

<Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Psalm 14:1-7; Luke 15:1-10>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

Growing up in the Southern Tier, down in Olean, I've always associated myself with Buffalo when telling people where I'm from. I or my family would routinely make the drive up here, thinking nothing of a trip that takes ninety minutes each way. Driving the route between Olean and Buffalo and back was just a matter of life. Which is what makes it so amusing to tell the story of one of the trips my friends made when still in high school.

They drove up to visit friends, with no notable issues, but when the time came to return home...that's when things started to go sideways. Starting on the interstate, they first got turned around going East instead of West, and once they figured that out and turned around, traveling in the right direction, they breathed a sigh of relief that they were on the right path. You can imagine their confusion, then, when they started seeing signs welcoming them to Erie, Pennsylvania. They had missed the both of the turn-offs, either for the 400 or the 219, which would have brought them home. Realizing they were not exactly lost, but also not where they intended to be, they made their way to the new right route and drove home. I'm not sure future generations will ever believe us when we tell them we actually survived life without cell phones and GPS.

If I were to ask you to tell me a story about a time when you were lost, what would that story be? Perhaps you, as well, would have a story of driving from one place to another and taking a wrong turn, or missing a turn, and ending up where you didn't intend to be. Or maybe it would be a humorous story of misplacing an item such as car keys, and feeling flustered in the moment but realizing that everything still worked out in the end. I could tell you the time that I got lost in an airport riding the escalators, able to see my family in the waiting area of the gate but unable to figure out how to make my way back to them. Or perhaps you would tell me of a time when you were not physically lost, but felt lost and adrift in life, lacking meaning and purpose, or uncertain of which decision to make, which next step to take?

There are as many stories about accidentally getting lost as there are people to tell them, some of them innocuous and amusing, others of them serious and mortal. From a young age, we are cautioned to avoid getting lost in the first place, but all of history shows that it is an inevitability, which leads to me to ask, instead of, "what do you do to not get lost?" rather, "what do you do when you find yourself lost?"

But first, we can take some measure of comfort in this knowledge that, when we feel lost - whether that be physically, directionally, or even emotionally or adrift in purpose - when we feel lost, this is not a unique experience to us, but is shared across the history and demography of humanity. It is so ubiquitous an experience that Jesus used it as a backdrop for some of his most notable parables.

These two familiar parables - the shepherd with the lost sheep and the widow with the lost coin, set in Luke's gospel along with the story of the prodigal son and father - highlight two immutable truths on which our faith finds its foundation: there will be occasions in life in which we feel, or even are lost, and there is a God whose love will never leave us, will never leave anyone in this world in such a state.

I'm not going to spend much time this morning on this first immutable truth, that we will feel or be lost at some point in our lives. We already know the truth of this, which is only made even more real by the extents to which we will go to try and avoid or prevent such a reality. We could spend hours, weeks even, telling the stories of when we have each experienced this, coupled with what we are most fearful of seeing realized. Our own life stories, along with stories across the ages, bear witness enough to this that we don't need to explore it much more this morning.

Which is also good, because while that is the first of the immutable truths, the second - which is just as immutable and just as important - is often just as overlooked or, perhaps more accurately stated, untrusted. Nevertheless, despite our human inability to trust and/or remember, the reality proclaimed is that God looks for us, and for all whom God loves (which, as we are reminded, even if we can't always comprehend it, is everyone).

This is evident in Jesus' parables. In the first, we are recalled to the dynamic that God is like a shepherd, especially when one of the sheep - us - willfully wanders off. Much has been written, taught, and preached about the dynamics of the shepherding profession, practices and mannerisms, practicalities and responsibilities. It would take an entire sermon series just to talk about all these nuances and arguments, and even then, we would find that we hadn't exhausted the discussions. But I would argue, especially that this is such a short and straightforward parable, that in the midst of all of that we overlook the critical piece: when a sheep, and we are all sheep, goes astray, God goes out and finds it.

End of story.

We wander away and get lost, physically and directionally in this sense, and God in Christ, as the Good Shepherd above all other shepherds, does not leave us in such a self-imposed state.

And if that weren't enough of a familiar dynamic for the Pharisees and the scribes, the tax-collectors and sinners, the disciples and would-be followers, Jesus follows up this parable with another very-relatable experience: a widow loses a coin.

Now, I know that in today's age of digital currency and credit cards, it isn't as readily imaginable to lose sleep over a lost coin. How many of us have joked about the kind of loose change that might exist in our couches and car seats? So perhaps this parable needs a little bit of an update: Which one of us, having received our paycheck and misplaced it, will not go through all our pockets, all our coats, and all the pockets of our bags to find it? Or, perhaps even more apropos, which one of us, experiencing fraudulent charges in our bank account, will not go to all lengths to dispute the charges and have the funds restored?

That kind of dedication, that kind of energy and commitment...that is how important, and more so, we are to God, and how much God will not let go and forget. And we won't even start today on the next parable in Luke of the Prodigal Son.

The reality is: we, even we the people of God, will find ourselves lost at some point or another.

This is evident in the prophet Jeremiah, as well. So expansive is the story of the people of God that it cannot be summed up only in the once-per-week pericopes as we receive them. Each week we look to a portion of the story, but the story is bigger than any one week of our readings. In this week, we see the fullness of how lost are the people of God...so lost that they have no understanding of events around them and the very earth of creation trembles and quakes. This, too, is not an unfamiliar experience.

Given the events of this past week, these past months, and even the memory of events in past years going back to 2001, there is perhaps some resonance in these verses. With every national tragedy, with every fracturing of connection and community within our country and within humanity, we know the truth of what Jeremiah describes. We have been there. We still are there. And the people of God throughout time have found these experiences to be true.

And still. And still, God looks for us. And still, God does not leave the people lost. Even in describing how incredibly lost they are, how lost we are, God does not leave us in such a state. This is crucial for us to fully understand and engage the story of God. This is an immutable truth at the foundation of our faith and how we live as disciples and the faithful communion of Christ. For just as we have been sought, and looked for, and restored to where we are meant to be, just as we have been found, so too are we to go out and find everyone else. It's like one giant game of amoeba tag - where once you're tagged, once you're found, you're part of the group and the next step is to go find everyone else, until nothing exists but one big group. One family of faith. One people of God.

We all have been lost, at some point in life and in some way. We all will experience being lost, again, or knowing loss. This, lamentably, is an immutable truth. But the attendant immutable truth, just as real and crucial and necessary for our remembrance, is that God does not leave us lost. Rather, in God we are found. And if we do not remember this, if we do not hold tight to the truth of this, then we will find ourselves lost, indeed. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*