

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, September 11, 2016

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28

At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem: A hot wind comes from me out of the bare heights in the desert toward my poor people, not to winnow or cleanse—wind too strong for that. Now it is I who speak in judgment against them.

"For my people are foolish,
they do not know me;
they are stupid children,
they have no understanding.
They are skilled in doing evil,
but do not know how to do good."

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.

For thus says the Lord:

The whole land shall be a desolation;
yet I will not make a full end.
Because of this the earth shall mourn,
and the heavens above grow black;
for I have spoken, I have purposed;
I have not relented nor will I turn back.

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Luke 15:1-10

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

"Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Let us pray...Amen.

When I was young, and my behavior was a bit on the squirrely side, my mother would often greet my father at the door as he arrived home from work. 'Do you know what *your* son did today?' was the usual question. Partly out of frustration, partly out of humor, parents often distance

themselves from their children's behavior by claiming that the misbehaving part somehow belongs to, or stems from the other parent!

I find myself doing the same thing with our girls, retelling for Betsy what *her* daughter did that was so vexing that day. We joke that whenever they have behavior that is questionable, they are the other parent's child!

All humor aside, as parents and grandparents and great grandparents, we know, don't we, that we cannot control the behavior of the younger generations. We know that we can't force them to behave in a certain way, even when we know that they know the difference between right and wrong.

All of God's children, including our own, have a free will that must be exercised. Of course, we wince when we see how some of our children, or our children's children choose to *use* their free will, don't we?

We do the best we can to raise our children right, giving them opportunities to grow and develop, to make good choices, to learn from their mistakes, and sometimes we even try to help them learn from our *own* mistakes. But of course, most of us need to learn things for ourselves, and rarely appreciate anyone else's experience.

Our Hebrew scripture this morning details how the prophet Jeremiah spoke for God at a time when the people of Israel had strayed far from God. They were lost. And God was mad. And through Jeremiah, God spoke of the anger and the pain of seeing what the people of God had done to the earth, to their home.

The children of God got lost.

Lost like the lost sheep of the gospel lesson. Lost like the lost coin. There is a strong connection between our Hebrew scripture and our gospel lesson this morning, and it's the theme of being lost, and hopefully found.

In the 21st century, think about how many ways we can get lost, lose our way, get separated from our God. And when we are lost, God seeks us, looks for us, aches for us to be returned to the right path.

In the clergy bible study I attend, an interesting question came up about this gospel passage. It sounds like a riddle, but bear with me, because I think it's an important question to ask: what is not lost, when something is lost? I'll ask it again: what is not lost when something is lost.

The first thing that I thought of was that the shepherd and the woman both had a clear idea of what they had lost. They knew what they had lost, they knew what to look for. The idea of the sheep, the idea of the coin meant that they would know what to look for. Both cared about the thing they had lost. Maybe we could say it was love, I'm not sure...but they were driven to find what they had lost, because they cared.

When I was 11, and we were camping in New Hampshire, each week, on Saturday, we had to go to the local dump to drop off our garbage. My dad was cutting down some trees, so my mom gathered me, my brother Ken, and our dog, Snoopy, and the week's garbage, into the station wagon, and off we went. The dump was just outside of Keene, about 20 minutes away. On the way, my brother and I pestered my mom with questions as to whether we could each get a comic book from the local store in Swanzey on the way home. And as usual, she replied with something like, 'if you're both good, we'll see.'

We got to the dump, which was a pretty cool place for an 11 year old to explore, we tossed our garbage, my mom corralled my brother and I back

into the car, and we headed off. My brother and I must have been good, because she pulled into the local store in Swanzey, and told us we could each pick out one comic book. So many choices....but finally, we checked out, and headed back to camp. When we go back, my dad asked, 'Where's Snoopy?'

And with a horrible feeling in my stomach, I realized I hadn't seen her since the dump. She wasn't in the car, hadn't been in the car when we got to the store, so she must have gotten out at the dump. 20 minutes away, after having been left there more than an hour ago.

My mom started to cry, I started to cry, my brother started to cry. And my dad suggested we go to the dump and look for her. Always practical.

So we all jumped in the car and headed back to the dump. In my mind, I could see Snoopy, romping through the garbage. I was worried about her, hoping she didn't get hit by a truck or car, hoping she didn't get cut on something sharp. I cared deeply for her, I loved her, I guess. And the image of her being lost made me want to cry more.

