

Lost and Found

A meditation on Luke 15:1-10

by Kat Wagner

The passage we have this week is from the gospel of Luke, and it's a section where Jesus tells three parables, 3 stories, which are all about things that were lost and are found. There's the lost sheep, the lost coin, and does anyone know what the third parable is about? (The lost son / the prodigal son.)

These parables are all about finding what was lost. They are all about salvation. They are about the misery of being lost, and God's joy in finding what was lost.

I got lost once. I was about 7 years old, on holiday with my family at Spring Harvest. It's a Christian conference week in the UK that takes place in Butlins Holiday Villages. And these places have amazing swimming pools. At least, they seem amazing when you're 7 years old! There are flumes and pirate ships and rapids. I was desperate to go to the swimming pool one more time, so I persuaded my mum to take me. My mum's not really into swimming, so she sat in the café area where you can see the pool. I had a great time! Until, I realized I couldn't see my mum any more. I couldn't spot her. And I didn't know how to get through to the café area. I started to panick. It was a horrible feeling when I realized I was lost. So with tears rolling down my cheeks, I approached one of the lifeguards and told them that I was lost. The lifeguard made an announcement on the loud speakers. And within a few minutes I was reunited with my mum, absolutely relieved and very happy get changed and leave the swimming pool.

I bet each of you also has a story about being lost or losing something. And I hope your story also had a joyful ending of being found.

Let's take a closer look at these two parables.

The first parable is about a lost sheep. It would have been be a familiar scene for Jesus' listeners at the time. There is a flock of 100 sheep, all of them searching out the next best bit of grass in front of them, safe under the protection of the shepherd. But this one sheep doesn't really pay attention to where it's going. It keeps munching grass, head down, never looking up to check it can still see the shepherd. And before it realizes what's happened, it's lost. The other 99 sheep are nowhere to be seen. And worst of all: the sheep has also lost the shepherd. Without the shepherd, this sheep is vulnerable to attack, it doesn't know where the safe places are or even where the best grass is. But the shepherd realizes that this sheep is lost and he goes looking for the lost sheep. And when the shepherd finds the lost sheep, how does he react? Is he angry? Does he shout and scold? No, he rejoices! He gently picks up the sheep and carries it back home. And the Shepherd calls his friends and neighbours to celebrate!

Have you ever felt a bit like this lost sheep? Consuming and being consumed by whatever is right in front of you? Focussing on the unimportant things of life, and forgetting to look up? Losing touch with the rest of the group, and losing sight of the One who really matters?

And who is this shepherd? The Bible has several places where God is described as a shepherd. In Isaiah 40:11 we read:

He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young. (Isaiah 40:11)

And in Ezekial chapter 34 we read:

“For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.” (verse 11) and “I will search for the lost and bring back the strays.” (verse 16)

And of course we all know of Psalm 23: The Lord is my Shepherd.

Jesus himself describes himself as ‘the good shepherd’. John 10:11 says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

How do feel about this shepherd? This shepherd who searches for the lost, who carries the sheep in his strong embrace, who gently leads, who is even prepared to lose his own life for the sake of the lost sheep, who leaves 99 ‘good’ sheep to look for one lost sheep...

The second parable is about a lost coin. This coin would have been worth about a day’s wages. We know that this woman had 10 of these coins, so she’s lost 10% of her money. (That’s a lot more than the shepherd, who had only lost 1% of his flock.) Can you imagine suddenly losing 10% of your income? You would feel sick, you’d be desperate to get it back again. In this story, the woman realizes she has lost a valuable coin and she diligently searches for it. It’s a big job. She searches the whole house, sweeping under furniture and shining a light into all the dark corners. And when she finds the coin, what does she do? She rejoices, and calls all her friends and neighbours to celebrate.

How do you feel about this woman? She’s hard working and diligent, but then how much do you think she spent to throw the celebratory party?! Somehow the scale of the celebration and the extravagance of her joy changes the worth of the coin which had been lost but now is found.

Here's an interesting point: If the shepherd in the first parable is Jesus, and we can assume that the father in the third parable is God the father, who do think this woman represents?

In this second parable, we have a woman with a lamp. If we look in the book of Revelation, there is lots of imagery of lamps which represent the Spirit which reveals God's truth.

Theologians suggest that each of these characters in these three parables represent a person of the Trinity. Jesus, the good Shepherd; God, the Father; and the woman with the lamp represents the Holy Spirit. Father, Son and Spirit are collectively involved in the work of salvation.

That was just a side point!

But why did Jesus tell three stories about things that were lost and found? Why does God – Father, Son and Spirit – care so much about finding the lost?

Does it really matter if 1 sheep from a flock of 100 wanders off? Does it really matter if a woman loses 1/10th of her income? Does it really matter if a father is estranged from one of his two sons? And the answer that Jesus gives is 'yes', every time, it matters, he cares. He cares so much that Jesus did lay down his life. He cares that much about every lost person. And so should we.

So, who is lost?

Lost like a lost sheep, wandering astray. Like a lost coin, lifeless and helpless. Like a lost son, a little foolish.

Are you lost?

Do you know someone who might be lost?

The good news is this: Jesus receives sinners and eats with them. It's there in verse 2. The grumbling Pharisees unwittingly state the very nature of the gospel: Jesus receives sinners and eats with them.

We don't have to be perfect to be saved, to live a life with God as our friend. We don't have to perform, or pretend to be someone we're not. As Richard Rohr puts it, "We come to God not be doing it right, but by doing it wrong".

It's when we realize that we're lost, that we can be saved. It's when we admit to our imperfections that we begin to experience freedom. It when we let go of our pride, that we can receive grace. It's when our raw selves, our humble selves, shed of all the baggage we often think is so important, it's when we become like a child, that we can walk through 'the narrow door' that Jesus describes in Luke 13.

Then there will be great rejoicing in heaven! Do you remember the look of joy on the faces of my helpers from the All-Age Activity when they found what was lost? Do you remember the feeling of joy when you found something that was lost? Just imagine how much greater the rejoicing is in heaven!

As Jesus repeats in these parables: There will be rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents.

We're going to spend a short amount of time in silence now. Let's examine ourselves, our own hearts. Let's enjoy the embrace of the shepherd who holds us close to his heart. Let us join in the party as lost ones are found. And let us be part of God's mission of searching for the lost. Amen