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### Lent with Luke: 3. What Are You Looking For?

Luke 15:1-10 The Message By this time a lot of men and women of doubtful reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently. The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased, not at all pleased. They growled, "He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends." Their grumbling triggered this story. "Suppose one of you had a hundred sheep and lost one. Wouldn't you leave the ninety nine in the wilderness and go after the lost one until you found it? When found, you can be sure you would put it across your shoulders, rejoicing, and when you got home call in your friends and neighbors, saying 'Celebrate with me! I've found my lost sheep!' Count on it - there's more joy in heaven over one sinner's rescued life than over ninety nine good people in no need of rescue. Or imagine a woman who has ten coins and loses one. Won't she light a lamp and scour the house, looking in every nook and cranny until she finds it? And when she finds it you can be sure she'll call her friends and neighbors: 'Celebrate with me! I found my lost coin!' Count on it - that's the kind of party God's angels throw every time one lost soul turns to God."

In the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke's gospel, Jesus tells three parables in a row. The parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin are our focus for today, and next week our Senior Pastor Emeritus, Gaylord Hatler, will focus on the third parable - the familiar story of the prodigal son. Each of these parables in its own way paints a picture of utter urgency, of desperation even. That urgency, that desperation, is conveyed by the **absurdity** of the descriptions of the main characters in each of these three parables. What do I mean? Well, I will leave for Gay to describe the father in the parable of the prodigal son, but I invite you to look with me at how Jesus paints the figure of the shepherd and his sheep and the woman and her coin.

Let's start with the shepherd. Last week I said that the parables of Jesus are not simply allegories or fables. Rather, one of the keys to understanding what Jesus is up

to is that Jesus invites us to identify with the characters in his parables and thereby to cause us to see our world, our faith, our God, in new ways. As he begins these two parables that invitation is quite explicit. Petersen translates his opening words as “Suppose **one of you** had a hundred sheep....” More familiar translations render Jesus’ words as “Which **one of you** having a hundred sheep....” In other words, Jesus is inviting us at the outset to identify with the shepherd in this story. And when we do so, we begin to see the desperation, the urgency, and the absurdity that I spoke of. How so? Well, in Jesus’ day, shepherds were a socially despised occupation. Our son once spent a summer working with sheep and summed up that experience by saying “Sheep stink.” Indeed. Which means that shepherds stink as well and whoever comes into their proximity stinks. So the startling and disturbing thing about Jesus’ invitation – “Suppose one of you....” – is that while we may *think* that he is inviting his hearers to imagine themselves as rich (and the average farmer of the day might have had 10 sheep, not 100, for which he thankfully paid someone to be their shepherd), he’s actually not inviting his hearers to see themselves as the *owner* of such wealth, but as the stinky and despised shepherd himself. As one preacher puts it, “Jesus’ innocent sounding words, “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep’ turns out to be a highly insulting inference. It would be like one of us saying, ‘Which one of you, having a hundred dumpsters (not to own and make money from, but to dive into searching for garbage to live on) ....’”<sup>1</sup> And of course the absurdity and desperation is heightened by what the shepherd does: he leaves 99% of the owner’s assets unattended in the

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.holytextures.com/2013/09/luke-15-1-10-year-c-pentecost-september-11-september-17-proper-19-ordinary-24-sermon.html>

wilderness – a place of predators looking for tasty sheep snacks – while he looks for the one strayed sheep. I wouldn't want this guy to be my property manager.

Now consider the woman looking for her lost coin. First of all, Jesus knows his audience and means to shake them up. In a time when one of the traditional prayers of the some of the orthodox was “Thank you, God, for not creating me as a woman,” Jesus invites his hearers to imagine themselves as a woman. Moreover, the very situation itself seems absurd. If you've ever looked for or helped someone look in the dark for a lost contact lens in the carpet or the grass, you know what a desperately fruitless-seeming search is like. And in this story, what we have is an ancient middle eastern house, walls made of dried mud – like adobe – with a dirt floor, likely windowless (although there would be no streetlights to let any light in anyway). The only illumination would come from a smoky oil lamp, and oil is not cheap – depending on how long the search takes the amount of oil used would exceed the value of the coin. Again, an absurd seeming situation, perfectly presenting someone who is doing something that looks both urgent and desperate.

Now, you and I have known the desperation both of ***being*** lost and of ***seeking*** something that is lost. Our culture also reflects that feeling as well. Think of the movies in the last dozen years or so that focus on the horror of being lost: Matt Damon utterly alone in The Martian, fifty million miles from home on an inhospitable planet; or – closer to home but no less alone – Tom Hanks in the movie Castaway, cut-off from all that he knew, fashioning a volleyball into a face and calling it “Wilson” just so he would have someone to talk to; or Suraj Sharma in The Life of Pi, trapped on a leaky boat for months on a trackless ocean with animals that would try to kill him. And, whatever your

politics, I have heard from many people and seen many Facebook postings and blog posts from countless others who believe that our country has lost the ability to be civil and is losing those values that have truly made us decent people, that “incredible diversity united by compromise and a pride in what our diversity and difference teaches us,”<sup>2</sup> as my wife, the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell, puts it. Or, as another preacher has said, “it seems that we've lost the art of holding hands and have perfected the art of taking sides.”<sup>3</sup>

