

“When home can’t be found”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
September 11, 2022

1 Timothy 1:12-17 and Luke 15:1-10

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

This is the story of how my wife Jenna and I got lost the first day of our honeymoon. We were in the Smoky Mountains, and decided to take a leisurely morning hike

We hiked the first 3 miles just fine, and then we got to this fork in the trail, with one path going forward and the other turning right. We were supposed to turn right. . . . We did not. If we had, we would have hiked another 1.3 miles, reached our romantic view, and then gotten back to the car by mid-afternoon. Instead, we went straight. We don’t remember exactly what happened. But we think we were so lost in our lovey-dovey conversation (remember, this is pre-children) that we just glanced at the sign and assumed we knew what we were doing. Now, this wouldn’t have been so bad if we had bothered to check the map at some point. . . . We did not. We kept hiking, and you know, you’re at 6,000 feet in elevation, and these trails are rocky and steep, we’re walking along the spine of the Appalachian Mountains, but we keep thinking the overlook must just be around the corner.

Five miles later, we start to think, “You know, this feels like more than a mile.” So at that point we get out the map, and we realize, oh yes, we do seem to have taken the wrong trail; in fact, it seems that we are on a three-day hike to something called Mt. LeConte. At this point, Jenna, my wife, decides we’re going to die. We did not pack enough food or water for even a full day hike. We haven’t seen anyone for a very long time, because well, who’s stupid enough to take this trail? And we were informed that morning by our waiter that there was a lot of extra bear activity and that we should watch out because the bears are hungry. So Jenna starts picturing some tragic headline about the newlyweds falling off a mountain or being eaten by a bear.

We turn around, we head back, hiking another 5 miles, until we get to the fork in the trail where we should have turned. Then of course we still have to do the romantic overlook. So we hiked another mile, and we’re sitting there, and then we hear something: oh, yes that would be thunder. So we end up hiking the last four miles in the dark in a torrential downpour, our legs aching from an unexpected 18 mile hike, dehydrated and hungry. We would have cried but we didn’t have enough water left in our bodies to make tears.

That day taught me a few things about marriage: first, you will get lost; second, be prepared (should have learned that from Boy Scouts, apparently didn’t); third, you will be far more confident than you should; and fourth, there will be a time when you curl up in a ball, in the rain, and beg the other person just to leave you there to be eaten presumably by a bear.

It’s a part of life, though, isn’t it? Getting lost. And the hardest thing to lose is home. Home, of course, can be many things: family, a person we love, a church, a job, a special place, even an idea. Home is whatever makes us feel safe and loved, a place where we belong, where we have

purpose and identity. It anchors us, defines us, gives order and meaning to our universe. But what happens when we lose it?

The pandemic did that to a lot of us, disconnecting us from the people, the places, the faith, and the traditions that we valued. But it's not only the pandemic; life just has a way of... well... slipping away. And of course, the most profound understanding of home is God, our originator, our author, the One from whom we come, the One who loves us unconditionally. And when we lose whatever it was that was giving us that sense of home, we often feel like we've lost God too.

Now, they'll tell you that the solution is to get un-lost. Work hard, get your mind set, pull your life together, find yourself, find God. You can fix this. But that's not always true, is it? There are some things we can't fix. Sometimes it's just too scary, or too hard, or beyond our control. It was great that Jenna and I persisted and, you know, didn't allow ourselves to die in the woods that day, but that single day of being lost pales in comparison to the person who's terrified to walk through those church doors, or the person whose family has been upended by divorce or sickness or death or hate, or the person who's no longer at home in their own body because of cancer or dementia or miscarriage, or the person who's left the only job they ever knew and has no idea what purpose life holds now.

That's what I love about these stories Jesus tells today. They're not about powerful warriors or philosophers who fight their way home. They're about us at our most vulnerable. A lost sheep. A lost coin. And right after these stories, the tale of the Prodigal Son: a young man who hits rock bottom and loses everything.

And then he offers us this twist of grace. The shepherd seeks the sheep. The widow seeks the coin. The father runs to his son. Jesus says that when home can't be found, it finds us. Home comes to us. God comes to us—seeks us with an unrelenting resolve, to find us, to hold us, to bring us home, because of an unshakeable love. We don't have to find home; it finds us. That is profound good news.

The shepherd searches mountains and valleys, years if need be, to find the sheep. "And when he has found it," says Jesus, "he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices... He comes home."

The father, in the story right after this one, comes to the son before he gets home: "But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." He does all this before his son has said a word.

God is so crazy in love with us that God will stop at nothing to bring us home. Because that's what love does, right? It comes after us. The gospel says that Jesus pursues us, even to the point of death, descends into the bowels of hell for us, to pull us out.

Twenty-one years ago, on this very day, when those airplanes crashed into the Twin Towers, a man named Welles Crowther led all his colleagues out of the building to safety. That alone would have been enough to make him a hero, but he went back. He found more people and led them to safety. And then he went back again, and again, and again, until the second tower fell, with him in it.

That's God, plunging into whatever burning chaos we are experiencing, however we're lost, and bringing us home.

We may ask then, "Well, where is this God who has come for me?" Her hand is stretched before us even now. She's right here. Who knows how she is trying to communicate with you, save you? Who knows what people, what opportunities, what poetry, she has brought into your life to bring you home? Or what grace and eternal life await?

It may be that we need this time, between being lost and being found. The sheep discovers new country in that interlude. The lost coin, which has been found, knows its preciousness more than the coin never lost. The Prodigal Son grows in understanding. For the lost know something of God, of home, that those not lost will never know.

The homecoming Jesus describes is not our work, but God's. We forget that sometimes even here at church. We think we've got to run ourselves ragged trying to get people back to church, back home. And indeed, part of our calling is to reach out. We aren't meant to wait behind these walls until time and age sweep us aside; we are meant to take this church out to the people, to the community. But carried alone, that is a burden too great. Many will not be ready. We'll think ourselves failures. Why weren't we good enough shepherds to bring them back? But that's the point. We're not shepherds. We're sheep too. Yes, we are called to go beyond these walls, but not to find the lost; rather, to love the lost as one of the lost, to open ourselves to be found continually there among the lost, to be astonished at how God finds us and brings us home together.

We seek each other, not with arms of guilt or self-righteousness or obligation, but like Jesus, as fellow wanderers, as fellow homeless, as lost ones too.

Peter Pan rallied the Lost Boys because he was one too. Same goes for Jesus. Same goes for us.

What if instead of constantly and exhaustingly trying to rescue ourselves and others, we devoted ourselves to becoming aware and alive to how God, wondrously, is seeking us and bringing us home? Now that's a party worth having. **Amen.**