

Sermon 3-30-25
Paul Purdue preaching

Perhaps prompted by our Lenten devotional guide, I spent this week wondering about what it means to be lost or found, so on Tuesday, I asked Emma and Matt about lostness? Emma shared how during her elementary school years, her family went to Italy. While walking with her family around the streets of Rome, Emma mistakenly fell in behind a woman with long dark hair and clothing similar to her mothers. When the Bushongs turned down a side street Emma continued to follow the wrong person. Suddenly Emma was aware that she was in an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar people. She didn't see anyone she knew. There were no signs she could read to help her get back home. Simultaneously her parents one street away turned around to discover Emma was gone. They began frantically calling out her name. A Roman stranger joined in as they all shouted "Emma, Emma" until they found each other.

Maybe you have felt that lostness when moving to a new place or new job, being a student away from home, entering a new school or workplace, reading a disorienting headline or a friend's depressing text? Maybe you have felt alone at your church or your own family diner table, wondering if or how you fit in? A clergy friend shared with me how twenty five years ago, after graduating seminary and taking her first church, she attended her first District Clergy Meeting. She sat down alone at a back table. Evidently, I got up, walked across the room, introduced myself, invited her to sit with a group of us, and introduced her to everyone at our table. Feeling a little lost amid the Tennessee Conference old boys network, she had not forgotten an act I never remembered. Romans 12 tells us "practise hospitality", it may help someone find their way.

Matt shared how we can get lost in ourselves: how we can get stuck in a sad place even amid familiar places that may not be healthy. We might even take some measure of comfort in the norms, practices and people that try to press us into a mold different from the image of God within us- our belovedness. We can feel deeply lost even amid familiar comforting routines and places. We often find our way home, with some kind of community. We hear the voice of God in the voices of the people around us, with acts of kindness, moments of reconciliation, welcome and warmth. "Practice hospitality", help people find their way to themselves and to God. You might be the marker, the landmark, the familiar face that helps someone find their way to home.

As I consider what to make of the theological label "lost", I thought of my own journey of faith. I grew up in a church filled with wonderful loving good people with bad theology. I grew up with a strict binary line demarcating "lost" and found. The theological dividing line determined who was in and who was out, who was saved and who was lost, who was a Christian and who was a sinner, who was right and who was wrong. The "Everything (in) Between" editors imagine a range of being from found to lost to found, writing that "we all travel the spectrum of lost and found at various points in our lives" and asking us each to consider where we are on that spectrum today and where God is seeking us in the midst of our journey? Maybe you are feeling a little lost, displaced or

disoriented today? It's okay, Jesus felt the same way praying Psalm 22 from the cross crying out "God, oh God, where are you?" (Matthew 27)

From age 13 until college I read the Bible every morning before classes for 45 minutes. My church taught that the Bible was infallible, inerrant, literal, and written by God. Reading the Bible cover to cover each year, I did not need a Tic-tok tutorial or seminary class to deconstruct my literalism, I managed to find the inconsistent passages on my own. (compare Matt 28:10 & Luke 24:49 or 1 Timothy 2:14 & Genesis 3:6) I used to say I had a crisis of faith, looking back I now understand I had a crisis of theology. Friends, wandering away from my fundamentalism as a 23 year old, may have been the most disorienting season of my life. Was I on a highway to hell or drifting into spiritual nothingness? It did not feel like I was on the path into belovedness, but I knew I could no longer accept what I once believed, even though I did not know what I did believe. The old trusted handrails of easy answers and absolute certainty were losing their grip, but I felt like I had nothing to hold onto. Some of my parents' friends would say to mom, "we are praying for Paul and Connie." Mom grew weary of their hackneyed judgemental "concern" and responded, "I do not think they have lost their faith, I think they have found a new church." Thirty-four years later, I am pretty sure, I had to lose my easy answers, literalism and judgement in order to find my way to God's boundless love. I needed to be a little lost to really find my way.

