager of the school bookstore there." "Your aunt isn't Darlene Little?" I asked. "Why YES," she said. "Did you know her?" "Of course I knew her- EVERYONE knew Darlene. She was one of the sweetest, most wonderful Christian ladies you'd ever want to meet," I replied. "By the way," I asked. "Whatever happened to her husband, your uncle. I remember him having some form of dementia which caused him to get disoriented. The school would have to mobilize a group of students to scour the campus until he was finally located. Then Darlene would arrive and ever so patiently and tenderly escort him back home. Though he didn't appear that old, in retrospect I suspect he was probably suffering from some form of Alzheimer's or something like it. Is he still alive?" "Oh, yes," she said. "My uncle is VERY MUCH alive. The curious thing about his condition was that after many years of praying for him, one day his affliction mysteriously disappeared and he was completely fine after that. He never got lost and they never had to go searching for him again. The doctors have never been able to figure out what caused it but we are convinced that WHATEVER it was, God healed him of it. It was a real miracle."

The fifteenth chapter of Luke—the basis of my sermons for the next five weeks—contains three parables about either someone or something being lost: a LOST SHEEP (which is the focus of our study this morning), a LOST COIN, and then perhaps the most POPULAR parable Jesus ever told- a story about a LOST SON, a young man more COMMONLY referred to as "the Prodigal Son." All three describe the joy of finding something both precious and important- the FIRST, the joy of a shepherd at the recovery of a lost sheep; the SECOND, the joy of a woman at finding a lost piece of money; and the THIRD, the happiness of a father in receiving home the son he had lost. These three parables reveal the very heart and core of Jesus's ministry and who he is as a person- that unlike the Pharisees and Sadducees, he has a special sympathy for those who are lost or discarded in this world and he rejoices beyond measure when they are found. Most INTERESTING, he almost never referred to people as "sinners." Rather, he saw persons as those who for WHATEVER reason had become lost and

disoriented and AS such were now alone and afraid- THESE are the ones he was concerned about MOST, the ones he had come to seek and to save in the FIRST place.

In our story, Jesus tells of a man who has a hundred sheep. When one of them becomes lost, he risks leaving the ninety and nine in order to find and rescue the one which had wandered away. Upon his return, he calls together his friends and neighbors to share with them his great joy. It is a simple story yet so profound in its implications. To begin with, comparing our exalted God to a common, ordinary shepherd would have been considered quite scandalous to the Jews. Jehovah was far too great, far too majestic to be equated with an occupation so low and demeaning. You see, the job of shepherding was anything BUT easy or glamorous. We picture them in clean, nicely-pressed robes carrying cute little lambs on their shoulders when in fact shepherds were generally among the poorest of the poor, a group stuck on the lowest rungs of society. In fact, they rarely owned the sheep they tended. Rather, they were like "temps" who minded sheep in the countryside on behalf of sheep owners who probably lived nearby.

In addition, to the Pharisees and Sadducees, shepherds were considered religious outcasts. Because they were always out in the field, caring for their flocks, they were never able to fulfill all the requirements of worship demanded by their laws and traditions. They could not go to the Temple to offer sacrifices at the proper time and were unable to observe the Sabbath as properly prescribed or any of the OTHER festivals and feasts which were required of all Jews. Hence, they were looked down upon and deemed "sinners" by them despite how Abraham, Moses and David--THEIR THREE GREATEST ANCESTORS--were all shepherds. Thus to equate God with that of a shepherd would have been considered BLASPHEMOUS by them.

It must be noted that the lone sheep in the parable is not lost because it is BAD. It becomes lost because it does what sheep quite naturally DO- that is, with its head so closely to the ground, it is SO preoccupied by the process of eating--moving from one patch of grass to another--that it forgets where it is in relation to the rest of the herd. It has wandered too far afield so that it eventually finds itself beyond the careful gaze of the shepherd. Thus, having lost its guide and lacking all sense of direction, it cannot find its way back to the fold.

Isaiah 53:6 declares, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way." Well like sheep, WE frequently stray AS WELL. The book of Hebrews offers a world of warning to those Christians who don't pay attention to what they speak or how they live when it says, "Therefore we must pay attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it." The point here is that if we become careless and unmindful about our Christian commitment, we can BY SLOW DEGREES drift away from our moorings in Christ, the same way a boat does when it is not securely tied to the dock. Once untethered from its berth, it can slowly drift out to sea where it then can easily become lost. Then one day we look up and realize that we're no longer dockside, that we'd been drifting out with the tide but never realizing it.,

During my years of ministry in Syracuse, New York, I had a 25-ft. sailboat which I used to take out on Onondaga Lake. Like all sailors, I always had to pay close attention to the weather for if a major storm moved into the area, I then had to head down to the harbor and make sure it was safely and securely lashed to the dock, checking to see that the bumper guards were properly in place so as not to damage the wale or side of the boat. That same kind of care and vigilance is no less required in our CHRISTIAN life, an attentiveness about our faith

commitment which if taken for granted or left to chance could prove DISASTROUS to our spiritual lives. Such a duty as coming to church and worshiping God with the rest of the saints can never merely be an OPTION if we're ever going to become the mature Christians God desires us to be. Neither is attending Bible study or engaging in private prayer or learning to share our faith with others as these are vital spiritual disciplines which when exercised, BUILD UP OUR FAITH and keep us close to our Lord. If NOT, we can EASILY drift away from him and never even realize it- carried from one lame excuse to another, increasingly distracted by the wide and growing number of diversions that compete for our attention until our spiritual sympathies and religious commitments dry up and God winds up becoming more of an AFTERTHOUGHT rather than a forethought in our lives.

