

A sermon preached at Grace Church, Russell Road in Alexandria, VA on March 31, 2019.
Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year C (RCL): Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Congratulations are in order! We have reached the midway point of Lent! Traditionally, this Fourth Sunday in Lent has been known as Laetare Sunday, or the Sunday of rejoicing or refreshment during one's Lenten journey. It is a time to breathe, to perhaps take a break from your Lenten discipline, but most importantly, to look towards Easter as it starts to come into view. Later today, I will see Facebook posts from several seminary friends who celebrate this day by wearing rose-colored (“no, not pink”) vestments ~ I know of at least one Liturgics professor who rues this day. Father Malm shared with me that, in the Church of England, today is known as “Mothering Sunday,” when people visit their “mother” church where they were baptized, or worship at the nearest cathedral. (Maybe that’s where rose-colored vestments started.)

Psalm 32 sets the tone today: “Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, and whose sin is put away!” 2 Corinthians says, ‘Happy are those who have “become the righteousness of God” in the merits of Christ Jesus.’ Joshua adds, ‘Happy are those for whom the forgiveness of God has “rolled away ... the disgrace” of former things.’ And Luke also: Happy is the father at the return of his prodigal son. And happy are we that our sins are forgiven for Jesus’ sake. Be Refreshed! So, Rejoice!

This day, and these lessons, are all about coming home, and forgiveness, and new life in accepting, even tasting, God's grace.

The story in Joshua celebrates the Israelites finally crossing into the Promised Land. They then celebrate the Passover and eat the produce of the promised land instead of the miraculous manna that had sustained them in the desert. Thus, the Israelites symbolically bring their forty years of wilderness wandering to an end at Gilgal.

Paul’s strong message to the congregation in the city of Corinth is the promise that in Christ everything is transformed into newness. All mistakes, all deliberate sins, all old history is reconciled with Christ’s resurrection.

Jesus tells a parable about a son who ponders his father’s love only after he has spurned it. The grace he receives is beyond his hopes. That same grace is a crisis for the older brother who believed it was his obedience that earned his place in his father’s house.

I wonder how many of you got caught up in the frenzy of the TV show “Lost?” It was a drama which ran for six seasons from 2004-2010 about survivors of a commercial airliner that crashed on a mysterious island somewhere in the South Pacific. The show was apparently quite popular due to a good dose of science-fiction and the supernatural that revolved around various lives which were suddenly torn apart or thrown together. I often felt ‘lost’ talking with my friends because I didn’t get caught up in the craze of THAT show.

Well, today’s Gospel lesson contains no sci-fi or supernatural elements, but is likely the most popular parable ever told by Jesus. The Prodigal Son, which is rivaled only by that of the Good Samaritan, is a drama about a kind of ‘lost-ness.’

Earlier in this 15th chapter of Luke, Jesus spoke about sheep getting lost by nibbling their way apart from the flock; they find one tuft of grass to nibble on, and when that’s done, they look for the next patch to extend their meal. Sometimes they were carried away by their appetite into realms unknown and places unseen, or, at least, out of sight from the shepherd. We too may be like those lost sheep that nibble our way into the faraway country.

Jesus also spoke of the coin that is lost through carelessness. We might choose the wrong friends, move in the wrong direction, hang out in the wrong places, or make the wrong decisions. With all this wrong-ness in our lives, we could become lost, one from another, through either indifference or negligence.

The 'lost-ness' that Jesus speaks to in the Parable of the Prodigal Son is, in fact, a chosen state. You think you know what you're doing. You thumb your nose at God and the people around you. And like the Prodigal, you make off to a faraway country by your own choice.

So how is it that that which was lost later became found? Scripture suggests that it is not the result of some great and wonderful spiritual revelation. For being found does not necessarily require cleaning up your act and changing your lifestyle (although it may help!) As in the case of the 'least of these' that Jesus called to become Disciples of Christ, God cleans the fish after God catches them. In fact, with this Prodigal, the tipping point comes in Verse 17 when this willfully lost one "came to himself," suggesting he makes a wiser choice than those of the recent past. "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; ..." There is nothing here that looks like science-fiction, or feels the least bit supernatural. There is a famine in the land, and no one will help him.

There are two truths in this story which feel very re-assuring: 1) that you and I have a homestead in God, and 2) Jesus is always seeking us to find us, to have us, and to keep us close.

When we're lost, it's because we have nibbled our way off to places apart from where we are meant to be. Each of us has a place in us for God to reside and abide with us. There is no other thing, be it employment, success, a special relationship, or even our families, which will fill that void. It is intended for and reserved by God for God. Much like the son who wants to go his own way, when we stray, we leave the presence of God and eventually find ourselves feeling homesick in ways we never imagined.

I hope you've heard me say this before: When you feel the lack of God's presence in your life, ask yourself: Who moved? We are made by our Creator to have a life and home in God, and God in us. Jesus as the great Good Shepherd is always actively seeking to find us when we stray.

Jesus regularly sought the lost in all kinds of unlikely places. He upset religious leaders by supping with the lost – those who were not righteous, nor clean, nor altogether good. Jesus as the great healer would go to those places where healing needed to occur. And our Lord seeks us in our lostness. It is in being found by Him that we return home and find our roots, either once again or perhaps even for the first time.

In 2005, while on a Journey-to-Adulthood pilgrimage to Scotland with youth from Grace, we took a daytrip from Iona to Staffa in the Southern Hebrides (Heb-rid-ees). Staffa, a volcanic island with amazing geological features of prismatic columns of basalt, is home to Fingal's Cave that was carved by the sea's waves. As we crossed the choppy waters to Staffa, I had an epiphany of 'being home,' of 'belonging,' to fully embrace my Scottish heritage from my mother's side of our family. It felt like a piece of a puzzle slipping into place. It was neither fantastical nor supernatural, but was completely affirming. What a delight it was to be 'found at home' on the seas of Scotland.

Each of us must have a sound understanding of what and where our true home is in order to really be aware when we are lost. If you know what it means to be lost, consider that a kind of gift. For knowing you are lost means there may be joy in the returning home.

Here in Luke's Gospel, there are four things that are lost. I've mentioned the sheep, a coin, and the Prodigal Son. But the fourth thing that may also be lost is the Prodigal's older brother. He is lost and doesn't even realize it. That may be more tragic than the first three. The older brother's lack of awareness of his own lost-ness may be too bound up in staying home, playing by the rules, and missing out on the extravagant love of his father.

P. T. Forsyth, a wonderful English preacher, said, "The only way to the Father is through the far country."ⁱ I believe the 'far country' can be that place where we are disillusioned with who we are and where we find ourselves. It is then when we have nibbled too far from the flock, or have become too careless with the people, paths, places or choices we have made.

When the Prodigal Son learned, thankfully not too late, of that divide which separated him from family and the place which is his home, he said, "Is this all there is?" And the Father replied, "No, of course not. There is more. Come home."

So, Rejoice! Be Refreshed!!

AMEN.

ⁱ Chapter 31: Lost and Found of Mastering the New Testament: Luke, by Bruce Larson; Lloyd J. Ogilvie, General Editor; Word, Inc., 1983, p.230.