

The God Who Seeks

Series: Lost and Found
 Date: 24 May 2025, 5th Sunday after Easter
 Location: St George's Battery Point
 Texts: Ezekiel 34.11-16, Luke 15.1-10

In 1986 a 5 year old boy named Saroo boarded a train Khandwa, Mayha Pradesh in India with his older brother Guddu. Their father had left their mother several years earlier and Guddu and Saroo had to beg and pilfer food in order for the family to survive. When they got to the next station, Saroo was exhausted. His brother told him to wait on the platform for him to return. Saroo fell asleep. When he woke his brother had not returned. He got into another train carriage and fell asleep waiting for his brother. When he woke he was 1500km away in Calcutta. After several weeks he was picked up by the police, declared to be a lost child and sent to an orphanage. In 1987 John and Sue Brierly from Hobart. 25 years later Saroo began to search for his mother using Google earth to trace the train lines from Calcutta and following his patchy memory. Incredibly, he was able to find his mother Kamla. Despite the family moving to another town she had stayed in the same house, convinced that one day her son would return. It turns out that Saroo was a mispronunciation. His given name was Sheru, which means "lion", and you can watch his story in the 2016 film starring Nicole Kidman. I cannot imagine the joy of Kamla and Saroo when they were reunited.

In this series, **Stories of Hope**, we've been looking at the parables Jesus tells his disciples on the road from Galilee to Jerusalem. Jesus uses these parables to teach us what God is like, about God's kingdom, and what it means for us to be part of the kingdom. If you're new or visiting, welcome! This is a great time to join us because these parables get to the heart of who God is and how we can know him and that is the heart of the Christian faith. Today and next week we're going to look at 3 of Jesus' most famous parables: the parable of the Lost Sheep, the parable the Lost Coin, and then next week bishop Richard will look at the third parable, the parable of the Lost Sons. These parables overturned the expectations of the people who first heard them. They thought God was one thing. Jesus showed them God was something different. And he wants to bring that change of perspective to us as well to change and transform our lives.

All three parables follow the same basic storyline. Something is lost. Then it's found. Then there's a party to celebrate. If each story is basically the same, why did Jesus use three different stories when he could have just used one? The answer is that the differences between the stories take us deeper into what Jesus wants to teach us about God and ourselves. So shall we get into it?

"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? 5 And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders 6 and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost

sheep.’ 7 I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

8 “Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9 And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ 10 In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

What’s the same about these 2 parables? Well, they’re both about someone losing something and then searching until they find it. In the first story the thing that’s lost is a sheep, and in the second it’s a coin. But the focus isn’t on the sheep or the coin, it’s on the person seeking until they find what was lost. The shepherd leaves the 99 sheep and goes after the lost sheep and he does not rest until he finds it. The second story lingers on the search. The woman lights a lamp, sweeps her house from top to bottom, carefully searches every nook and cranny until she finds it.

When the shepherd finds his lost sheep he’s overjoyed. He gently carries the sheep home and invites all his friends and neighbours to celebrate because he’s found his lost sheep. In the same way the woman calls her friends and neighbours to share her joy, “ I’ve found my lost coin!”

What do these stories teach us about God? It’s clear that the shepherd and the woman represent God. The lost sheep and the lost coin represent us. We belong to God, but we’re lost. But God’s heart is for us. All his affection is set upon us. He leaves the 99, and he goes in search of us. Like the woman he lights a lamp, to shine in all the dark corners to find us. There’s no dark place you can go where he won’t look for you. He’s prepared to take on all the hardship and suffering needed to rescue us from where we find ourselves. And he does not rest until he finds us. He’s always searching, seeking for us.

Jesus’ parable of the lost sheep Jesus sounded a lot like the promise God made through the prophet Ezekiel hundreds of years before.

This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. 12 As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered ... 14 I will tend them in a good pasture, ... I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. 16 I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, ... I will shepherd the flock with justice.¹

¹ Ezekiel 34.11-16

In John's gospel Jesus says that he himself is the The Good Shepherd. And later in Luke Jesus says that he came to seek and to save the lost.² God's promise to Ezekiel had come true. In Jesus, God had come to shepherd his people, to search for his lost sheep and to bring them home.

But who are the lost sheep, that the Good Shepherd Jesus is prepared to go and search for till he finds them? The answer comes when we look at the context of this parable. Have a read with me verse 1.

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. **2** But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Jesus tells these three stories in response to the condescending complaints of the Pharisees about who he is hanging out with. Who were the tax collectors and sinners that the Pharisees had in mind? Tax collectors worked with the occupying Roman forces to collect taxes. They were hated for collaborating with the national enemy and using their muscle to line their own pockets. Sinners were those who were known for disobeying God's law and so were seen to have forfeited their relationship with God. They were moral and religious failures.

