

“Prone to Wander, Prone to Search”

Exodus 32:7-14, Luke 15:1-10

Rev. Joy Laughridge

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I know I don't have to ask if anyone in this room has ever gotten lost because I know the answer is 100% yes. Some of you might have a traumatic or a dramatic story that you'll never forget about a time when you got lost. I think I've told you before about the boy I knew from church and school who got lost in the woods when he was just 3 or 4 years old. He was gone all night and when they finally found him the next day, he told everyone that he hadn't been afraid because there had been angels who came and sat with him. That's a dramatic story about getting lost, but most of us have a lot of ordinary stories about getting lost because we took a wrong turn, or we got separated from our parents in the grocery store and things like that. At some point or another, we've all looked around and realized that we weren't in the right physical location, but being lost isn't always about geography. Sometimes we experience being lost as more of an existential crisis. Life isn't going the way you wanted or expected it to go, and you find yourself saying, "I don't know how I ended up here, and I don't know how to get from here to where I want to be." Still other times, we may not feel so much like / am lost but we are lost. We look at our community, or our nation, or even the church and we have an unsettling sense that *together* we aren't where we want to be or where we ought to be. As we take in all the headlines, and listen to people on Tik Tok, or read books and articles about what is happening in our 21st century world and culture, we may find ourselves saying with sadness and fear, "we have really lost our way."

There are two things that are true about being lost, I think. One is that it generally doesn't feel good. No one likes to be lost. If nothing else it's just frustrating to be in the wrong location because now

you're late, or you're missing out on something, or you're going to have to buy more gas, but it can also be scary depending on where you end up. And when we're talking about these other ways that we can be lost, like when we find we aren't where we want to be in life or when we feel like we're part of a collective that has lost its way, we have a bad feeling about being lost in those ways, too. We're likely to feel scared, or helpless, or even angry. It doesn't feel good to be lost, and a second thing that is true about being lost is that we have a tendency as humans to be good at getting lost. We are inclined to want and to wander into places where we should not be. Our text from Exodus today illustrates this human tendency all too well.

The Israelites had experienced a dramatic rescue from slavery in Egypt. God had parted the waters of the Red Sea, and they came out on the other side as free people. God invited them into a covenant relationship, and they were all for it. *Yes, we want you to be our God, and we will be your people. Yes, we will follow all your instructions so that we can be a light to the nations,* and God said, *good!* The people gathered at the foot of Mt. Sinai and their leader Moses went up the mountain so that God could give him the instructions about how to live in a right relationship with God and with each other.

Moses had been gone for just 40 days when the Lord had to break the news to him about what the people were doing at the bottom of the mountain. While Moses had been on the mountain taking down instructions from God, the people had become restless. Moses was taking too long, and they were left to wait and wonder. They couldn't see what was happening at the top of the mountain, and soon they couldn't endure the discomfort of Moses's absence or the uncertainty about what was happening or what would happen next. They wanted certainty and security. They wanted a god that they could see, so they went to their priest, Moses's brother Aaron, and Aaron offered them all of it in the form of a golden calf. After all

that they had seen of God's love and power; after saying "yes, we are committed to living as your people;" after just 40 days of waiting, they couldn't wait any longer so they began to wander straight toward an idol, and just like that, they were lost. They weren't physically lost, but they had wandered away from the God who had demonstrated such great love for them and away from God's purpose and plans for their lives.

The story about the golden calf can certainly be read and understood as an expose that reveals how *all* of humankind is prone to wander away from God and God's will, but for a community of believers who claim our baptismal identity as God's people, we might feel a little squirmy about the fact that this is a story about *God's people* going the wrong way and getting lost. We can admit that we fail in our attempts to follow a GPS sometimes, and we might be brave enough to admit that some of our life choices have led to unwanted detours, but we are *God's people*. We have confessed our need for forgiveness and have placed our trust in Jesus. We come to church for worship, and we try to be good people. We might get a little mixed up sometimes, but we aren't *lost* – at least not in the way other people are lost.

