

God of grace, seek us out when we are lost and bring us back to you. Bless the reading, the hearing, the preaching and the singing of your Word today. Amen.

Fifteen years ago, I was in my senior year at Luther College, headed to the physical education class that I still needed to take as a graduation requirement. I arrived at the gym ready for some ballroom dancing – that was the class I had signed up for. But no one danced that day.

Everyone who was in the gym when I arrived was huddled around the small computer screen at the front desk, in awe at the events unfolding in New York City. As we watched, a plane flew in to the second tower of the World Trade Center and disappeared, while the building started to collapse.

That's when the professor said, class is cancelled. Go somewhere and find a TV and watch the news.

Do you remember where you were on the morning of September 11th, 2001? Some of you do. Some of you probably don't.

Perhaps you were camping in the wilderness or living abroad. Maybe you slept late or were sick that day and only learned the news hours or days after the fact. Maybe you can't remember because you have a hard time remembering anything these days, and where you happened to be on an early fall day 15 years ago just doesn't make the cut for your precious memory bank.

Perhaps – now don't laugh, this is a reality – perhaps you weren't born yet. We have members of this congregation who we consider to be adults – our youngest confirmed members – who are 15 and 16 years old now. They would have been infants or not even born yet when 9-11 happened.

There's some perspective for you.

When an event like 9/11 happens, it can be an identity-forming moment.

And actually, it doesn't have to be such a public and dramatic event – the same thing can happen when we witness a car accident or a friend is undergoing cancer treatment or a relative suddenly passes away. Even if we don't or can't remember where we were that morning 15 years ago – there have been identity-shaping events in each one of our lives.

In times like those, people suddenly know or discover who they are – someone who dives into the fray to help, someone who sends money to support those diving in to the fray, someone who prays hard from where they are, someone who brings laughter or music or a comforting touch to those who can't find those things on their own...

While we don't always *know* how to react to intense situations, our instincts kick in and we react anyway. And we discover who we are.

These identity-forming moments can be the times in which we see most clearly how to use our God-given gifts.

We remember where we were and who we were when something important happened. In a sense, we were *found*, like that coin that was found by the woman sweeping her whole house until it was unearthed and rediscovered to be something precious.

Based on our responses to these critical moments in our personal lives and in the world's history, we learn who we are, and we find ourselves.

The Israelites thought they had found themselves after several of these critical moments. They had escaped from slavery in Egypt. They had discovered that they were important enough for God to protect and guide them, and provide them with miraculous food on their journey.

They had their identity – they knew who God wanted them to be.

But the Israelites took it too far.

In the book of Exodus today, we hear about how a people's sense of being found – of knowing who God wanted them to be – eventually became lost to the power of their own sin, which showed up in the form of a golden calf.

Instead of continuing to listen to God's guidance, and draw into closer relationship with God, the Israelites allowed the *good* of self-identity to deteriorate into the *sin* of idolatry. Instead of continuing to form themselves as a nation guided by the word of God, the Israelites started worshipping their own pride and self-sufficiency.

The Israelites are not the only people susceptible to such sin.

Every culture and nation throughout history has had to fight the battle between humble nationalism and toxic xenophobia. Our own nation has been embroiled in this battle, particularly for the past 15 years.

When we forget who we were when we were at our best, we no longer have that sense of being *found* – of being in the presence of God. This is true both individually and collectively. We might have a solid memory of being found, like the coin in the woman's hand. But after a while, our identity is put to the test, and either we lose it or we start to worship it in place of God.

We are lost.

There are many factors can contribute to a sense of being lost.

A lot has happened in the past 15 years. And at some point, many of us have become desensitized.

You might remember where you were when you heard about the terrorist attacks on 9-11, or JFK's assassination, or Pearl Harbor.

But do you remember where you were when you heard about the deadliest school shooting in US history, at Sandy Hook Elementary School, on December 14, 2012? Or the massacre at Virginia Tech, which left 33 dead and 17 wounded? What about the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, or the tsunami that devastated much of Asia the day after Christmas, 2004?

Violent, horrible, tragic events are happening at an exponentially increasing rate. Social media and online news outlets bring news of more events to our attention, more quickly than ever before. And we can't handle it all.

One of my favorite authors and activists passed away earlier this year. Elie Wiesel was a Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate. He wrote several books that were responses to his experiences in Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps.

My favorite work by Elie Wiesel is a play, called *The Trial of God*.

