

The Gift of Getting Lost

A sermon in the 2016 Lenten worship series

“Gifts from the Dark Wood”

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- Psalm 119: 169-176 I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek out your servant, for I do not forget your commandments. (v.176)
- Luke 15:1-7 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? (vv.3-4)
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Feeling lost can make us more attentive to how God is trying to guide us in our lives.

When you have a new driver in your house is when you realize how much your kids *haven't* been paying attention. They've gone with you to the same places for years and years. But now behind the wheel themselves, new drivers don't know the way to go. Here's an example. Navigating from our house to, say, Giant Eagle, is pretty simple: turn right onto Lake Road, left onto Wagar Road, then right onto Center Ridge. Simple. But not if you're a new driver.

New drivers' minds are awash in “too much information” while they're piloting that powerful vehicle on the roadway: turning corners properly, watching their speed, being aware of other traffic, obeying traffic signals, watching for pedestrians and cyclists, noticing that cute guy or gal mowing the grass... and all that without music playing or a cell phone ringing. Before they know it, they've missed a turn and don't know what to do, where to go. They're lost, even in the town they grew up in.

Regardless of our age, the lives we lead can be like the plight of a new driver. We think we know where our life's headed.

- We've followed the normal course of life: grade school, middle school, now we're in high school getting ready for college or work or military service.
- Maybe we've already gone the college route, landed our first job, then our second, found a partner, settled into a cozy place to live.
- Maybe we've done the child-rearing thing, gotten them moved out (at least for now) and are exploring the new “empty nest.”
- Maybe our retirement party was years ago, and now we're sensing a need to downsize our space and our stuff.

Wherever we are in the story of our own lives, we think we know where we're headed. Until suddenly we don't. The path we *thought* we were following simply disappears. Maybe new opportunities arise. Sometimes complications spring up. At other times the path disappears for no apparent reason.

During Lent this year we've been exploring the metaphor of a “dark woods” to describe what those periods in our lives feel like when we're distracted by doubt, tested by temptation, undermined by uncertainty. It seems that in those distressing, depressing,

disorienting “dark woods” periods of our lives God may be offering us a unique blessing that we might not otherwise experience. Today we acknowledge how it can be that *in our own lives* we can feel lost and uncertain which direction to turn, which way to go.

Undoubtedly you’ve had the experience of becoming lost while behind the wheel. When you realize you’re lost, suddenly you become much more attentive to your surroundings. You turn off the radio not because it impairs your ability to see landmarks but because its noise is a distraction you can’t abide at that moment.

Similarly, when we realize that we’ve lost the path we thought our lives were following, we also become more attentive, looking for signs of what happened, how we got off the path (or how the path veered out from under us).

It’s been more than a dozen years since the release of the movie “Bruce Almighty” starring Jim Carrey, Jennifer Aniston and Morgan Freeman. Jim Carrey plays Bruce Nolan, a local TV weatherman in Buffalo who is fired. Bruce’s world is turned upside-down. He doesn’t know who he is, what he’s supposed to do. Bruce is lost.

At one point he’s venting his anger at a God he’s not even sure he believes in.

As he drives down the highway one night he anxiously prays, “Okay, God, you want me to talk to you? Then talk back. Tell me what’s going on. What should I do? Give me a signal.” Just then he passes a road construction sign flashing the words, “Caution Ahead.” Oblivious to its message, he continues to pray, “I need your guidance, Lord, please send me a sign!” A truck full of construction signs suddenly pulls in front of him, full of warning signs like “Stop” and “Wrong Way.” Exasperated, Bruce exclaims, “Ah, what’s this joker doing now?” Stomping on the accelerator, swerving dangerously around the truck, he glances at his rearview mirror, noticing a set of prayer beads hung there. “Okay,” he says, I’ll do it your way” as he takes the beads in his hand, holds them in a tight fist, and prays, “All right, Lord, I need a miracle.... I’m desperate. I need your help, Lord. Please, reach into my life.”

Suddenly Bruce’s car hits a pothole that jolts the beads out of his hand. Taking his eyes off the road, he searches and finds the beads on the floor. Clutching them triumphantly in his hands, he looks at the beads and laughs in an I’ll-show-you-who’s-boss kind of way, then looks ahead just as his car smashes into a light pole next to [Lake Erie.] Stumbling out of the car, he tosses his prayer beads into the lake shouting, “Fine. The gloves are off, pal! Let me see a little wrath. Smite me, O mighty Smiter! *You’re* the one who should be fired! The only one around here who’s not doing his job is you! *Answer me!*”

Just then Bruce’s pager rings. Slowly, he takes the pager off its holster and checks the number. Little does he know but it’s God paging him. “Sorry. Don’t know ya,” he sighs. Wouldn’t call ya if I did.”¹

As the movie progresses, Bruce developed a sensitivity to noticing the signs along the way. Gradually, Bruce noticed hints and intuitions and insights that God placed before him. Like that shepherd Jesus described who would not abandon that one lost little sheep who

¹ Steve Koren, Mark O’Keefe, Steve Oederkerk, *Bruce Almighty* (Los Angeles: Universal Pictures, 2003), cited in Eric Elnes’ *Gifts of the Dark Wood: seven blessings for soulful skeptics (and other wanderers)*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015, 86-87.

wandered away from the flock, God remained constant, faithful, pursuing lost little Bruce. God guided Bruce from a place of anxiety and uncertainty. God guided Bruce toward a place where he discovered healing for his emotional turmoil.

Psalm 119 is notable not only because it's the longest psalm in the Bible. Psalm 119 also recognizes how common it is for us to feel like we're lost and don't know which way to turn. Verse 176 confesses "I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek out your servant, for I do not forget your commandments." And verse 170 pleads "Let my [prayer] come before you; deliver me according to your promise."² We can't expect God to make our life's path immediately and completely clear to us—that would make us humanoid robots subject to God's control for our every move. If God micromanaged us all the way down to when you scratch your head and when you take a nap, that would negate God's gift to us of free will and autonomy.

So God doesn't reveal our entire destiny all at once. But over time God continues to reveal a bit more of the path. Author E.L. Doctorow's description of what it's like to write a novel also applies to how God reveals each step of our life's journey: "...Doctorow once observed, 'Writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.'"³

To our surprise, feeling "lost" from time to time can actually be a gift. When we sense that we're not sure where we are, uncertain what's going on, not clear on where to go next, we can become more perceptive of God's guidance. "Getting lost" reminds us that God will show us a way if we become more attentive to the subtle signs that God places in our lives to show us where the path goes next.

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² New Revised Standard Version; [prayer] = "supplication"

³ Elmes., op.cit., 100.