

Lost

It is truly wonderful to look out and see all of you here this morning. It has been three years since we were able to begin our program year this way, with a vested choir in procession and children in church school. It has been a long pandemic and people are still getting sick, but with vaccines and treatments, there is a greater sense that we can live with this. Today is testimony to that hope.

I'm mindful that today is also September 11, Nine-Eleven, a day that has gone down in infamy, to borrow Franklin Delano Roosevelt's phrase. It is now twenty-one years since the World Trade Center towers were destroyed. Since that time we have not only been through a pandemic, but also wars and political turmoil. Many are unsure what will be next.

This past week we also lost one of the enduring people of our time, the only English monarch many of us have ever known, Queen Elizabeth II. Only recently did we celebrate her Platinum Jubilee! With many others we mourn her loss with the royal family, especially King Charles III, grateful that the transfer of authority is happening so smoothly. The Episcopal Church traces its origins to the Church of England, so what happens there affects us all.

This paradoxical combination of joy and sorrow is characteristic of life. It is also characteristic of the Bible, as we saw in today's readings. Jeremiah's vision could not be bleaker, with the earth waste and void and the heavens without light. It will be many more chapters before he gives any word of hope. The letter to Timothy also begins with the bleakness of Paul's former life, but at least he offers hope, knowing that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

Being saved from sin is the subject of the two parables we heard in the Gospel, stories of becoming lost and then being found. The reading stopped before the third story of "lostness," the Lost Son, often called the Prodigal Son. In that one it's telling that we consider the son's wastefulness as more important than his being lost, but that's a message for another day.

Today's parables, the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin, are similar. Both tell of the great joy in finding what seemed to be gone forever. Jesus used them as illustrations of the joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. The portrayal of God as a shepherd is common; you'll hear that in today's communion hymns.

Unless we ourselves feel like lost sheep, this parable can be difficult. Many of us are more like the ninety-nine who remained. We do what we're supposed to do and rarely wander off. We go to church on Sunday and pay our pledge and follow all the rules. We may actually resent the fact that God isn't just as joyful about our constancy and dedication. That resentment is addressed in the Lost Son parable.

In today's stories, there is simply joy in finding what is lost, like the joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. I do think we can relate to that. If we have lost contact with someone, especially with someone we love, there's rejoicing when we finally reconnect with them.

The Gospel expresses God's special love for those who are on the margins of society. The very tax collectors and sinners about whom the religious leaders grumbled are the ones that God particularly seeks. In the same way, Jesus calls us to find hope and joy in serving those who feel lost or forgotten, bringing to them God's love and acceptance. These last few days we have been reminded once again of what dedicated service means, putting others before oneself. Queen Elizabeth lived a life of duty to her subjects in ways that are hard for us to comprehend, always faithfully and unwaveringly.

At Trinity we serve others in part by welcoming all who come through our doors. I am thrilled to see how that spirit of inviting and welcoming is growing. At the same time we need to venture outside our walls. We need to go to where people are and not just wait for them to show up. God always sends us out "to do the work [he has] given us to do," as we pray each week after receiving communion. Whether that is through Churches United meals, the food pantry, services at The Fountains, or simply being a listening ear or helping hand, we are called to seek the lost.

Those efforts help to bring the kingdom of God to earth, the new life that has already broken into this world through the resurrection of Jesus. The events of twenty-one years ago did change our world and our lives. But events two thousand years ago changed everything even more profoundly. Because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we can live in hope, not fear. We can live with joy, not desolation. Let us not forget those who lost their lives that day, and those who put their lives at risk every day. But let us also remember that we are Easter people, with hope for the future. And let us rededicate ourselves to compassion, to courage, and to love.

[Pentecost 14: Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Psalm 14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10.]