

Sermon: I Once Was Lost
Date: March 31, 2019
Text: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
Context: WWPC
Lent, week four
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

“This son of mine was lost . . . and is now found.”

Luke 15:24



If you were here the first Sunday of Lent, you may remember the story I told about the young man who was traveling alone, on foot, in Glacier Bay National Park, a vast, pristine wilderness that lies at the northern tip of the Alaskan panhandle.

I told this story because, following in the long-tradition of Lent, we ourselves were about to follow Jesus on his own forty-day sojourn into the wilderness.

And Glacier Bay is the essence of wilderness. There are no trails. There are no campsites. No quick-marts, no hospitals or clinics, no churches or schools, no signs of human habitation at all.

It is just dense, wet forest, surrounded by towering peaks, and laced with clear ribbons of pristine glacial-fed rivers.

I told how, early on, this young man had managed to get his matches wet. Which not only meant that he could not prepare any hot food, he had no fire to warm himself, no flames to give him light and comfort at night.

So there he was, alone, hiking during the day in a trackless wilderness twice the size of Delaware, camping at night in pitch darkness, in a forest that is home to at least two of North America's most fearsome apex predators, wolves and grizzlies.

Before he set out on his misadventure, I imagine this young man thought his foray into the heart of Glacier Bay was a good idea.

He may also have assumed that he would have a memorable time, that his brave solo venture would prove to be a defining experience, one that would teach him and shape him.

Instead, within just a few days, he was cold, wet, hungry, and, I have no doubt, totally miserable. I would bet the one thing he wanted more than anything was to leave this daunting, fearsome, unforgiving wilderness behind and head for home.

I say all this again now because I suspect many of these same things could be said about the younger son in today's story.

He woke up one day, having decided he did not want to wait to inherit his share of the family money. It was time to leave the comforts of home behind and go off in search of adventure. In search of himself.

His father's response to this idea proved to be startlingly generous. He immediately agreed to bankroll this journey of discovery. And so the son sets out on a quest that, in theory anyway, would give him what he was looking for.

Unfortunately, and unbeknownst to the young man, this was a terrible idea from the start. Flush with cash but short on experience, and even shorter on the good judgment that comes with it, it was just a matter of time before his quest for fun and adventure ended in disaster.

In fairness, I have no doubt that the pleasures of the flesh were wondrous at first, that this young man was tasting things, seeing things, hearing things, experiencing things he had never tasted, seen, heard or experienced before.

Perhaps that's why he didn't realize how quickly he was burning through his money. Or if he did know, why he didn't care.

But the reckoning came. Within just a matter of weeks he found himself destitute and far from home, forced to survive by eating food that wasn't even food -- just husks fit for pigs, in his culture the most unclean animals imaginable.

He is sad and lonely, yes, desperate even, but he is not altogether without hope. Because deep in his heart he knows one thing will always be true; that there is one person in his life who will love him, even in his present state, one person who will gladly welcome him home, even if he's dressed in rags and smelling of pigs.

In the story Jesus tells, this person is a human figure. It is of course the boy's father.

But this is not an ordinary story. It is a parable, which is to say it's a Gospel story, a story about the kingdom of God, a story about the nature of God. A story meant to reveal to the world unimaginably good news.

So the father figure is not, finally, a human character. Rather the father figure is of course the God who knew you before you born. The God who wove together the very strands of your DNA.

The God who knows you better than you know yourself.

The God who will always welcome you home. No matter where you've been. No matter what you've done. No matter how lost you may have become.

Even if you've spent all your money you don't even have a penny to your name. Even if you're dressed in rags, and smelling of pigs.

This God will be there, waiting for you. That is, of course, the point of this story. This is not new to us. We know the truth which this story is meant to reveal because we have heard this story before, and we've heard this truth proclaimed.

So now, as we've been doing during our observance of Lent, I'm going to invite us, I'm going to invite you, to go a little deeper. I'm going to ask that you focus in on the front cover of you bulletin.

Where does your eye go? Why is that?

Who do you most identify with in this picture?

Is it the son, down on his knees, pleading for mercy?

Is it the servant with his arms full, always busy, always weighted down, carrying someone else's burden?

Or maybe it's the brother, pleading his case with the servant. Complaining about the unfairness of life, failing to understand the extravagance of God's grace, failing to appreciate that love is not a finite resource, that there is always enough love for everyone. Always.

Or maybe it's the father, welcoming the prodigal home because you have been that prodigal. You know how he feels because you once were lost yourself and you were welcomed home.

What is it you are seeing as you take this story in through your eyes?

What is it that you are feeling?

What is God's living word to you?