

September 11, 2022

## **Getting Found, in spite of Ourselves**

Luke 15:1-10

*Cathedral Church of St. Paul, Detroit*

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Getting Found, in spite of ourselves, because our salvation, our being saved metaphorically, theologically and sometimes even geographically doesn't have to have anything to do with us. Getting found in spite of ourselves.

Many of you know I am a sea kayaker. In my sea kayak I am happiest where lumpy waves meet chunky rocks. My most favorite place to paddle are the outer islands of the West and North coast of Scotland: the Inner and Outer Hebrides, Orkney, Shetland, St. Kilda are all places where my soul is full.

It doesn't hurt that many of the places, I've accessed after paddling through tide races and completing substantive crossings have included some of the earliest footholds of Christianity in the British Isles. I've sat in 6<sup>th</sup> century stone hermitages and been lowered by a rope tied around my waist down into 7<sup>th</sup> century solitary cells. A common factor of all of these places, besides the ever-present wind, and pugnacious waves are the grazing sheep, hundreds and hundreds of ewes, rams and lambs munching away on pretty much every remote island I've ventured onto in the Northern portion of the United Kingdom.

This is what I've learned about these sheep. The lambs want to be close to their moms.

They all look naked when they've been freshly sheared and they will follow grass anywhere. That is, they put their heads down and chew. They don't look up much to orient themselves. Instead, blade by blade they follow the grass. If the grass grows on a flat field, there they are. If their travels take them to a road they will then look up—see grass on the other side of the road they will quickly cross and continue munching, never looking to see if a car is coming. If the grass takes them up the side of a mountain—up they go—no fear of heights. And if the grass goes over the side of a mountain and down a very steep cliff, they are likely to continue on down, not really thinking about how their little hoofs aided by gravity on the descent, will not be all that handy as they contemplate getting back up. Which is to say, they, like many of us, can bit by bit, get themselves into a situation, a position that it next to impossible to get themselves out of.

Which brings me to one of my favorite genre of Scottish Sea Kayaking Stories: “Rescuing the stuck sheep, off the steep cliffs, by the salty sea. Trust me there are hundreds of these stories. My favorite is when a group of friends were out paddling along a rough coast at low tide. They looked up and saw a lamb that had followed the tasty grass, down the side of a cliff. It was stuck. No way it was going to make it back up to its mom, who was bleating at the top. So, after some conversation about the intelligence of the average sheep and how much each one of them enjoyed the beautiful woolen caps that adorned their heads they decided to see what they could do. They hatched a plan. The swell on the rocks wasn't too bad. They decided that two of them would get out of their boats one would remain on the sea and attach her tow line to one of the boats to aid in their eventual getaway. Two of them landed, both slipping around like you read about it on the brown and green seaweed that is omnipresent at low tide. They slid their way to below the ledge where the lamb was trapped. Then with one of the paddlers standing on her friend's braced leg, she reached up and grabbed the lamb. Then between the two of them they got it down to the slippery reef. Then dodging the incoming waves, one sat in her boat. The other one put the bleating lamb on top of her lap across her cockpit. Her boat had a tow line on it from her friend who was offshore. They pushed her boat back into the water and her friend further out in the water towed her boat off the reef. The third friend hopped back into her boat and slide off the rocky reef. Then they all paddled around the corner and landed the little lamb safely on the beach next to the grass where the rest of the herd was hanging out.

Was there any guarantee that the little lamb wasn't going to just follow the grass up the high hill, over the top and back to the cliff ledge. No. None at all. It is completely possible. But the sea kayakers saved the lamb, because it was a good thing to do. Not because they thought the lamb had learned a lesson, not because they thought the lamb would somehow behave differently. Maybe it would, but that wasn't why they saved the lamb. They saved the lamb, because they could. They saved the lamb to give it another chance.

More than once in my time inhabiting this earth I have been that lamb. I suspect I'm not alone.

We get lost, separated from the herd, floundering by ourselves in all sorts of ways.

- Sometimes we lose our way emotionally or physically.
- Sometimes our moral compass gets out of whack, and we find ourselves doing things, agreeing to activities that we know are wrong or we suspect will not bring out our best selves.
- Sometimes we lose a part of ourselves gradually bit by bit, like our faith, our hope, our joy, our ability to love, one blade of grass at a time.

Then all of sudden we look up and realize we are alone, riddled with doubt, seemingly trapped, filled with despair.

That is when the owner of the sheep, the shepherd, or the sea kayakers come, sometimes metaphorically, sometimes physically and we are found in spite of ourselves.

Getting found in spite of ourselves. Not because we've found ourselves in a difficult spot and now we are rethinking every step that led us to this precipice. Getting saved in spite of ourselves. Not because, we've looked up from the grass we were chewing and we've suddenly we have repented, changed, and reformed. Getting saved, getting found because God loves us. Jesus came into this world, because God loves us. God's grace, love—there for the taking—even if we find ourselves trapped on the ledge of life. God comes for us.

In my moments of deepest doubt and darkest fears, when I have nibbled my way out of on a ledge with little recourse, God's hope, God's help has come to me. When my mom died, it was my friend Marianne who picked me up at the airport at midnight and drove me another hour home to my bereft family. When my career felt flat and my faith low, the words of psalms kept coming to me unbidden, parading through my brain, "Lord you have searched me out and known me, you know my sitting down and my rising up, you discern my thoughts from afar. Indeed there is not a word on my lips but you o Lord know it all together." Over and over, God comes. God holds me. Holds you. Holds us.

Sometimes we are the lamb lost on the cliff.

Sometimes we're the sea kayakers, out for a paddle, who see a lamb stuck and we are willing to stop, get that lamb and put it on the shore safely. Not because we think the lamb will change, because we know what it's like to be stuck on the ledge and because we care.

There will be joy in heaven, joy in the presence of the angels.

And if the lamb is safe, it has another chance.