Prone to Wander

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Matthew 9:35-38

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Have you ever been lost? I mean really lost? I have, twice. Once I was lost in the woods and another time I was lost in a strange city. It’s a really disorienting feeling. Waves of panic can sweep over us. Nothing jump-starts the imagination like the sensation of feeling lost.

We can become spiritually lost. We can become lost from God with a resulting lack of direction and purpose. Life can seem like a maze where there is no way out.

The largest maze in the world, according to the Guinness Book of World Records, is located near Sacramento. This gigantic corn maze measures a whopping 63 acres, featuring 9 miles of trail and 400 dead ends. People have been known to become lost in this maze for hours on end. The Sacramento police receive numerous 911 calls from distressed people who cannot find their way out of this elaborate corn maze.

Jesus came to rescue lost people. He said, “The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10).

This summer will translate into more downtime for most of us: no school, less activity; more vacation time. It’s an ideal time to focus on your relationship with Jesus. We’ll focus on stories of Jesus this summer—Summer with Jesus, we are calling it. We want you to utilize our daily devotional this summer. Are you aware that a team of people write this devotional as a daily companion to our Sunday worship themes? You can read stories about Jesus and we’ll feature one such story each Sunday in worship. These stories will be accessible to people of all ages.

Our goal, pure and simple, is to help you become better acquainted with Jesus. Paul writes in Philippians, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection” (3:10). We don’t want you merely to know about Jesus. We want you to know him in more personal, meaningful ways. We want you to leverage your time this summer to know Christ in ways that can positively impact your life.

Our Scripture lesson provides a concise, one sentence summary of Jesus’ early ministry: “Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching in synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness” (Matthew 9:35). When, in the next verse, Jesus sees a swelling crowd walking towards him, Matthew tells us that “Jesus had
“Jesus had compassion on the crowd, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (9:36). The Old Testament regularly likens people to lost sheep. They function like sheep without a shepherd (Numbers 27:17; 1 Kings 22:17).

The Bible often compares us to sheep. We are not equated to cows or chickens. Psalm 100 waxes poetically, “We are his people, the sheep of his pasture” (100:3).

I did some research on sheep this week. For starters, I need to dispel the myth that sheep are dumb animals. Sheep have a discerning ear for voices and a keen memory for faces. Sheep can remember the faces of 50 sheep for two years or longer.

Sheep are social animals. They are known for their flocking behavior. They like to maintain visual contact with other sheep while grazing. Their herding instinct serves a vital function. They have lots of predators so their primary means of protection is to stick together.

Sheep also possess a strong instinct to follow other sheep. If one sheep decides it’s time to move, the rest will follow. This is what gets sheep into serious trouble.

Sheep are prone to wander in the Bible. David famously prays in Isaiah 53, “We all like sheep have gone astray” (53:6).
Any of you raised in an Anglican or Episcopal tradition are familiar with the Book of Common Prayer. There is a well-known prayer of confession that originates from Thomas Cranmer in 1549: “Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.”

Robert Robinson was a gang member in England in the 1750s. He and his drinking buddies decided to attend an evangelistic meeting to heckle the preacher and mock the crowd. When the evangelist George Whitfield began preaching, Robert became mesmerized. He felt as though the sermon was directed right at him and led, ultimately, to his conversion several years later.

Robert entered the ministry and wrote a hymn in 1757 to accompany his sermon for that Sunday. We still sing it, “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” What remarkable insight this 22-year-old preacher displays into the human condition:

“O to grace how great a debtor, Daily I’m constrained to be. Let thy grace now, like a fetter, Bind my wandering heart to thee. Prone to wander, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love. Here’s my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above.”

We, like sheep, are prone to wander. We tend to stray and follow the crowd.

You’re familiar with roaming charges related to your cell phone. When we leave the coverage area of our cell phone provider, we incur roaming charges. This can prove expensive, especially in connection with foreign travel.

Well, we roam from God. And, like the roaming charges on our cell phones, our roaming can prove very costly.

Most farm animals function well without a shepherd. Cows and chickens don’t need a shepherd, but sheep do. Otherwise, they can wander into serious trouble.
Psalm 23 begins with the memorable words, “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters.”

Ezekiel likens God to a good shepherd: “As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock so I will look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places they have scattered…I will lead them in good pasture…They will lie down in good grazing land…I will tend my sheep. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays” (34:12-16).

Jesus announces, “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11, 14). He protects and leads his followers. He even lays down his life for his sheep.

Jesus tells a parable about a shepherd who leaves his flock of 99 sheep to rescue a single stray (Matthew 18:10-14). Some critics argue that a good shepherd would never jeopardize the well-being of 99 other sheep to rescue a stray, but that’s making too much of the details. For all we know, this shepherd could have left the 99 with another shepherd. The emphasis, clearly, is on the lost sheep. Jesus cares about sheep who wander off.

Maybe you are wandering from God. Sure, you’re here in worship, but your soul is roaming and drifting from God. James, in his letter, talks about those who have wandered from the truth (5:19-20). The good news is that Jesus, our good shepherd, wants to bring back lost sheep into his fold.

There are two things we need to recognize if we have wandered off. Perhaps it goes without saying that first we need to know that we’re lost. As long as we don’t think we are lost, we won’t recognize our need to be found.

Search and rescue personnel will tell you that the key to successful rescue hinges on people recognizing that they are lost. In search and rescue operations, children are found more often than adults because they don’t stray as far. Children stop and wait to be rescued. Adults keep wandering in their attempt to save themselves.

Second, we’ve got to know who can save us from our lost condition. Don’t follow other sheep. Following the crowd can get us into trouble. Follow the good shepherd.
What does all this talk about animal husbandry have to do with our emphasis on mission today? We’re hosting 13 mission partners this morning who represent our church. We invite you to attend the Mission Marketplace in the hall after worship and the luncheon following the 11:00 worship. Jesus abruptly changes the metaphor at the end of our lesson from shepherding to harvesting: “Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest’” (9:37-38).

Jesus wants to enlist you in his mission of helping other people find God. We do not go about this mission with an air of superiority. D.T. Niles says it well: “We are like one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.”

There are other lost sheep out there that need to be found. Some people are ripe and ready to follow Jesus as the good shepherd. If lost people matter to God, they matter to us also. Read the next chapter in Matthew’s gospel and you will discover that Jesus sends out his 12 disciples “to the lost house of Israel” (Matthew 10:6).

If you are feeling lost, Jesus offers you rescue. If you are finding Jesus to be your good shepherd, he wants you to join him on a mission of saving other lost people.