In our own polarised society the left often seems concerned with issues of social and economic justice and despises those who fail in this regard, whereas the right is often concerned with issues of personal morality and religion, and lambasts those who transgress those norms. How interesting that here the Pharisees cannot believe that Jesus would eat with the greedy capitalist Tax Collectors *and* the immoral sinners. And yet those despised by both the left and the right are drawn to Jesus.

Earlier in Luke's Gospel Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick. I've not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."³ The problem for the Pharisees was that they believed they were righteous and that God was for them. If Jesus were from God, a prophet, he would want to hang out with them. What was he doing partying with these immoral, bigoted people?

Jesus tells these stories to show God's heart. He does not deny that the people coming to him have things they have done wrong. Far from it! He says they are sick and need a doctor. They are sinners who need to repent. They are lost people who he has come to find. And we saw what repentance is last week. It means turning around. Turning from self and turning back to God. Jesus starts his public ministry by saying to "The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and Believe the Good News!" Repentance is accompanied by belief. Trusting that the

² Luke 19.10

³ Luke 5.30

Good News is true. And what is the Good News? That the Good Shepherd has come to search for his lost sheep.

Who are the lost sheep? Us. You might feel like you've stuffed up. You've done things you're ashamed of. You've failed on the left's moral compass or you've failed on the right's moral compass, or maybe you've just failed in ways that only you know about, and you feel sick because of it. Brilliant! Jesus says, he has come for people like you, who know they are sick and need a doctor. Maybe you're like a sheep who has wandered off on your own way, and you've realised that you're lost and alone and the world is a scary place. Brilliant! Jesus is the Good Shepherd, he has been searching for you. Maybe you're like the lost coin, you feel like you've been hidden, discarded, neglected, forgotten, unloved. Brilliant! God has not forgotten you. He's turning the house upside down to find you.

One commentator suggests that the woman's coins would have been hung on a headdress as part of dowry. Translate that picture to today, and the coin would have been like a wedding or diamond engagement ring. If you lose that, you're going to turn the house upside down to find it, because it's so precious to you. And Jesus says, in the same way and even more so, you are precious to God.

Next week we'll hear about Jesus' third parable, the parable of the 2 lost sons. In that parable the figure who represents God is the Father, who waits for his lost son to come home. Tuesday this week was the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea where the creed which we often say was hammered out, summarising the doctrine of the Trinity. That the one true God who made heaven and earth is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If we take a theological reading of these three parables we see God the Son who comes to seek and to save the lost as the Good Shepherd. We see God the Father who waits with open arms, longing for his children to come home. That leaves the middle parable, the woman who lights the lamp and searches the house. In this reading we can see her as representing the Holy Spirit. The Spirit shines the Light of God's truth into our hearts. The Spirit frees those trapped in darkness. The Spirit sweeps our minds clean of the lies that would cause us to doubt that God loves us and so run away from him. The Spirit brings us to repentance, turning our hearts so that we respond to God in thankfulness and trust. And the instruments the Spirit uses to do this work are his people - the church. He gives us gifts so we can join Jesus' mission of seeking and saving the lost.

So in these parables Jesus shows us who God is. He's the God who loves us. He is the God who seeks his lost children to bring them home. He is also God the Holy Trinity: The waiting Father, arms outstretched longing to welcome us home. The two hands of the Father: the Son, the Good Shepherd, who has come to seek and save the lost; and the Holy Spirit, the Light searching our hearts to bring us home.

There's one final thing we learn about God in these two parables. They both finish with a celebration. "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep." "There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." Did you notice who it is who rejoices in heaven? I had always thought it was the angels who celebrated. But have a look again at verse 10, "In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." Who is the one rejoicing? It's the Good Shepherd. It's the woman. It's God himself. Yes the angels are there, but only as guests who have been invited to share the joy of the Father.

Do you realise that this how God feels about you? He loves you with all his heart. And when you come home to him, well he dances a jig with glee. He calls all the angels of heaven, and us the Church, to join that dance of joy, to celebrate. "My daughter, my son, was lost, but now he's found!" Do you know that it's this joy, the longing for the joy of your welcome home that moved God to seek you in the first place? Hear what God says in Hebrews 12.

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, *who for the joy set before him endured the cross*, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.⁴

Whoever you are. Whatever you've done. Whatever is going on in your life. God loves you. He has sent his Son the Good Shepherd to seek for you and save you. His Holy Spirit has been searching for you. Maybe you've sensed that. Maybe you've heard his voice calling you. Will you admit you need God's help? Say sorry for the bad stuff in your life. Turn to Jesus and ask for his forgiveness. Ask him to come into your life. And know when you do, God himself is rejoicing before all the angels in heaven, even now.

⁴ Hebrews 12.2-3