This was the way that the scribes and Pharisees saw things. When we jump over to our Gospel reading, Luke says that Jesus was welcoming sinners and tax collectors and the scribes and Pharisees were grumbling about it. If being lost is living without acknowledgment of God and orienting one's life around idols or purposes that are unrelated to God and God's purposes, then the tax collectors and sinners were certainly the kind of people that the scribes and Pharisees would have described as lost. They were caught up in things that were unpleasing to God and things that caused them to be alienated from God. They were the kind of people that seemed *hopelessly* lost and destined to be separated from God

and God's kingdom forever. If the scribes and Pharisees believed that about them, some of those lost people who were coming near to Jesus may have believed it about themselves so while they were gathered there and listening, Jesus told these two wonderful stories about lost things being found and the joyful celebration following the recovery of the lost things. Jesus told these memorable stories to communicate the good news that God is like the shepherd who will leave the 99 other sheep to go in search of the one lost sheep, and God is like the woman who turns her house upside down in search of that single lost coin. All the lost sinners and tax collectors who heard this story were hearing Jesus say to them, you may be prone to wander, but God is prone to search for the lost things that God loves, and God never gives up on the search.

Jesus certainly told this story for the benefit of those in the crowd who felt lost from God or had been told or made to feel that they were hopelessly lost from God, but Jesus knew that the sinners and the tax collectors weren't the only people who were listening and they weren't the only people who had gotten lost. Jesus knew something about the scribes and Pharisees that they didn't seem to be fully aware of. Yes, they were God's people, and yes they knew that they belonged to God, and they knew all the rules about what God expected of them, but they had lost their way too.

One of the signs that the scribes and Pharisees had lost their way was their attitude toward the sinners and tax collectors who were going near to Jesus. They didn't recognize God as someone like the shepherd or the woman who had concern for the lost, and they could only see the sinners as people deserving of condemnation and separation not mercy and inclusion. Yes, they were God's people, but they were completely out of touch with the heart of the God to whom they belonged. Somewhere along the way, they had been seduced by and wandered off toward appealing idols; the idol of their own

tradition and interpretations of the law, the idol of their power and reputation, the idol of their need to be in charge and control. They may have been well-meaning. They certainly thought they were right, but they had lost their way and needed to be found just as much or more than anyone. The good news that God is prone to earnestly and relentlessly seek people who are so prone to foolishly and sometimes even willfully get lost was good news, and is good news, for everyone in the audience- the Pharisees *and* the sinners, the “insiders” and the “outsiders.”

As we listen for God’s voice today and reflect on these passages of Scripture from Exodus and Luke, I’m aware that we have collectively been through a difficult and an emotional week, one in which you might have found yourself saying either, “we have really lost our way,” or maybe, “some people have really lost their way.” Of course, the events that have taken place in our country this past week are not the first signs that we’ve seen that would suggest that maybe we have together lost our way or that there are people out in our community, and in our country, and inside and outside our churches who have lost their way. The events of this last week and the fallout from them are just the latest evidence that people are prone to wander and are good at getting lost.

At the end of a week like the one we’ve had and at the beginning of a week that could potentially hold even more evidence that either we or others are lost, the good news that is proclaimed to us today is that God is searching tirelessly for every person who is lost. God is searching and always calling people to come back home, always calling people to leave the idols behind, always ready to show mercy, and God never gives up the search. At any moment, anyone who has lost their way can turn toward the God who has been looking for the lost all along and in a moment be found. It is possible for even the most “hopelessly” lost to be found, to repent of sin and idolatry, and

to begin a new life. Think of Paul the Apostle. This is his testimony. *“I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service,¹³ even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief,¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus”* (I Timothy 1:12-14). It is possible for individuals, and it is even possible for groups of lost people to repent and turn toward God who loves us and shows us how to live, and this means for one thing, that there is hope. It means that we don’t have to resign ourselves to the thought that lost people will always be lost, that they will never change, that nothing will ever change. There is always hope for change and that means, also, that we need to remember that we are called to pray regularly and earnestly for those who are lost. I know that complaining and being mad about people comes much more naturally, but Jesus says pray, so we are to pray and remember also that we are sent to be the salt that adds a different flavor to the world and bear the light that can help those who are lost to see.

The challenge of course is that we need to stay on the right path ourselves, and as we’ve said, it’s possible that we can lose our way, too. Especially when we feel vulnerable, and when things aren’t going the way we want them to. When we’re like the Israelites at the bottom of the mountain who can’t see what’s going on at the top and so we feel uncertain and uncomfortable. When we are scared, and anxious, and angry, we are also vulnerable, and when we are vulnerable, we are prone to wander, and if we wander, we can lose our way. We can lose our way when we listen to the wrong voices; when we allow anxiety to become our master; when we drift away from regular worship and prayer that keep us rooted in the truth and close to God in Christ. Sometimes if we are feeling lost, it is because we have gotten a little lost, but if we realize that we have, Jesus gives us the

assurance today that we can always turn back. The good news for God's people is that if we have lost our way, we already know the way back. All we have to do is look up and look for Jesus. He will be there. He is there, searching for all who want to come home. Amen.

