

“ON GOING ASTRAY AND BEING FOUND”

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Luke 15:1-10

September 16, 2007

The Rev. Ryan Lambert

It was mid-August I suppose, school was starting in a few weeks, and I was wandering around downtown Spokane on one of my earliest excursions for school clothes. My mom had been brave enough to once again take us on our traditional school shopping trip to downtown Spokane, complete with lunch at “The Crescent” restaurant, under the clock. For those of you who have never been to downtown Spokane, the department stores and boutiques are connected by a series of skywalks which allow shoppers to move across streets without needing to brave the elements or risk having your young children wander into traffic. It was set up to be a perfect day, but somewhere along the line I think my mom must have realized that her idyllic day might be sabotaged by one of three possible glitches: namely her 7 year-old son (me), my 5 year-old brother, or my sister who was two and a half.

Let me give you an idea of the kind of fun we had that day. I remember the looks from the humorless clerks as my brother and I ran in dizzying circles around the circular clothing racks, yelling out our lap numbers as we raced around. I remember being yanked out of our hiding places in the fort-like space in the middle of those same round racks. I also remember my mom's admonitions after we had gone peaking under the walls of the dressing rooms as we grew impatient waiting for an open room to try on our new clothes. At some point, after numerous threats I am sure, we calmed down enough to get to the work at hand: finding school clothes. I am sure that my mom was breathing a sigh of relief as she handed a shirt in the next larger size into the dressing room and turned around to comfort my sister. In the next couple of seconds I remember hearing a great deal of rustling around and my mom, quietly at first, began to say, “Pat” over and over as she looked around for my brother, who had evidently disappeared. Based on our earlier behavior, my mom began looking inside every possible hiding place: inside clothing racks, under mannequins, inside dressing rooms, behind the counter in the housewares section directly across the aisle. At some point my mom said rather forcefully to me “Come out, stand right here with your sister!” and she was off looking for my brother. After she had looked in every part of the store possible, while also keeping an eye on us, she contacted a clerk whom we knew. She was just preparing to begin wandering the skywalks in search of my brother when he came sprinting into view. He was breathing heavily, and as he skidded to a stop in front of my mom he looked at her as the relief washed over her face and in the best naïve kid voice ever said, “Hey mom, I came back! He also noted that he had found the candy store down the way and wanted to know if we could get a piece or two. I want you to know he lived to tell the story, but as an adult I am convinced that it was only because as angry as my mom was, the only thing she could do was to grab my brother and hug him, to welcome him back and rejoice in the fact that he was safe. My brother had gone astray, but he was found, and my mother rejoiced. It was many years before I understood how terrified and angry my mother must have been that day; but the picture of the embrace she gave my brother is both a picture of rejoicing and a picture of forgiveness.

Our lectionary lessons today are joined by the theme of going astray and being found, of being lost and being forgiven. In Jeremiah we find one hopeful moment amid the prophet's rebuke of Judah and

Jerusalem for their sins against God; and in our passage from Luke we hear the parable of lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin and we witness rejoicing when the lost is found.

The text from Jeremiah is a part of three chapters in Jeremiah that has the prophet accuse Judah and Jerusalem of sinning against the Lord, and for those sins the prophet announces judgment. The prophet proclaims that there is an enemy about to attack Judah and Jerusalem and they will soon be ruined. The prophet's words portend that the coming destruction is based in the fierce anger of the Lord, essentially saying that the attackers will bring the Lord's wrath that Judah and Jerusalem have coming to them. This is a powerful text, made more powerful for me because of the first time I remember encountering it. As many of you know, the lectionary is laid out in a 3-year cycle and if you go back six years, you will know that this text fell on the Sunday after the horrible attacks of 9/11. In light of what happened that day there is much in the prophet's words that could be read to say that the prophetic words of Jeremiah came to life again in the burning towers in Manhattan. I remember a conversation with Bryn Smallwood-Garcia, one of my mentor pastors at the church where I did my seminary internship, as she wrestled with what she was going to say about this text as smoke still billowed from New York. We wondered if this scripture lesson was too harsh; could the hearts of the Orinda congregation tolerate hearing the prophet say these words: *"I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. I looked, and lo, there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled. I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins before the Lord, before his fierce anger."* Could our hearts together hear those words when our nation was in such a profound state of grief? Sitting on the hillside above the church during our weekly mentoring session we talked about all that had happened that week, of our own fears and our concerns for the future of our nation and of our world. We also read the lectionary readings and tried to come up with ideas for what we could say on Sunday morning: Jeremiah offered little in the way of hope, except for a little phrase in verse 27. In this verse, the Lord says: *"The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end."* That passage became our rallying point, because even as the prophet announces doom for Judah and Jerusalem, even as the promise of the holy city in ruins was announced, there was a promise that this was not the point where God says, "I've had enough and I wash my hands of you." We took solace in that phrase and we decided that we could not ignore this passage even though we would have liked to. This passage can be seen as a warning, proclaiming to the people of ancient days and the people of contemporary times that the sins and stupidity of the people will have consequences. However, it can also be seen as an opportunity for confession, because even though the Lord seemingly had every reason to let the invaders destroy Judah and Jerusalem, the Lord's people were not abandoned. Thus, we can know that our confessions will not leave us abandoned either. Amid the ancient and contemporary rubble, our sinning will not cause the Lord to leave us. Quite simply, amid the frightening images of Jeremiah's prophecy there is grace enough for us to be found.

