

The Lost Treasures of the Kingdom

Scriptures

Exodus 32.1,7-14

Psalm 51.1-17

1 Timothy 1.12-17

Luke 15.1-10

Opening

And so in this season of the year we enter the heart of Luke's Gospel, the parables, the stories of Jesus. For the next three Sundays, we will meditate on the parable of Jesus from the middle of Luke's Gospel. So I invite you to return in your pew Bible with me to Luke 15 on page ###.

We hear two stories of lost things today, yet these two stories belong with a third, and this trio include yet a fourth story. The two stories we read are the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. Curiously our lectionary does not include the *third* story of lost things (presumably for the sake of length) the parable of the lost (prodigal) son, which begins in verse 11. The saying is true in this instance that things come in threes and there is a parable itself in this succession of parables. Ecclesiastes teaches us that a cord of three strands is not easily broken and such is the strength of Jesus' three stories: the Lord came to seek the lost. Pharisees and scribes contested Jesus' association with sinners and tax men. Then came the succession of three stories. One wasn't enough, two was not sufficient. He tells *three* parables to express God's reckless love for those who have lost their way.

So where is the fourth story that belongs with this trio of parables? Jesus moved into story mode because the pastors of Israel—Pharisees and scribes—said of our Lord, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." His stories address their affront, yet these stories

address a more ancient story that began with a more ancient question: “Where are you, Adam?”

Where Are You, Adam?

Hold your place in Luke 15 and come with me to Genesis 3 on page ###. You will remember that after the first transgression, Adam and Eve wove fig leaves to cover their nakedness, they heard the Lord God walking in the Eden morning, and hid themselves from his presence. “Where are you?” The Lord asked.

I want you to think about that question. This question is the key to understanding not only Genesis, but the Old Testament, and the Incarnation of Jesus. God comes seeking Adam and Eve with the question, “Where are you?”

Think about this. Does God—the creator of heaven and earth, the maker of day and night, stars and planets, the sea and all that dwells therein; whose very hands formed the dry land; whose breath breathed into Adam the breath of life—does he *really* **not** know where Adam and Eve are? In his hands are all the depths of the earth and he doesn’t know where Adam and Eve are in the depths of the garden he made?! Why would God ask the question?

This is not some primordial version of hide-and-go seek in the Garden of Eden. God *knows* where *and* in what condition Adam and Eve may be found. Yet he speaks this question so that *they* hear his searching question. “Where are you?”

Adam and Eve heard the sound of the Lord walking and the sound of his voice seeking them, “Where are you?” But listen to Adam’s reason for hiding. Verse 10: “I heard the sound of you walking in the garden, *and I was afraid, because I was naked, and hid myself.*” //

When you read this story of Adam and Eve’s first sin, do you find compassion stirring within for Adam and Eve—afraid and hiding? I do. It makes sense—they are our ancient parents. Their sin was an act of disobedience, but even more it was more an act of ignorance.

To paraphrase St Irenaeus, a theological giant of the early church, Adam and Eve sinned because they were really quite young. Other church fathers hold the same interpretation of

our first parents. Adam and Eve were created in the image of God—pure, innocent, and beautiful. But they were not created fully mature. Their task was to grow and mature forever in holiness in God’s good world. God placed Adam in Eden to ‘work the garden and keep it.’ He was free, master of himself, complete, yet God gave him this task for development—develop, cultivate the earth, cultivate holiness towards me. So, Adam and Eve were complete and whole in the image and likeness of God, but they were also young.

Now, to say that our ancient parents sinned because they were young doesn’t let them off the hook. It explains why they were so easily deceived; it does **not** remove responsibility for their sin. They are no less guilty and their disease is no less deadly. Their sin was a contagion, a deadly virus. Their sin went viral, so to speak, corrupting our bodies and God’s creation. //

This, to me, makes sense of their response to the deadly consequences of their sin—fear, covering up, hiding. The children begin behaving like orphans. They try to make a home for themselves. They quickly search for a safe place, making the best use of their resources. Children are like sheep. They scatter and search for safety, but they end up in a wilderness. They seek cover in the trees of the garden. God made trees for food and for beauty, but not a hiding place from himself. There they are—lost in the wilderness, body and soul infected with a deadly virus.

Lost in the Wilderness

I remember one spring break in my early 20s I went to the Blue Ridge Mountains when I was peopled-out. I stayed at my parents mountain home and took a few outings to hike in the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains. I looked for trails where I would have the lowest possible opportunity to see other human persons, and found exactly what I was looking for in the trials of the Linville Gorge Wilderness.

I’ve always had a curious spirit, ready to explore new territory, but I wasn’t an experienced hiker in those days. I was fine with well-marked trails, but the trails in this portion of the Linville Wilderness were poorly marked and the trail forked in new directions in numerous places.

I didn't think about this much when I was headed out, but when I turned to go back, I found I had quickly lost my way. I headed in the general direction of the trailhead as best I could discern it, but when I turned around I also noticed I had lost track of time. The sun began descending in the west. Visibility wasn't great and I began thinking I might be staying overnight in the Linville Wilderness, hoping a search party wouldn't be necessary. By the grace of God, I found my way back to the trailhead in the twilight of that March evening. I thought I knew how to navigate the wilderness, but I had gotten lost. It would have been ever so much better had someone found me and said, "I'll lead you back."

God in Search of Man

To our ancient parents lost in the garden wilderness, God searches for his own saying, "Where are you?" It is the question that echoes across the centuries, to each man, woman, and child born in the image of God. Abraham Heschel said, "All of human history described in the Bible may be summarized in one phrase: *God is in search of man.*"¹

I think we are ever learning and unlearning how to read the Bible. We read the Bible and we think it's up to us to find God. Well, there are Scriptures about seeking the Lord with all our heart, but the weight of the Bible, the whole story, is saying "God is searching for us." In whatever wild places, wilderness areas, where we've lost our way, God is seeking us.

