

## Selva Oscura (The Dark Wood)

### Luke 15: 1-32

“In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself, in a dark wood, where the direct way was lost. It is a hard thing to speak of, how wild, harsh and impenetrable that wood was, so that thinking of it recreates the fear.

I cannot rightly say how I entered it. I was so full of sleep, at that point where I left behind the clear path.”

These words, translated from the original Italian, are the opening of the Divine Comedy, written by the Italian poet Dante Alighieri six hundred years ago. It was entirely another time, another place, another country, another language but those four short sentences metaphorically capture what is perhaps a universal human experience—finding oneself in a lost place.

In fact, it may be the absolute perfect description of how one comes to a lost place.

In the middle of the journey of our life (I was just going along) I came to myself in a dark wood (all of a sudden, it seemed, though it must have taken a while to get there) where the direct way was lost.

And the place where I am feels scary (the surrounding wood is wild, harsh, impenetrable) and what to do is unclear (the direct way, the path forward has disappeared entirely) and the way BACK is lost as well (I cannot rightly say how I entered it. I was so full of sleep, at that point where I left behind the clear path).

In other words, I was just going along, getting along, and I sort of sleepwalked into a lost place. Have you ever sleepwalked into a lost place? A place, as the poet Dante later calls the dark wood, where the sun is silent?

There are so many ways to get there. Here are just a few:

A teenager wants desperately to fit in, and doesn't. There was a time, looking back to elementary school or preschool, when it was easier to make friends. If somebody else was in the sandbox, you just sort of walked up and joined in. But now—well, it's harder now. Everybody has their little

cliques and groups, and I don't fit with any of them. I don't even know who I am anymore. I'm too busy figuring out who I'm not. And I'm often sad and angry, but my parents get mad when I ACT sad or angry, and they don't understand me, but how could they, when I don't understand me? Somehow it just gradually got harder and harder and harder.

A young mother battles postpartum depression. Nine months of anticipation, nine months of joy, and baby showers and people telling me to treasure every moment—and I feel like I fell down a hole. People call it baby blues, but this isn't the blues, this is more like despair. It feels like I can't breathe, and I can't stop crying, and I feel no joy holding my child, I feel nothing at all holding my child, and I'm a horrible, horrible mother and I'm scared because my feelings are wild and harsh and impenetrable, and I just want to be alone.

A person in middle age feels stuck in a dead-end job. The alarm goes off and just getting out of bed is hard. And life feels like a hamster wheel, a whole lot of running that goes nowhere. And I really don't like what I do anymore, I'm bored doing it—but I really can't do anything different, not at the same pay, anyway, because I'm not trained to do anything else, and I can't afford to quit my job, because I have to pay the bills, and the kids' college tuition and save something for retirement, and retirement isn't even on the horizon yet, and somehow this isn't what I signed up for.

A person sits in a jail cell. This isn't where I planned to be. I'm not a bad person, I made a bad decision, or maybe a series of bad decisions: wrong people to be with, wrong place to be, wrong time to be there. It's a drug rap, I was just trying to find a way to cope, I wasn't trying to hurt anybody...but the sentencing is mandatory, so now I'm in here for a long time, and nobody cares who I am, they only care what I've done, and even when I get out, I'll be an ex-con. I feel like I dropped my life and it broke.

An older person goes home to a too quiet house. The spouse is not there anymore, the kids are not there anymore—and there's nothing on TV, four hundred channels and there's nothing on, and I've read the same page of this book ten times and I don't care for the book, and I used to enjoy cooking but now I just eat because I have to, cooking for one is no fun. And I go to bed early, because sleep is good, when I can get to sleep.

I could go on, offering as many examples as there are people. The point is, I think, that we all come to lost places, though it is the nature of a lost place to feel like we are the only one there.

And if you feel really lost—not misdirected, but more like no way forward and no way back lost--there's a lyric in the Kingston Trio song, They Call the Wind Maria—now I'm so lost, so gol darned lost, not even God can find me. If God's looking. Is God looking?

Well, that's a pretty long introduction, but it leads up to our looking at what is a pretty long chapter in Luke's gospel in which Jesus speaks of lost people and lost things. It all begins with an overheard conversation—Jesus is teaching, and the tax collectors and the sinners are coming near to listen to him. The Pharisees and the scribes are grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Sinners, by the way, is a description not only of those with moral failings, but of those who do not maintain the ritual purity that the religious leaders practice. And what the Pharisees are saying is, “These people need to get right, before God will care about them.” They need to find themselves before God will look for them.

