

Search and Rescue **Luke 15:1-10**

Preached by Rev. Greg Dawson on February 26th, 2023
at the Trinitarian Congregational Church of Northfield MA

Scores of tiny figures moving up and down the rubble, here and there, back and forth, it's hard to see the ground beneath them, their numbers blanket the terrain. Like an army of ants, they work and work and work as if they will never stop. A slab here, a girder there, moving mountains by their labors. All their labors with one purpose driving them, searching, searching, searching. They are searching for the lost. On February 6th in southeastern Turkey and northern Syria an earthquake struck resulting in the collapse of 173,000 buildings and more than 109 million people being forced to take refuge in temporary shelters, hotels or public buildings. But those we saw on TV laboring there, at ground zero, were not searching for personal property. They were not digging for lost tablets or iPhones. They were seeking, with all their strength, for their lost comrades, for missing loved ones, for the humans lost whether they were living or dead. In today's passage we read about a God who is on a never-ending search for the lost and missing. God is like a shepherd looking for a lost sheep, a woman searching for a lost coin, and God invites us "rejoice with me, for what was lost has been found".

It is often in times of great loss when we are shockingly reminded that most of what we value can be replaced. But that which we most take for granted once gone is forever missed. Here in the fifteenth chapter of Luke we find hope. We are reminded that God never forgets what is of true value. As you and I run about our daily lives consuming and accumulating, buying and collecting things that will one day decay and be thrown away. God is out searching, ever searching, searching, searching, for that which has been lost and must be found. Searching for that which too many consider of little regard.

It was reported in an article yesterday concerning Turkey that there had been no reports of survivors being rescued in the recent days. Hope of finding any of the remaining missing alive will now give way to the heart wrenching resolution of recovering the remaining dead. But we serve a God who has never given up. Who for ages beyond count has traveled the highways and byways ever searching for those counted dead. And finding joy in their return. Listen to the words of Christ,

"What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them,
does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness,
and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it."

How often have many of us, like sheep have become lost along our way. Gone astray from the path taught to us in Sunday School. Turned away from the guidance given to us by our parents. To find ourselves lost with no star to guide us home. Fear not, for God has set forth in search of us. Our heavenly Father will not stop his search until he has found us and brought us safely home again. Like a shepherd in search of a wayward lamb God is out there looking, looking, looking. Do you feel lost, not sure where you are in your life or how you got there. Do you long to find your way back home to God. Then be still, fear not. God is still searching and God will find you. He will lift you upon his shoulders like a shepherd bears a lamb and he will joyfully carry you home.

Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? God is the shepherd and God is the woman. Diligently seeking that which was lost. Where the sheep has wandered the coin has been misplaced. How many in our society are mis-placed people. The homeless. The poor. The elderly. In the rush of our busy society how many have we allowed to fall to the wayside, forgotten. Not able to fall in step with the expectations of our consumer-oriented world we allow them to be left behind, like a coin that has fallen to the ground. But what we regard as of little worth, God holds dear and worth all his efforts to recover. In a small cemetery in a parish churchyard in Olney, England, stands a granite tombstone with the following inscription:

“John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and Libertine,
a servant of slavers in Africa, was,
by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,
preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed
to preach the Faith he had long labored to destroy.”

You know him. John Newton wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace”. And it was amazing. He had followed his father in a life at sea. A life filled with rebellion and debauchery. A life that gave him his own ship. A slave ship that trafficked in the capturing, selling and transporting of black slaves to the plantations in the West Indies and America. A slave ship that trafficked in human suffering and degradation. Like the prodigal son before him John Newton had lost his way. A man of evil ways who trafficked in human flesh with little regard for their true worth. A man whose death would have cheered many a heart that regarded John Newton lost beyond hope.

But then God was also in the story. At sea upon a sinking ship desperately seeking to find his way back home, John Newton was unaware that God also was upon that sea in search of John Newton. On March 10, 1748, God found John Newton. Confronted with the power of God in a storm at sea, and the wonders of God in a book named “The Imitation of Christ”, John Newton cried out, “God have mercy on us”, and then he found the mercy of Christ. The lost had been found, the dead had been raised to new life. Following his conversion Newton left the slave trade. He became, instead, a clerk. Then, after many years he became an Anglican Priest, and to the end of his life the man who once had enslaved others fought for the abolition of all slavery. In 1807, the year of Newton’s death, the British Parliament fulfilled his hopes and abolished slavery throughout all of its reign. John Newton never ceased to marvel at the mercy and grace of God that had so dramatically changed his life. This was the dominant theme of his preaching and writing. This is what he had to say:

“Amazing Grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now I’m found was blind, but now I see.”

We follow an amazing God. An amazing God who never gives up, who is seeking the dead that He might give them life. The only true life; life that will lead us all beyond the grave. Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.” God in Jesus Christ is seeking, ever seeking, the lost that long to be found. The dead that are in need of life. God is still searching and rescuing.

Let us rejoice!