

St. James' Episcopal Church Cindy Baskin
Proper 19-C – **8:00 & 11:00 am** September 12, 2010
Texts: Ex 32:1, 7-14; Ps 51:1-11 (12-18); 1 Tim 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

Focus: God searches diligently for those who are lost; God seeks us in our present lostness.

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Introduction

Over the public address system came a loud, clear announcement: “We have a little girl here named Jennifer whose mother is lost!” Most of the grownups standing around started chuckling. But who’s kidding whom? Being lost is by no means the provenance of only children. Have any of you ever been truly lost? I got very lost when I was in the 4th grade. But there are more ways to be lost than just geographically

Yesterday was the 9th anniversary of the 9-11 attack in Y-2001. Do you remember where you were and how you felt on the terrible day as the visual pictures of the two towers falling shattered our sense of well-being? I suspect that a sense of “being lost” is what most of us felt that week. The world we thought was safe had just been turned upside-down. Those things that had helped us to feel safe and secure were suddenly gone. **We discovered yet once again that “being lost” is more a condition than a place.** And that brings us to today’s lectionary texts.

The Gospel – Two Parallels

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus tells two parables about something that is lost: the lost sheep and the lost coin. Not being too bright, the sheep probably wandered off from the rest of the flock. The shepherd knows that left by itself, this sheep will probably die – either by becoming prey for a predator, by falling into a ravine, or by wandering into a fast-flowing stream and drowning. The woman’s coin may have accidentally fallen from wherever she kept it. Regardless of how, both the sheep and the coin are lost!

This common theme of being “lost” is what’s led to the traditional titles of “The Lost Sheep” and “The Lost Coin” for these two parables. However, neither the sheep nor the coin can do anything to overcome being lost – neither can help themselves to be “found.” It is the shepherd and the woman who expend all the effort to find that which is lost. So these parables might more appropriately be named “The Seeking Shepherd,” and the “The Searching Woman.” The shepherd seeks and seeks until he finds that wandering sheep; the woman lights a lamp and sweeps and sweeps, searching carefully until she finds that missing coin.

Have you ever looked for something that was lost like that? It may be that whatever was lost had little intrinsic worth in and of itself – it’s value lay in how important it was to you.

Illustration: Barney the Dog

This past Lent, my husband was out walking our two dogs at the Model Air Park in Germantown. It’s a open space, adjacent to a nature preserve and quite safe at 6:30 in the morning. No cars and no other people. It’s usually a very safe place to let the dogs run in the early morning.

But on this one particular Friday morning, something frightened our small twenty-two pound dog named Barney. Usually he keeps pretty close, but on this particular morning he suddenly took off, over a foot of crusty snow, running into the woods. My husband called and called him; then searched the woods for several hours. Barney had disappeared. Bob went out at noon to search to search again. I went out with Bob later in the day and we searched again. We did likewise the next day . . . and the next. Barney was nowhere to be found. He was truly lost! We reported him missing to the Animal Rescue League in hopes that someone might find him and call.

Our prayer chain here at St. James’ heard of our lost and started praying for Barney. Jerry

and Alice Morrison were traveling in Italy and Alice, while visiting in Assisi and the Chapel of St. Francis (the patron saint of animals) lit a candle for Barney.

Three weeks passed and then came a call. A woman, out walking her dogs, had come across this ragged little dog, holed up in a groundhog burrow on the edge of a field. Barney wouldn't come out of the groundhog hole. But this kind person coaxed him out with some food. Barney had his collar on with a name tag bearing our phone number; the woman called us. My husband Bob left work to go get the dog as soon as possible.

Barney was a mess! He was filthy dirty. He was starving, having lost 25% of his weight, and so weak he could hardly walk; he was covered in burrs and matted hair; and he was infested with ticks.

So what did we do? We gathered him up like that shepherd who laid the lost sheep on his shoulders and brought him home. We spent hours cleaning him up, cutting the burrs and mats out of his coat, and ridding him of the ticks! We took him to the vet and put him on special foods to counteract the starvation. Today, Barney is a happy, cantankerous little dog who, when we go out for walks, keeps a much closer eye on us. He has no intention of getting lost again!

Now if we human beings would do that for a lost dog, how much more will God continue to seek us who seem to keep wandering off and getting lost?

As a pastor, I've occasionally heard someone share that they feel too ashamed to come to church because they've missed Sunday worship several times – guilt and shame causes these folks to get lost. I've heard other folks say that God couldn't possibly love or accept them because of something they've done in the past – fear keeps these folks lost. And then are those of us, who like the Pharisees and scribes at the beginning of today's gospel, are so filled with self-righteousness and pride that we are as lost as the worse sinner we can think of – lost in our own arrogance and hubris.

To all of us the message of Jesus' parables is clear: God is a compassionate and searching God who will keep looking for us who are lost, seeking to bring us home.

I Timothy (*include at 11 am*)

In Paul's letter to Timothy, our New Testament reading this morning, Paul remembers his former life wherein he describes himself as *a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence*. But then he speaks of the mercy he has received from God as *the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus*. And he affirms that *the saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*. Paul, the lost, has been found by Christ.

Conclusion

Everyone of us knows something about being lost. Jesus comes to us today, not to remind of us our fears or to drive us into the ground with the hammer of our sins, but once again to confront us with his love and to refresh us with the joy of being found. These parables reiterate the great lengths to which God will go to find us when we become completely lost – God will not give up until we are found. The challenge is to trust in God and allow ourselves to be found. Barney the dog had to come out of that groundhog hole to be found. If he had stayed there, he most assuredly would have died. We too need to come out of whatever hole we have crawled into and allow ourselves to be found by God.