Rev. Sarah Speed in our "Everything (in) Between" devotional guide shares a poem entitled The Good Shepherd. Rev. Speed asks us if the parable is about us, sheep, or God?

Jesus said, "Who among you wouldn't leave the 99?
Who among you wouldn't look for the one?"
Someone in the crowd probably rolled their eyes.
Someone squirmed and looked at their palms.
Someone sighed and thought to themselves,
"This man doesn't understand the business.
What fool would leave 99 to look for one?"

But maybe God was not talking about us.
Maybe God was talking about
her own reckless love.
Maybe God was talking about
her own willingness
to turn the world upside down
for me.

I grew up with constant worry about God judging me. I never thought much about God's boundless Love for me, God's reckless love for me, that came to liberate me, to set me free to live a life of love. Several years ago Cokesbury commissioned a Vacation Bible School song for preschoolers about our passage. "If I get lost like a baby sheep, ba, ba, Jesus will find me, because Jesus will not sleep until he finds every one of his sheep."

We changed our voices for the mamma sheep, daddy sheep, and auntie sheep! I have known farmers who have stayed up all night, navigating blackberry thickets and muddy bogs to find one lost calf. Which of you, having a cat or dog, would not wander around in your pajamas in the pouring rain, calling out your pet's name and praying they find their way back to you? When we love someone, we do not judge or shame them, we call out their names and hope to woo them back home!

It is risky to leave the 99 content sheep in the wilderness exposed to dangers of wranglers, wolves and their own proclivity to wander off. Love compels us to lose our sense of comfort to help the lost, knocked sideways, or disoriented. Why do we resist Jesus' hopeful invitation to "Rejoice with me": to come and celebrate the one lost soul who finally feels at home with God and themselves? Why do we grumble when God breaks bread with God's beloved sinners, tax evaders, and collaborators with the Roman Empire? There is more joy in heaven over one lost soul finding their way home than in 99 beautiful Pharisees, Bible Spouters, and Methodists who never saw a reason to wander off. Our Bible celebrates the homecomings of Cain, Jacob, Moses, Rahab, Ester, King David, Simon Peter, Mary Magdalene, a thief hanging on a cross and the legionnaire beside them, Paul of Tarsus, Cornelius the Imperial Centurion, Lydia the head of Fashion House, the Philippian Sheriff, and you and me. Heaven rejoices when any of us finds our way home. Do not grumble about who God has included, just be glad you are home! Rejoice to have found your way. Love celebrates when we all find our way home.

My mom always loved a slightly universalist hymn we sang in the church I grew up in.

Sing the wondrous love of Jesus,
Sing God's mercy and God's grace;
In the mansions bright and blessed
He'll prepare for us a place.
When we all get to heaven,
what a day of rejoicing that will be!
When we all see Jesus,
we'll sing and shout the victory!

Once you have found your "found-ness", rejoice and be glad, become free enough, secure enough, beloved enough to turn your attention towards helping others find their way home where they can dwell at peace with God, neighbors and themselves. Be patient with yourself when you get a little lost, displaced, dysregulated, disoriented and distressed, do not judge yourself or others too harshly. Judging helps no one find their way home. (Matthew 7) God does not need your judgement. The Holy Spirit guides all of us "sinners" and "saints" home. (John 16) Instead, let us remove any stumbling blocks that keep people away from God's Table. (Matt 18) Some Christians may not understand what you are doing, they may grumble. You're in good company! Jesus not only ate with sinners and endured the grumbling, Jesus so deeply identified with the lost and wounded, Jesus endured the disorientation of the cross to help us find our way home.

Oh dear ones, if you are feeling lost; you are not alone. Jesus will not sleep until you find your way home. If you are feeling lost- stop, stand still, and pray. Look for welcoming markers, loving faces, little joys, and risk making your way towards God's boundless love. And if you feel sound and found today, be a gentle kind voice calling out, inviting neighbors to our Lord's open table. Amen