And then there is our lostness and our losses as individuals. There are those who know the desperate loss that is grief for one now gone. There are those who know what is like to be lost in the midst of a relationship that is no longer life-giving but is suddenly a mirage. There are those who have lost the excitement, the enthusiasm, the passion for a job or a career or a calling that used to light up life with purpose. There are those who know the loss of bodies that are failing and the diminishment of freedom and dignity that come with that. There are those who know the loss of financial security and the terrifying prospects it brings. Oh yes, as individuals, as families, as a people, we know the sense of loss, we know the desperateness that can sometimes color our lives, the urgency of wanting to find what has gone missing, the need to not let what we have lost define us but those things that we can yet indeed find.

And that is where the gospel speaks to us. How do we let these parables change us? By letting them get inside of us and reminding us not of what is lost but

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.facebook.com/barbara.blaisdell1/posts/949794138422256>

<sup>3</sup><http://needhamucc.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/20120819-RevHeike-10-Parables-Luke-LostSheepCoinsChildren.pdf>

what can yet be found. The gospel, the good news, in these two parables comes, then, in the form – as I have said on many occasions – of both **assurance** and of **challenge**. Here is the assurance: the utter urgency of that shepherd seeking and the woman scouring, conveyed by the very absurdity of the lengths they will go to, is meant to startle us into realizing that it is with such urgent and desperate love that God seeks you and me. In a day when to be a shepherd meant being one who was ostracized from polite society, God becomes as a shepherd to find us and remind us what hope can yet inhabit our lives no matter how much we may think we stink or our life stinks. In a day when some of the smug would pray their thanks for not being born a woman, Jesus tells us that God comes precisely as a woman who will spend a sleepless night sweeping the floors of your soul and mine helping us to find our hope again, helping us to find a way out of our lostness. As one preacher says concerning these parables, “we think that maybe God has given up on us; that we are so persistently sinful that God has finally given up on us; that our character defects seem to be so inescapable, that God finally gives up on trying to get through to us. But this story tells us clearly of God’s forever wanting to find us.”<sup>4</sup> Or, as the wonderful Christian writer and poet Frederick Buechner says, these two parables are “essentially about... the outlandishness of God who does impossible things with impossible people....”<sup>5</sup> The assurance of these two parables is that God’s grace is indeed outlandish and that nothing you have done, no matter how lost you are, no matter how stinky your surroundings, no matter how sullied

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<sup>4</sup>[http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series\\_c\\_lost\\_and\\_found.htm](http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_c_lost_and_found.htm)

<sup>5</sup><http://frederickbuechner.com/content/weekly-sermon-illustration-one-lost-sheep>

you feel, the God who would chase down one sheep, the God who would desperately sweep the floor of her house looking for that lost coin, is also the God who will not give up on you. And that's a wondrous assurance indeed, isn't it?

But that's exactly where these parables also become a challenge to us. Both in this room and in the world outside these doors there are all manner of lost coins clinking around the floors of too many lives,<sup>6</sup> there are all kinds of solitary sheep who've lost their ways. There are those whose family of origin gave them messages about their lack of worth that they have been lost in for years. There are those who don't quite know how they will ever move past the lostness of their grief over what used to be or what might have been. There are those who have labored while lost in a morass of hateful ideas about God that make God a tyrant and not a friend. There are those convinced that both God and the Church would fling them out into the wilderness, shunned and shamed, because of their orientation or their ideas. There is a whole society lost in the thickets of vilification and meanness, demagoguery and demonizing. And, my friends, these two parables invite you to now identify with, to step into, the role of that shepherd and that woman. Jesus invites you to take on that urgency, that outlandish urgency that says "no" to anyone who believes themselves unworthy, too stinky, too shameful to be worthy of hope and be worthy of someone caring for them. My friends, in the coming days, in the coming weeks, I invite you, no, Jesus invites you, to emulate that shepherd, to walk alongside that woman, offering a word of good news, a word of hope, a word of life to those who are lost.

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<sup>6</sup>I'm grateful to Alyce McKenzie for this image:  
[www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Lost-Found-Alyce-McKenzie-09-09-2013](http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Lost-Found-Alyce-McKenzie-09-09-2013)

As I prepared for this sermon, I read several accounts of folks who had been lost in the forest while hiking. I also read a paper by a psychologist who studied how people react to being lost in this way.<sup>7</sup> Those accounts and that paper noted that there were several typical ways that people often reacted to being lost in the forest: they began to panic and run a few feet first this way and then that way, or they tried to backtrack their route (almost always unsuccessfully), or they tried to fix on a point and walk slowly toward it only to almost always discover they were going in circles, or they would follow a creek downstream only to find that it ended not in civilization but in a swamp. But you know what? The almost near-universal way that folks lost in the forest were found, though, was this: they *heard the voice of someone calling their name*.

*The voice of someone calling their name.* Do you hear that voice? Can you **be** that voice?

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<sup>7</sup><http://www.geos.ed.ac.uk/~mscgis/12-13/s1100074/psychologyoflost.pdf>