

THE LOST SHEEP



Sir John E Millais

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The Lost Sheep and The Lost Coin

Luke 15:1-10

As Luke sets the scene, Jesus is in trouble again for hanging out with the wrong people. As “all the tax collectors and sinners” come near to listen to him, the Pharisees and scribes begin to grumble: “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

In response, Jesus tells his critics two parables. In the first, a shepherd leaves his flock of ninety nine to look for a single lamb that is lost. He searches until he finds it, and when he does, he carries that lamb home on his shoulders, invites his friends and neighbours over and throws a party to celebrate.

In the second, a woman loses one of her ten silver coins. Immediately, she lights a lamp and sweeps her entire house, looking carefully for the coin until she finds it. Then, like the shepherd, she calls together her friends and neighbours and asks them to celebrate the recovery of the coin: "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost."

Many interpret these two parables as being about going outside the Church in order to find and rescue sinners. But no, the lost lamb belongs to the shepherd, and, likewise the coin belongs to the woman before she found it. In other words, these parables are not about lost outsiders finding salvation and becoming Christians. These parables are about us, the insiders. The church-goers, the bread and wine consumers, the Bible readers. These are parables about lostness on the inside.

Lostness happens to God's people and we get lost over and over again, and God finds us over and over again. Lostness is part and parcel of the life of faith.

What does it mean to be lost? It means so many things. It means we lose our sense of belonging, we lose our capacity to trust, we lose our felt experience of God's presence, we lose our will to persevere. Some of us get lost when illness descends on our lives and God's goodness starts to look not so good. Some of us get lost when death comes too soon and too suddenly for someone we love, and we experience a crisis of faith that leaves us reeling. Some of us get lost when our marriages die. Some of us get lost when our children break our hearts. Some of us get lost in the throws of addiction or anxiety, or lust or un-forgiveness, or hatred, or bitterness.

Some of us get lost very close to home - within the very walls of the Church. We get lost when prayer turns to dust in our mouths. When the scripture we once loved lies dead on the page. When sitting in the pew on a Sunday morning makes our skin crawl. When even the most well-intentioned sermon sucks the oxygen out of our lungs. When the table of bread and wine that once nourished us now leaves us hungry, bewildered, or bored. Some of us become lost when a pandemic strikes and we can no longer be safe inside a church, where the singing is banned and masks must be worn during worship.

We get lost. We get so lost that the shepherd has to wander through the craggy wilderness to find us. We get so lost that the housewife has to light her lamp, pick up her broom, and

sweep every nook and cranny of her house to discover what's become of us.

When we become lost, we feel it eventually. But from the very start of our lostness it is God who experiences authentic, real loss. God searches, God persists, God lingers, and God plods. God wanders over hills and valleys looking for his lost lamb. God turns the house upside down looking for her lost coin. And when at last God finds what God is looking for, God cannot contain the joy that wells up inside. So God invites the whole neighbourhood over, shares the happy news of recovery, and throws a party to end all parties.

These two parables on lostness reveal something about the nature of God. God the searcher, God the seeker, God the finder. God is where lostness reigns. God is in the darkness of the wilderness. God is in the remotest corners of the house. God is where the search is at its fiercest. Meaning: If I want to find God, I have to seek the lost. I have to leave the safety of the inside and venture out. I have to recognize my own lostness, and consent to be found.

This isn't easy. For one thing, its so hard for me to believe that I'm worth looking for. That I'm not expendable. That I'm loved enough to warrant a long, hard, diligent search. It's so hard to trust that God won't give up on me. That God does God's best work when I'm utterly lost and unable to find myself. That God

will feel so much joy at my recovery that he'll tell the whole world the good news and throw us all a party.

Lostness makes us stronger at the edges and softer at the centre. Lostness teaches us about vulnerability, about empathy, about humility, about patience. Lostness shows us who we really are and who God really is. "What you seek is seeking you" (Rumi). This is true and even when we find ourselves in the bleakest and hopeless places, and we've given up seeking ourselves - God finds us.



Much of the above is from Debbi Thomas and her essay on Lostness.