It's the paradox of the Bible, we think we're seeking God, but truly he's pursuing us more than we seek Him. Hear the Jewish poet Jehudah Halevi express this paradox in verse:

¹ Abraham Heschel, *God In Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, 136-137.

Lord, where shall I find Thee?
High and hidden in Thy place;
And where shall I not find Thee?
The world is full of Thy glory.

I have sought Thy nearness;
With all my heart have I called Thee,
And going out to meet Thee
I found Thee coming toward me.

Jesus and the Recovery of Lost Treasures

The tax men and sinners of Galilee were saying in way, “I have sought Thy nearness.” Return with me to Luke 15. Luke tells us as much. The tax collectors and sinners were going out to hear him. Why would they do that? Because in his life, his words, his actions, they could say with the poet, “I found Thee coming toward me.”

The tax men and sinners of Galilee were lost in their own wilderness, estranged from home. Luke does not soften this a touch, and Jesus doesn’t either. They were sinners, just like their ancient parents. But Jesus turns upside down how we understand sin. *Sin is estrangement from home. And sinners are the lost treasures of God—the God who ever searches for men and women made in his image.*

It’s the stories themselves that completely reframe the story of sin and sinners for these grumbling Pharisees and scribes. As familiar as these stories may be to us, let’s not miss the forest for the trees. I fear I’ve missed the power of the parable in years past, not noticing the basics of story.

Verse 4 is loaded with prophetic power: ‘What man of you, having a hundred sheep...’ Stop for a moment. The *setup* of the parable is everything. Jesus tells the story to Pharisees and scribes—the pastors/shepherds of Israel. The form of the story—the characters and conflict—*already* rebuke the pastors of Israel. Before the lost sheep was lost, he belonged to you. We begin with lostness, but Jesus begins with belonging and home. Jesus sees his Image. St

Nicholas Cabasilas said of Jesus, “He it was who came to earth and retrieved his own Image, and he came to a place where the sheep was straying and lifted it up and stopped it from straying.”² It’s explosive in the first century *and* the 21st century.

If we submit to the Scriptures, we must always listen closely for the sharp words Jesus addresses to Pharisees and scribes. They were the Church of his day, the pastors of his day, and he is firm with them. Jesus says “You have a hundred sheep *before* they were lost.” Do I see the image of God within the atheist, the skeptic, the mocker, the enemy of the Gospel?

Remember when the Good Shepherd called out to that mocker and enemy of the Gospel, Saul, on the road to Damascus. “Where are you, Paul?” Paul says in 1 Timothy, I was a blasphemer, persecutor, an insolent opponent. But I received mercy *because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief.*” Just like his ancient parents. God went searching for Paul even when he was a scoundrel. Because his true nature wasn’t a scoundrel. He was a lost treasure that belonged at home with the Lord.

Look at the forest in the parable of the lost coin too. “What woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin...” Stop. Notice how the woman understands the *ten* coins. They are her treasure. If one goes missing, she suffers. Her household treasure, her temporal worth, is ten, not nine.

Then what does she do? Lights a lamp, sweeps the house, seeks diligently. There are three more sermons there but I’m only permitted one today. But the habits of the pursuing God are worthy of our ongoing meditation in *both* parables. Both speak of tenacious persistence to what belong to them. Both find their **joy** in the recovery of lost treasures that belong to them.

² St Nicholas Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*, 50.

The Fifth Story

We have been to the Garden, we have listened to these two Parables, remembering it belongs with a third story of a lost son, but there's one more story of lost treasures I want to include. It is the time when the Storyteller lives his own parable.

The prologue to this story is neither in Genesis nor in Luke. We find it in the psalms, when a homesick soul prayed from the depths: 'Even if I made my bed in hell, still there you would find me.' You can only understand that prayer in light of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he was lifted high on the cross so that he might draw all lost sons and daughters to himself. Then we believe our crucified Lord Jesus descended to the dead *with the same question his Father asked in the Garden, "Where are you, Adam?"* Our Lord descended to the dead to rescue his lost treasures, to lead many sons and daughters to glory.

Jesus, you see, redefines lostness, not just in his stories, but even more by his death and resurrection. You do not recover lost things by barking more rules. You recover lost things by drawing near to anyone estranged from home, anyone trying to find shelter in wilderness places.

"There You Are!" , Or Who Are You Pursuing in Love?

I once heard a wise man say that there are two kinds of persons who enter a room full of people. Some persons enter a room and say within themselves, "Here I am!" But another kind of person enters a room and says, "There you are!"

I want to be a "There you are!" Christian. I want to lead a "There you are!" Church. We've misunderstood our place in the recovery of lost treasures. We think our task is conversion, but that is not our work. That is the work of God the Holy Spirit. Our work is the ministry of faithful, loving presence. We can be a guide in the wilderness who says, "I know the way back home."

So I have a question for us. Who are you pursuing in love? Notice I did not say, who will you convert? Who will you seek in love to say, "There you are!"? For our faithful, loving presence is the living witness that God is in search of mankind. That's the Gospel.

We have all kinds of false gospels and false gods that promise salvation in our time. But they simply lead you from one wilderness to another, from one false god to another, gods who cannot lead you to the heart's true home. Biblical orthodoxy in our time is simply this: Jesus Christ and his Church are the heart's true home. /

Who will you pursue in love? Oh, Lord Jesus, who came to seek and save the lost, save us from finding joy in our own wants and comforts. Help us yearn for the greater joy that only comes from seeing sinners—your lost treasures, sons and daughters made in your image, return home to you, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit live and reign one God forever. Amen.