

BEING FOUND IN THE DARK

9/15/19 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Proper 19 (C) Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Psalm 14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

Several years ago, when my nieces were only about five and seven, they spent the morning sledding down the hills behind my parents' home. As Mom told me the story, I could see them bundled up in layers of jackets, scarves, hats and mittens, their little button noses red from the freezing temperature, and the sun reflecting brightly off the pure white snow.

She told me, since they'd been outside for a while, she went to check on them. They were easy to find, because she could hear them arguing over who would sit up front, who would choose the route, and who would be steering. In the midst of their tussle, the sled took off and they grabbed on as fast as they could. But, without an intentional path, or any steering on their part, they crashed half-way down the hill, tumbling in opposite directions to the bottom.

One of them started sobbing and the other called out, "Are you hurt?"

"No," cried the younger one, "but we don't even know where we are."

"Yes, we do!" the older one yelled back, "We're at the bottom of this hill!" And to this day, the older sister is still the pragmatic one.

But haven't you had days when you felt like the younger sister? When you haven't really gone anywhere, so you're not geographically lost, but at the same time you've completely lost your bearings. And on those days, you just want to cry out: "I don't even know where I am!"

The girls hadn't realized Gramma was watching them the whole time; Gramma was right there ready to help them back up the hill, and lovingly show them the way back home. Our relationship with God is like that.

As we insist we should sit right up front, that we choose our own route, and we do our own steering, we manage to get way off course from God's purpose and intention for our lives. And, yet, there's God...patiently observing as we crash and tumble about, ready to lovingly call us home whenever we're ready to be found.

Which is what the parable of the lost sheep and lost coin tell us in this morning's reading from Luke. It's easy to overlook that it's talking about us, though, isn't it? After all, this is a parable about sinners and tax collectors. We don't often think of ourselves as sinners in that sense; and, certainly, none of us are tax collectors!

But we are all sinners. If you think of sin as doing something that keeps us from being fully connected to God, then as we insist it's we who should sit right up front, we who can choose our own route, and we who'll do our own steering, we are sinning. Fortunately, God's nature is to forgive and restore.

So even in our darkest hour, when we feel like the lost one, the one overlooked, the one who doesn't fit, the one who isn't enough...whatever story we've made up, or come to accept...there's God. With the care of a gentle shepherd, or the focus of a woman sweeping for that silver coin, there's God ready to lovingly welcome us back home.

That's why our theme for the September sermon series is: "Finding Life in the Dark", because it's usually in our darkest hours when God's call to us finally gets our attention. Which means the dark isn't such a bad place to be, since it's a place where we'll be found by God.

Now, I am in no way implying that we must be in the dark to experience God. That'd be like that expression I hate so much...you know the one? "God doesn't give us anything we can't handle." You've heard me say this before: that while I completely understand the sentiment, the theology is whacky.

God doesn't divvy up bad and good events for us all, and then watch how we handle them. So maybe we need to start using a new expression. How about this: "Even in the dark; God finds you"?

I've been reading a book by Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest turned academic. The book's called, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*; it's about our tendency to label anything to do with darkness as bad, evil, or at least something to avoid. She suggests, however, that there are plenty of beautiful, beneficial and life-giving things that happen in the dark.

Germination is one. Of course, it's not so pleasant for the seed that gets burst open. But, on the other side of the pain, is a sprout that eventually takes the life found in the darkness up to the light.

Sharing stories of sitting outside out in the country watching stars dance in the night, the author describes how she's become more attuned to the world around her by using other senses, as just one example of the good found in the dark. I haven't yet finished the book, but I'm sure she'll get around to a vignette, or two, of times when she felt lost, in what some call the "dark night of the soul," and what fertile ground that time turned out to be for her.

When I'm in my own process of discernment, about which part or parts of my life need releasing, I often repeat to my friends that "I trust the process". I usually don't like the process much, because as I mentioned a moment ago, the seed breaking open can feel pretty painful. And, yet, on the other side, is the promise of new life.

In all of today's scripture readings, humanity is basically referred to as God's "lost causes". The prophet Jeremiah describes the ways the people were so stubborn and committed to doing things their way, and, yet, how God waited patiently nearby, ready to lovingly welcome them back home, because, after all, they are God's beloved...we are all God's beloved.

1st Timothy explains: "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost, " and continues with exactly the outcome I've been describing. He writes, "But I received mercy... and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus."

And, as I pointed out, the parables in Luke remind us, we are the coins and sheep; we are the lost ones. But whether we were tossed into the corner accidentally, or were purposefully hiding, God is constantly seeking us out, ready to forgive us and welcome us home at any moment.

Jesus explains that any one of us would rejoice over having found the lost coin, and that, in the same way, God is filled with joy over each and every sinner who repents. And repenting, is as simple as turning back around to be with God; surrendering again and again our insistence that we sit up front, that we choose the route, or that we do the steering.

I love the way it's stated in 1st Timothy: "But for that very reason I received mercy, so that...Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him".

And just because there are so many stories in the media that would convince us that there is only dark and that dark is evil, I want to share a story I heard recently about people in the little town of Hillsborough, North Carolina. When they heard that the Ku Klux Klan was planning to hold a demonstration in their town in the upcoming weeks, the townspeople went and created a listserv that allowed them to text everyone who signed-up at a moment's notice.

When they received the text that the KKK was in the process of beginning their protest, the townspeople all dropped whatever they were doing—whether they were at work, at school, or in the middle of grocery shopping—and went directly to the site. They staged their own peaceful counter-protest, surrounding and greatly outnumbering the KKK members. Their message that hate is not welcome in Hillsborough, North Carolina was communicated loud and clear.

There is hope in the darkness. In the darkness of the threat of hate, the townspeople found hope through community; and in the darkness of oppression, they shined a light onto the oppressor, declaring love is stronger than hate. Just maybe the demonstration of the townspeople helped one of those KKK members hear God's loving call to come home.

All of us—even KKK members—are being sought out by God. We may be labeled a “lost cause”, but we aren't. We are simply lost, not lost causes. God patiently seeks us out and lovingly calls us back home...over and over again.

Even in the dark; God finds you!

-AMEN

The Collect

O God, because without you we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

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-- a 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.

Psalm 14

- 1 The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God." *
All are corrupt and commit abominable acts;
there is none who does any good.
- 2 The LORD looks down from heaven upon us all, *
to see if there is any who is wise,
if there is one who seeks after God.
- 3 Every one has proved faithless;
all alike have turned bad; *
there is none who does good; no, not one.
- 4 Have they no knowledge, all those evildoers *
who eat up my people like bread
and do not call upon the LORD?
- 5 See how they tremble with fear, *
because God is in the company of the righteous.
- 6 Their aim is to confound the plans of the afflicted, *
but the LORD is their refuge.
- 7 Oh, that Israel's deliverance would come out of Zion! *
when the LORD restores the fortunes of his people,
Jacob will rejoice and Israel be glad.

1 Timothy 1:12-17

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, 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, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Luke 15:1-10

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. 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 persons 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."