

“Lost and Found Department” based on Luke 15:1-7

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Robinson Crusoe. Most people know the story of Daniel Defoe's famous book, written in 1719, widely considered the first English novel. It's the tale of an English sailor marooned for 27 years on a deserted Caribbean island surviving by his wits; hunting wild boar on foot; rescuing his man, Friday, from a cannibals' feast; a symbol of our ability to survive the ultimate tests of nature; so adapted to his solitary environs he's loath to rejoin civilization. Three centuries later, this story still has a hold on us, evidenced by movie versions and a host of other spin-offs: *Swiss Family Robinson*, *Gilligan's Island*, *Six Days and Seven Nights*, *Cast Away*, a handful of reality TV shows, and a book I'd recommend: *Life of Pi*. We're fascinated with such stories — the castaway, the marooned, the lost. Yet one of the major flaws in Defoe's book is that Crusoe is so unrealistically stalwart during his plight. Far more fascinating is the story of Alexander Selkirk, whose real-life adventure was the basis of Defoe's novel.

Born in Scotland in 1676, Selkirk was a trouble-maker. At 19, he was brought up on charges after his brother's trick of making him drink sea water resulted in a family fight. Before his case was heard, Selkirk fled to sea, hoping to make his fortune by privateering — legalised piracy on the King's enemies — against Spanish vessels off the South American coast. But in 1704, the hot-headed Selkirk quarrelled with his captain over their ship's seaworthiness, saying if he was determined to continue on without making repairs then it could go to the bottom without him. The captain replied, "Very well, you will be accommodated," and stranded Selkirk on the uninhabited island of Juan Fernandez, 400 miles west of Chile, with nothing but his sea chest. Selkirk remained there until 1709.

While Crusoe immediately began making the best of things, the real-life Selkirk was human in the face of his lostness. As his ship sailed away, he cried piteously to be taken back. For months he lived in terror and dejection, regretting his rash actions. Selkirk did provide for himself. Yet he constantly dreamed of escape and kept a constant lookout for passing ships. When Crusoe's finally rescued, Defoe's hero is reluctant to leave his "paradise." But Selkirk, seeing his rescuers, rushed to the beach, built a fire, and signalled madly. When brought aboard, he was so overjoyed that for a great while he was unable to speak sensibly. As one shipmate said of him, though Selkirk "diverted and provided for himself as well as he could" he "had much ado to bear up against Melancholy, and the Terror of being left alone in such a desolate place."

We like stories of people who become lost, I think, partly because we can identify. Though perhaps never shipwrecked, we've all been lost: in the grocery store separated from our mamas; hiking in the woods; driving through an unfamiliar city at night. Think of yourself as lost and what do you feel? [ANSWERS GIVEN] Alone, disoriented, confused, fearful, terrified. Face it. Being lost is one of the worst things that can happen to us.

This universal feeling was what prompted Jesus to tell the Parable of the Lost Sheep. We can readily imagine what the lost sheep is feeling. Jesus' purpose is to prompt us to identify with the sheep — feeling our loneliness, our vulnerability, our fear — because he wants us to take heart that God, like a shepherd, won't rest until each lost sheep is found.

Intrestingly, we never learn why the sheep became lost. Was it chased away by wolves? Was it stolen? Did it just wander off? Was it the "black sheep," always running away; like Selkirk, the cause of it's own lostness? The beauty is we don't know. So, we're free to identify with whatever lostness we may be experiencing in our own lives. For though we may be lost, that doesn't mean we're "locationally challenged."

I've been thinking how most of us get lost. I've seen it, walking past a neighbor's sheep farm. We're nibbling on grass in the field, moving from one tuft to the next. Before we know it, we're munching up next to the fence. Then, noticing a nice clump of green on the other side we stumble through a gap and — suddenly! — we're out on the road. We don't intend to get lost. We just nibble our way into lostness; a gradual process.

I'm reminded of *Lost in Translation*, an Oscar-winning film that explored this common way we wake one morning feeling lost. It features a brief friendship between a middle-aged actor and a young college grad who meet in a Japanese hotel. They're jetlagged and sleep-deprived, and suffer through confusion and hilarity due to the huge cultural and language differences they encounter in Tokyo. But, all of this is really just to emphasize their underlying suffering — feeling lost.

Bob's a has-been movie star, reduced to doing whisky commercials, fully aware his movies were never much to brag about. Nor is his 25-year marriage. Phone calls with his wife focus on new carpet for his study and, conspicuously, never end with "I love you." When he tells her, "I'm completely lost," she says, "Bob, it's just carpet." Charlotte's also in a dead-end relationship, tagging along with her photographer husband whose always rushing off without her, captivated by the celebrities he works with and who she finds shallow. "I don't know who I married," she says. She listens to a self-help tape — *Soul Search: Finding Your True Calling* — but she confesses, "I just don't know what I'm supposed to be." It's about navigating through a foreign environment and finding the process mirrors your fear that you've been stranded in your own life, marooned on an unrecognizable shore, with no idea how to find your way back. Therefore, the film stands out for being a humane depiction of the experience of lostness, with its alienation, loss, aimlessness, and loneliness.

Our lostness comes in many forms. You know your marriage is shipwrecked as you find yourself yelling at your spouse or simply silent. You feel washed up on a desolate shore as you awaken from another night of drinking. You lose your moorings, as serious illness changes everything for you and your family. You're cast away, discarded by an employer who decides you're expendable. Marooned, you're stuck in a career with all the trappings of a desert isle. You feel set adrift, and you cling to your raft — the couch — unable to rise for your depression. Being lost is a part of life.

The good news, this scripture tells us, is that, no matter what our lostness may be, we will be sought out by a gracious, loving God. More about that next week in the second part of this two-part sermon series. Today, however, I encourage us, in this Lenten season, to carry two key spiritual questions with us: Where is the lostness in my life? And, perhaps more important, what would being found mean to me and feel like to me? May our God give us courage to ask and discern these questions in this and in every season of our faith journeys.