

Lost things and lions

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All of the lectionary texts for this week address lost things. In Jeremiah, a people and a city; in 1 Timothy, a blasphemer and a Roman citizen; in Luke, a sheep and a coin.

Perhaps they might lead us to suppose the Bible is all about lost things. I expect that's what the Pharisees and scribes listening to Jesus' parables might have supposed. Jesus begins, "Which of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one..."—inviting them to identify with the hard-working shepherd who labors over his irresponsible and sometimes unreliable sheep. I confess as a priest and professor I can lapse into the same mode: why don't people show up when they say they will? Why can't students get their papers to me on time? Of course, *I'm* responsible and reliable to the utmost, never late for anything and meticulous in following up the minutest particulars. . . just like the woman searching methodically to complete her count of coins.

If the Bible is about lost things, then I find here a comfortable fit. It describes humanity well: at least it confirms something of my experience. These parables acknowledge my hard work and urge me on to be even more patient and particular in seeking out the lost; on the one hand, never giving up and on the other hand, treasuring even the most recalcitrant clients. Bear in mind that I'm not offended to be compared to a shepherd or a woman, as undoubtedly the Pharisees would have been.

But this is not the point of these parables. The problem is with the assumption that the Bible is all about humanity. No! The Bible is fundamentally about God. Jesus isn't just calling the Pharisees to be a bit more generous. Hear the twist at the end, when Jesus calls them to repentance—a complete reversal of their way of seeing and being in the world. The point of these two parables is not for us to identify with the shepherd and the woman. We are not the shepherd: we are the lost sheep. We are

not the woman: we are the lost coin. God is the shepherd; God is the searching woman. God is the one who takes the astonishing risk of leaving the 99 sheep and coming to look for us, a journey of danger, daring and devotion. God is the one who carefully, thoughtfully, seeks us out like a woman meticulously and methodically tracking down a lost coin. This story about God is also an invitation to become a part of God's story—if we can stop running away and hiding from the one who yearns and searches for us.

We are used to hearing these parables, and it is hard to communicate the shock of this reversal afresh. Allow me to indulge in a favorite story from a book that never seems to become dated: *Christianity Rediscovered*, by Vincent Donovan. Donovan was a Roman Catholic priest-missionary in Tanzania in the 1960s. Exasperated with conventional forms of Catholic education, he persuaded his bishop to let him simply wander among the Masai tribes, sharing their life and talking about God.

Initially he wrestled with his own doubts about how the particular story of Jesus' cross and resurrection translated into the Masai culture all around him. But a Masai elder converted Donovan by contrasting the faith of a Western hunter with the faith of an African lion. The Masai elder showed Donovan that his notion of faith was a profoundly Western notion: it was merely intellectual assent. "To 'believe' like that was similar to a white hunter shooting an animal with his gun from a great distance. Only his eyes and his fingers took part in the act." The Masai elder said, "'For a [person] really to believe is like a male lion going after its prey. His nose and eyes and ears pick up on the prey. His legs give him the speed to catch it. All the power of his body is involved in the terrible death leap and single blow to the neck with the front paw, the blow that actually kills. And as the animal goes down the lion envelops it in his arms. . . pulls it to itself, and makes it part of himself. This is the way a lion kills. This is the way a [person] believes. This is what faith is.'"

The Masai elder went on. "You told us of the High God, how we must search for him, even leave our land and our people to find him. But we have not done this. We have not left our land. We have not searched for him. *He has searched for us.* He has searched *us* out and found us. *All the time we think we are the lion. In the end, the lion is God.*"