However, if this parable highlights how deceptively easy it is for sheep to get lost, on the OTHER hand, it emphasizes just how remarkable the SHEPHERD is and how deep his love runs for those in his care. For instance, from among the many sheep that make up his flock, he is able to detect if just ONE of them is missing. This can be credited to his sense of devotion and responsibility for those in his charge- so MUCH so that he even knows each one of them by name. As Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd; and I know my own and my own know ME." To the good shepherd, a sheep is not merely a package of lamb chops or skeins of woolen yarn. Rather, it is one of God's blessed creatures and therefore ever precious in his sight. If one is no longer among the security of the group, he will drop everything else to do what he has to do and go wherever he has to go in order to find it and return it home safely.

We're even told that the shepherd's love for each of his sheep is SO great, he is willing to risk leaving the other ninety and nine to go in search of the one, even though he knows that by doing so, the REST of the flock is left vulnerable to wolves and other animals of prey. Of course, there is also the possibility the lost sheep could be DEAD already. Yet love is willing to assume such risks because it loves indiscriminately- no one sheep is loved more than any of the others. Nor does he waste any time or spare any expense in trying to find it. He will search and search until at long last the lost one is found, REGARDLESS of the dangers to his life. As Jesus also said, "I am the good shepherd; and the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

And when the shepherd DOES find it, he doesn't punish it for simply doing what sheep do by nature. Rather, he REJOICES because it has been found safe and sound. And since the lamb is probably too weak and too scared to walk on its own, he shows FURTHER sympathy by hoisting it upon his broad shoulders and hurrying back with it to the rest of the flock. His joy will be complete only when they are all reunited.

What a beautiful image of God's love the Bible provide for us here. To the lost sheep of Israel, Christ was a Good Shepherd in every way. He never had any regard for anyone's age or sex, nationality or economic status. He had only to perceive that person's need and then he would attempt to meet it any way he could, whether it involved restoring sight to the blind, enabling the lame to walk, healing lepers, or delivering them from their demons. He was constantly drying their tears, calming their fears, and making those who were despised feel loved. He refused to rest until those who were lost were found and made safe and whole once again.

In much the same way, he remains a Good Shepherd to each of US. The picture the

Bible paints is of a world in which ALL of us are “lost” in some way or another- even the “holiest” among us as the Pharisees clearly showed. It doesn’t mean we are immoral or evil or just plain bad- only that we’ve found ourselves separated from one who never stops loving or looking for us and we now have trouble finding our way back to him. In truth, ALL of us have wandered away from the safety and security of the fold, ALL of us have found ourselves in trouble at one time or another and did not know what to do or how to get from under it. If any of us has ever been caught for a crime, regardless how petty; if we have ever lost our job; if we have ever grown hopelessly in debt; if we have ever faced divorce; if we’ve ever lost a loved one; if we have ever been involved in a personal scandal or been enslaved by a variety of addictions, then know that this message is meant for US- right NOW, this very MORNING!

And this is our hope and consolation, that if the Bible paints for us a picture of ourselves through this portrait of a lost sheep, it ALSO gives us a picture of God as the Good Shepherd who will not rest until he has sought and saved those who are lost. No other religion promotes such a God. They may speak of God's power and holiness but nowhere do they speak of such LOVE; nowhere do they offer us a SHEPHERD God who loves us to the extent THIS one does. And once he has found us and brought us safely home, we cannot help BUT submit to him and love him and share the joy he feels in finding us. Now you know why there are so many images of Christ the Good Shepherd adorning our walls or the stained-glass windows of our churches- because it is an image that wins our hearts and commands our love like few others possibly can. Well, it promises to do likewise to US if we are willing to allow this same image to adorn the walls and sanctuaries of our HEARTS and our MINDS this very morning. Let us pray...

*Almighty God, Everlasting Father, Dear and Wonderful Shepherd, draw each of us close to you this morning that we might find the rest we all so desperately yearn for- rest from our worries, rest from our sorrows, rest from our anger, rest from our jealousies, rest from our loneliness, rest from our guilt, rest from our despair. Even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil for you assure us that you are with us; with your rod and your staff, you comfort us. Help us to believe this and live our lives by this truth. In the name of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, we pray. Amen.*