

**Getting Lost**  
**Based on Exodus 32:7-14 and Luke 15:1-10**  
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Part of me wonders, what was the one sheep thinking when it got lost? I know it's a parable, not a documentary, but still, I wonder. Did it spy a patch of especially green grass in the distance, and head for that? Was it following a bird or a butterfly? Or was it thinking, "I'm tired of blindly following the flock; it's time I struck out on my own and thought for myself. What am I, a sheep?"

Sometimes being lost feels like freedom, at least for a while. Maybe you've seen the movie or read the book, *Into the Wild*. It's the disturbing true story of a young man who, angry with his parents and disenchanted with civilization, travels across the country on his own, first driving, then hitchhiking, then hopping freight trains, and eventually hiking. He ends up in Alaska, north of Denali National Park, where he finds an abandoned bus that he makes his home. Mind you, he has told his parents nothing at all about where he is going—personally, I find it hard to forgive him for that. But he is utterly free and he glories in the beauty of the wilderness, for a while. Then he becomes cold, his food sources dry up, the meat from the moose he managed to kill spoils quickly, life in the wilderness becomes a struggle, and he is, at last, lonely. He writes in his journal that happiness is only real when it is shared. He tries to go home, but the stream he crossed to get there has now risen to a torrent, and he cannot get to the other side. He is forced to go back to his bus. When he mistakenly eats poisonous berries, there is no one to help him, and he is already so weak from malnutrition that the poison kills him.

And so he was lost. He had been lost, and did not even know he was lost until it was, essentially, too late. Sometimes being lost feels like freedom—for a while.

That's not really the point of Jesus' parable, of course. The point of the parable is not why the sheep wandered away, what it thought it was doing out there away from the flock. The point of the parable is that the sheep was missed, that it was valued, that the shepherd risked his own safety and that of all the other sheep to go after it, that no matter how wayward or willful or silly the wandering sheep has been, the shepherd will not leave it to its own devices. He will not leave the sheep to eat the wrong berries and die out there, alone.

Both scriptures today have to do with forgiveness rather than punishment. In the book of Exodus, the people have worshipped a gold statue, rather than waiting for

word from God. Moses' own brother seems to have both led the people in their idolatry and followed them, giving in to their impatience and providing them with an idol to worship. God is furious, ready to destroy the people and forget his whole project with them. But Moses begs God to reconsider—"don't let the Egyptians say you're cruel," he pleads with God; "remember these are the descendants of Abraham, and of Isaac." And God relents.

And in Luke's gospel, people around Jesus want him to punish known sinners by shunning them. They want him to distance himself, physically and morally, from people whom everyone knows have made big mistakes. But Jesus has exactly the opposite strategy in mind. He doesn't push the sinners and the supposed lowlifes away; he draws them near. He doesn't hide from them; he seeks them out, he seeks them out where they are hiding—up in a fig tree or in an abandoned bus north of Denali National Park. Even if it means neglecting the holy people, the people who work every day to stay on the straight and narrow. Jesus is looking for the people who are lost, because they're the ones who need his help; they're the ones in danger.

There was a minute in my 10 days on the Appalachian Trail, when I very much resembled the lost sheep of Jesus' parable. I can tell you now that I really have a terrible sense of direction. But for the most part, I had the white blazes of the trail to make up for that—pretty large, white paint brush strokes, every little ways, so as soon as you began to doubt if this were the right path, there was another white blaze. Conversely, if you look for a white blaze and don't see one pretty soon, you are definitely not on the trail. But despite the excellent system of marking on the trail, I still got lost, a little bit, once.

Basically, I followed some white blazes to a water source, not realizing that the main trail didn't continue in that same direction. I *did* continue, and when I saw no more white blazes, I came back, still couldn't figure out where else the trail could lead, started out the same way again, no white blazes, came back again. None of that would have been that big a deal except that it involved going down a long, steep hill and then up again, and then down again and up again. Did I mention it was hot? The second time I came up, I decided I would stay near the last white blazes I saw, until someone came by who knew where they were going.

Mind you, I carried a cell phone with me, but it was dead at that point. I had a battery pack for the cell phone with me, but I had brought the wrong cord to connect it to my phone, so for the moment the battery was useless. I had some printed pages from the guidebook with me, but they weren't helping. I needed

people. I didn't need experts or specialists or forest rangers. I just needed people with a little more familiarity with my surroundings than I had.

The second time I came up the hill, I was determined to sit and wait for hours if necessary, for people who knew the trail to come along. But I didn't even get seated, before my guides turned up, in the form of three teenage girls from New Zealand (exchange students, maybe?) on their way to a nearby pond, walking in their bathing suits and sandals, who knew exactly how I should get to the trail and were very nice about directing me there.

Sometimes that's all it takes. Not a guru or a sage or a thru-hiker. Just someone who's walked that path before.

Finding the lost isn't supposed to be a logical enterprise. It doesn't make logical or financial sense to leave 99 sheep vulnerable in the field while you go searching out the one that wandered away. The prodigal son's older brother complains to his father: "it's doesn't make sense that you celebrate the one who ran away, and not me, when I've been here the whole time, plugging away, doing my duty." It doesn't make sense, but then again it kind of does.

My son Nazim was a lego fiend as a kid—I mean, he was next level in his Lego passion. When he got a new set, he would not eat or rest until it was finished. One time, the kid next door got a new Lego set and his mom asked him if he wanted help putting it together, but the little boy answered, no, Nazim will be over in a little while and he'll do it.

Invariably, in putting the set together, there would be a piece that Nazim had trouble finding. He would give up hope, almost, yell to me that a piece was missing, to which I generally said, lamely, "keep looking!" Often he would insist that I come and help him search for the missing piece. I came to understand that I was there for moral support, only. Usually I'd just about enter the room when he would yell, "found it!" He always found it himself—partly because I never completely understood what it was I was looking for. But mostly because he cared so, so much more. He knew *exactly* what he was looking for—to him, that missing piece had its own identity and value. And maybe most importantly, the lego set couldn't be complete without that one piece, and an incomplete Lego set might as well not be Legos at all. For a Lego aficionado like him, there could be no piece left behind.

I suspect that something like this is the reason that Jesus seeks out the lost, why the shepherd goes searching for the 100<sup>th</sup> sheep. Because without that missing one, the wholeness of the community cannot happen. It's not only for that one sheep, but for what that sheep means to the flock. Not only for that wayward sinner, but because the righteous people need that sinner's gifts and perspectives. The older brother needs to know what the prodigal son learned out there; why he left and why he came back. God seeks us out, however far we have wandered, because we are each of us valued and known. We are every one of us an essential part of the beloved community that God is building. We are loved and valued for who we are, and we are loved and valued and sought out, for the essential, unique gifts that we bring to the building up of God's community.