

“Lost and Found”
Luke 15: 1-10

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One of the things I enjoy doing on vacation or when I have a free day is to go for a hike. Hiking is not something that comes naturally to me. For one thing, I am not the best person at keeping my balance, especially on rocky terrain or steep trails. And for another thing, I have a pretty horrible sense of direction. I started hiking 6 years ago, and the first three times I ventured out on a trail, I got lost. I didn't know how to read the trail markers, or my map, and the harder I tried the more turned around I got.

The first two times were very minor incidents—more akin to getting turned around and confused than genuinely lost. The third time was a bit different. I took a hike with a friend on a beautiful Easter afternoon. She was a novice hiker, like me, and only came along because I told her I would be our guide. We picked a spot about 20 minutes outside of Boston, definitely not something you would call back country. It starts in a public park, and spread out for a few miles of wooded trails, but was ultimately surrounded by a suburban neighborhood. At the beginning of the hike, there were other groups and families that would pass us on the trail, it was a pretty popular spot. There were several trails that crossed each other, and over time our green paint marker on the trees started getting farther and farther apart, and more difficult to distinguish from other paint markers, and then from the moss on the trees. When that happened, it was hard to tell if we were still following the correct trail, or any trail at all. Did I mention that the brush started getting thicker and less kept-up? There were significantly fewer people in the woods, and the sun, once overhead, was getting farther and farther away. Soon there was no one but us. I kept our course, or what I thought was our course. I didn't want to worry my trepid hiking partner, so

occasionally I would look at the trail guide and say something like, “yes, this looks just like this bend over here. Any minute now we should loop back to the beginning, just a little more to go!” This was 2007, and I started to wish that someone would invent a cell phone that could be used as a map so I could tell where we were and how to get back to the car. It looked hopeless, so hopeless that my friend finally noticed we were lost, and a mild panic ensued.

Eventually, three hours after we started our 45 minute hike, we spotted a break in the woods, and decided to take it. We ended up in a yard on an unfamiliar street, lined with big, beautiful homes, set far back from the road. It was not too unlike a road you might find in South Glastonbury, complete with a lack of helpful street signs. We walked down the street and realized we had no idea where we were, or even what roads we needed to follow to get back to our car. So, with no futuristic smart phone, and no clue, we said “God have mercy on us!” and we walked up to a stranger’s doorstep to ask for help. The guy that answered couldn’t believe that we ended up where we were based on where we started. Apparently we wandered off the trail a lot earlier than we thought. This kind man left his family’s Easter supper, and gave us a ride back to our car. I will forever say prayers of gratitude for the goodness and compassion he showed us. It was an Easter miracle.

The details may be unique to me bumbling my way into hiking, but the theme is a familiar one: 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 his flock and finds his 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. He was more likely to be frightened and disoriented and concerned for his safety. The one who saves the day in this story is the shepherd, who sets out to find the lost sheep and bring him home. That sheep and his 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 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 anytime. 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 crowd. There is something in the honesty and vulnerability of admitting that we are lost, of crying “mercy!” 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. But it also includes the things we do have control over—the dark places and the empty spaces we find ourselves in because of our own doing. 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 choices 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 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, a joy that comes from a 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. 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.