The play is set in eastern Europe in in the 1600s, shortly after a pogrom in which the entire Jewish population of the village was killed – everyone except for an innkeeper and his daughter. They were tortured during the pogrom, but left alive.

After all the evil that he had witnessed, the innkeeper was understandably angry with God. And so he decided to put God on trail – hence the name of the play.

Some guests at the inn found themselves thrown into the middle of the innkeeper's story. One of them repeatedly asked a critically important question... where is God in this tragic scenario?

"And God? Where is God in all this, innkeeper? ... Don't you think whether you pray or not is also His concern? ... Where was God, laughing or crying?"

The Trial of God, Elie Wiesel, p.13-14, 65 http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/the-trial-of-god-elie-wiesel/1000473704;jsessionid=EF26E8BCEE65F95C5C84526474D7AA95.prodny_store01-atgap04?ean=9780307833815

When horrible things happen, when tragedy strikes – where is God in all of this?

Sometimes the answer is, I don't know. I can't tell.

I feel lost.

When tragedies invade our community or our personal lives, we can relate to the innkeeper's anger with God.

We are confused, overwhelmed, fighting off the sin of pride. We are trying desperately to hear the voice of God, calling out to us as the shepherd did to the sheep lost in the wilderness – but sometimes we cannot find ourselves or find our way back to God.

It's a cycle – that sense of rootedness, then becoming lost in events that are beyond our control. Finding ourselves in unexpected moments, but not being able to bring out the best in ourselves in every moment.

There are, of course, times of joy that bring us to that sense of being found – this doesn't just happen through tragedy. The birth of a child or grandchild, a wedding, a graduation – these things can remind us of who we are at our best.

The same holds true for our society. The election of the first African-American president of the US was a milestone for people of color.

Marriage equality across the nation was an incredible triumph for love over fear.

Last week's happy news story that caught my eye was former US Senator Herb Kohl providing funding for every single project requested by Wisconsin schoolteachers on a crowdfunding site. While our educators struggle to find the resources they need to provide quality education, someone steps up with amazing philanthropy that restores my faith in humanity.

At times like this, we feel found – as though something is right with the world, somehow justice has been achieved, if only for a moment. We can feel God’s presence.

Sometimes we are the lost sheep wandering in the wilderness. And sometimes we know exactly who we are, where we belong, and what our role is in the world.

The most important part of being “found” is being in relationship. The lost sheep wasn’t in danger only because it was in the wilderness. It was in danger also because it was alone.

The 99 would have been vulnerable to thieves and predators when the shepherd left them to seek out the one who had been lost. So why would the shepherd put the 99 at risk in order to seek the one? There must be something more important than safety in Jesus’ definition of *found*.

The only clear answer is, relationship.

The 99 sheep were not safe from the dangers of the world, but they were safe from something else – loneliness. The 99 were *found* because they were in relationship with one another.

When the one wandered off, the true danger wasn’t thieves or wolves or being exposed to tragedy. The true danger for someone who is lost is that they no longer have a relationship with God or with other people.

We continue to learn who we are as children of God when we go through formative events in our lives that bring out the best in people. We find ourselves when we help others, pray for them, listen to their stories, and discover how our lives fit together with theirs.

Here’s the good news today. Whether you feel lost or found as an individual and in your relationships with others... God continues to seek you out, to draw you deeper into relationship, and help you always feel that sense of being found.

God creates clean hearts in us, restores to us the joy of salvation, and keeps us always in God’s presence.

The grace of God overflows for us.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

There is nowhere that we can go apart from God's presence.

The parables in today's Gospel lesson describe the relationship between us and God. In both of these parables, you and I are in the position of the thing that is lost. God is the shepherd. God is the woman. God is the one who seeks out what has been lost, and won't give up until it has been found.

God will not give up on us, even when we don't know where to turn. God will keep drawing us close and helping us find ourselves again, until we finally know who we truly were created to be as children of God.

Life's milestones might give us a sense of self-identity. When our pride gets too big, we might lose ourselves to sinful behavior. When events that we can't control seem to rule our lives, we might feel lost.

Wherever we are in the cycle of being lost and found, God will always seek ways to grow closer to us, to keep us away from sin and hopelessness, and draw us into life. God will continue to fight for us until we are as secure as that coin in the woman's hand.

That's what being found looks like.

Thanks be to God, who seeks the lost and finds us all.

Amen.