If Jesus can hear the grumbling, we can bet that the people he's speaking to can hear it as well. The Pharisees aren't making too much effort to hide their disdain. So, in response Jesus tells three parables, so that his listeners are sure to hear him...and so that the grumbling scribes and Pharisees are sure to overhear him.

Each of the parables is a story of lost and found—a lost sheep, a lost coin, a son who loses himself--and each is a story of how God responds. So, we might ask, why does Jesus tell what is essentially the same story three different times? Well, perhaps for the sake of repetition. But I think there may be more. You see, what I observe is that while each parable is about losing and finding, I think that Jesus' point may be, as we observed earlier, that there are a lot of ways to get to a lost place.

We take the parable of the lost sheep for example. How does a sheep become lost, or separated from the flock? Well, it doesn't set out with the attempt to leave the safety and security of the flock. Maybe it just sort of nibbles its way gone. It's just going through the motions of sheep life, grazing from grass clump to grass clump or from clover patch to clover

patch and it wanders off, or it fails to follow when the rest of the flock moves. Or maybe it gets frightened by a loud noise or some sudden stimulus, and it runs unheedingly, and when it stops running, it's lost. It didn't willfully wander, it just got separated.

And a coin. How does a coin come to be in a lost place? It slips through a hole in a pocket, or it falls off the edge of a table, hits the floor, and rolls into a dark corner. A coin makes no decision of any sort—getting lost just happens to a coin.

You don't judge a sheep for wandering or getting scared, Jesus says, you just look for it, and you rejoice when you find it. You don't judge a coin for slipping out of a pocket or off of a table. You just look for it, and you rejoice when you find it. The lostness in each of these instances is not a moral failing, it is a simple state of separation, it is a loss of orientation, not a loss of value.

So, when Jesus comes to the third parable, the stage is set...the younger son in the parable also comes to a lost place. In the middle of life's journey, one might say, he finds himself in a dark wood, where the direct way, the path forward, is lost. And he doesn't know how he got there. I mean he does—he can walk it back and see the mistakes and the bad choices. But he certainly is not in the place that he set out to be. Maybe he felt he had to prove himself, and he could never do it under his father's roof or in his brother's shadow, so he set out to prove he could make it on his own—and found he couldn't, because no one can. Or maybe he just chafed under the rules of trying to be a good son—in the words of the old Dixie Chicks song, he needed wide open spaces and room to make his big mistakes. So, he became—not a bad person, but a good person who had made bad decisions. Or maybe he took a gamble and lost, and in the way of gamblers, he kept compounding his error trying to get it all back.

The point is, God doesn't care how people come to find themselves lost and in a dark wood, God sends out a search party. Jesus makes it clear, by the way, that the son is not welcomed home because he has repented and mended his ways. His Father runs to meet him before he utters a word, and when he tries to stammer out his little rehearsed apology, his Father wants none of it, and calls for a celebration.

The point of the three parables isn't in particular a point about sin and repentance—it is about how God never stops looking for God's children who FOR WHATEVER REASON, end up feeling lost or God-forsaken. The parables are a response to Pharisaical particularism—you only matter to God IF, you are only acceptable to God IF, you must find your own way out of the woods and back to God before God will even care. IF you're in a lost place....God isn't looking.

But Jesus reveals a different God entirely—a God whose love is relentlessly universal. The shepherd looks for the sheep how long? UNTIL—until it is found. The woman looks for the coin for how long? UNTIL—until it is found. The father searches the horizon for how long? UNTIL—until he sees his child in the distance and runs to meet him. There are no write-offs, no acceptable losses.

So the message I take from this chapter in Luke's gospel is that, if we find ourselves feeling lost or discarded—if in the middle of life's journey we find ourselves in a dark wood, whatever the reason: If we wandered, or ran scared, or fell through some hole in life's pocket, or if we chose a poor path and don't know what to do--If we feel so lost, so gol-darned lost, not even God can find us...

We are pursued to the ends of the earth by a God who loves us beyond our imagining. I spoke at the beginning of the million ways we get lost—but they all have a similar result—the feeling that we don't matter. The teenager who feels like a square peg—the mother who doesn't feel like a mother—the worker who feels like just a drudge-filled drone—the prisoner who made life-changing mistakes—the older person who has lost the person to whom they mattered most and no longer feels that they matter at all...each one has forgotten the truth that they are beloved.

So, we all need to remember how dearly we are beloved. And our job? We only have one—we are God's search party sent out after each other. After EACH other. After every one who for any reason might feel that they're in the woods. We need to be as relentless as God is in seeking out one another. Because if everyone is busy looking out for each other then no one can be truly lost. Amen.