The gospel lesson from Luke includes the first two in a set of three parables concerning the lost and the found. The parable that follows this week's reading is the Prodigal Son, but even without that parable our lesson teaches that joy—an absurd amount of joy, actually—is an appropriate response to finding something that has been lost. The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin seem somewhat laughable: Who is really going to leave 99 sheep alone in a field to pursue one who is lost? Who is

going to throw a lavish party on the occasion of finding one misplaced coin—even if that coin would be worth around \$100 in today's currency? At first glance, the absurdity of these parables is the point because Jesus is trying to teach the Pharisees that the extent of God's love is absurd when looked upon in human terms. He is trying to answer their contempt for who he hangs around with a proclamation of God's love. Jesus is attempting to teach the Pharisees and the disciples about the reach of God's love, and there is really no rational way to understand such a thing. So Jesus tells completely irrational stories hoping that the Pharisees will stop complaining and questioning and simply understand that God's love is inappropriately extravagant.

Alas, the Pharisees don't get it, and thus Luke's gospel will continue with the parable of the Prodigal Son. There are a couple of things we should be taking from these parables. First, we should understand these parables as an invitation to confession and God's grace. We should recognize that whether we see ourselves as the lost sheep, the lost coin, or the ones who never get lost, God's grace is equally available to us. We could wonder about why 99 would be left in the pursuit of just one outlier, but what is important to understand is that at some point we will all be in that place of being lost. And Luke tells us that God will have great joy when we are found and brought back into the fold.

Secondly, our parables offer an invitation to a relationship with a God that acknowledges that we will run off and hide from our responsibilities at times, but that we will also come back to God and happily (and naively) announce, "I came back!" And what will God do...rejoice! That is the good news of our parables, that there will be great joy upon our return—even when it happens over and over again. God's grace is given to us, not in begrudging fashion, but with great joy from God.

So from these parables a question comes to mind: Where is our joy? Why doesn't God's grace inspire us to sing, dance, and even roll in the aisles? It really is that spectacular! Worship, prayer, board and committee work, Stone Soup, counseling at camps, singing in the choir—all of it should be done with great joy because all of it is possible because of the extravagant and inappropriate way that God welcomes us over and over again. We should be meeting God's joy with our own: God's grace is here for us, and rather than slouching toward it, rather than being afraid to ask for it, rather than being shy about accepting it, we should be running up to accept it with glad hearts, with joy pulsing through our veins, with smiles upon our faces. God did not turn away from Judah and Jerusalem, and God rejoices when one or many are found! Why then do we slink toward our God? It is time to get rid of that meek voice and, instead, replace it with a strong and confident one; it is time to admit that we have been lost; and it is time to come home to God because the celebration is waiting. It is there for each and every one of us! God's grace is reason enough to celebrate in inappropriate ways. We should be matching the absurdity of God's grace with our abundance of joy. Let's get to it, let us join with God and the angels who are celebrating that those who have gone astray have been found!

Thanks be to God!

“ON GOING ASTRAY AND BEING FOUND”

September 16, 2007

by

The Rev. Ryan Lambert