We pulled onto the dirt road that led to the dump entrance, and there, along the side of the road, trotting along happily, was Snoopy! We opened the car door, and she jumped right in, like nothing had happened! We were so happy to see her, we all cried I think, maybe even my dad.

Do you ever wonder if God feels anything like we do when the people God loves get lost? The dread, the panic, the fear. Does God have an image of us in God's mind, does God care enough for us to look for us? I think so.

The first place God looks for us is in worship. When we are in worship, we open ourselves to God in prayer, and in song, in meditation on God's Word. So when we are lost, God looks for us in worship.

Of course, when the children of God are lost, how likely is it that they will be found in a worship service? We're a small minority of the community. Just a fraction of our community attends church, attends worship.

Can the lost only be found in worship? Of course not, but again, how often would a lost child of God find themselves in prayer, with their hearts wide open to God's presence if they weren't in worship? Not too often I would think.

Yes, we know that God reaches all kinds of people in all kinds of ways, at many different times. But I believe that God looks for the lost first in worship. It's the first place God looks. The second place God looks is in our prayers. So if we aren't in worship, and we don't pray, I'm not sure whether God can really find us.

And there are so many ways we can get lost. Lost in our work, in our obligations, in our addictions, in our obsessions, in our sadness, in our anger. Practically anything you can think of can become an idol, a golden calf: we all need to shop for things, food, clothing, items that we use to live our lives. But when we begin shopping to make ourselves feel better about life, we're making a golden calf out of shopping.

Movies, music, television, all entertaining, pleasant diversions from the challenges of modern life. But when we seek those things to the exclusion of all other things, we fashion a golden calf out of entertainment, we get lost. And when many of our lost, the world begins to look like the world described in our Jeremiah passage.

God seeks us out when we are lost. But we do a pretty good job of hiding from God when we want to. We may even try and justify the path we're on by saying that God can find us anywhere, so it's not important to be in the most likely place for God to find us, namely worship.

The gospel lesson from Luke reminds us that God's energy is about finding us when we are lost, restoring our relationship with God when it is damaged.

Jesus is telling the Pharisees and the scribes, the ones who grumbled about the tax collectors and the sinners, that God seeks those who are lost. The tax collectors and sinners are lost in their own way, and the Pharisees and the scribes are lost in their own way too. God seeks both groups, seeks to restore a relationship with them, seeks repentance and restoration.

This gospel passage has often been quoted by church councils and Deacons as biblical evidence that pastors should spend time trying to convince those who have left the church to return. That energy spent finding the lost sheep will restore wholeness to the church.

But this passage is about God's relationship with us, not about our relationship with each other.

This passage speaks to God's actions on our behalf: that God seeks us when we are lost, that God rejoices when we are found. It doesn't seem to be about how we should approach our brothers and sisters who no longer worship with us, that seems to be God's job.

So if I could have you think about one thing today, reflect on one aspect of your faith life, it would be this: how easy is it to be lost? In a world where we have GPS, where someone can tell where we are by the signals that come from our cell phones, where the most remote areas of the world are being mapped by a company named Google, how can it be that we get lost on our way.

We think we know where we are, but in relation to God, are we on the path, or off the path?

Modern life provides us ample opportunity to fashion golden calves for ourselves. Whether out of anxiety, or fear, or boredom, our world is full of golden calves. And God is saying to Moses, look what *your* children have done!

But when Jesus came to us, in his human form, with his divine intentions, he helped change God's mind forever: we will not be consumed from the face of the earth by God's wrath. We have free will now, and we will bear the consequences of that free will sometime down the road, when God holds us accountable for the path we chose while living our lives.

God seeks us when we are lost. God rejoices when we are found, when we repent from the ways of the golden calf, and seek the Way of Jesus.

We do that in worship, together. We do that in prayer, together. We won't be found while pursuing our golden calves, indulging in our false idols. We'll be found where God seeks us. And the most likely place for God to find us is right here, together, with our voices raised together in worship and in prayer.

We may be found today, but we may yet get lost tomorrow, or the next day. Let us rejoice that God seeks us, aches for us, and let us make good choices about the path we choose to follow. Amen.