

## YOU HAVE BEEN FOUND

Jeremiah 8: 4-6 & 8:18-9:1

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### THEY'LL NEVER FIND ME HERE

Have you ever been lost? I mean, really, really lost, so lost that you sincerely were afraid that you might never get un-lost? That you might never be found?

It's a universal fear that lurks in every human heart and is considered one of the five primal human fears.

I remember as a child playing hide and seek with my siblings and cousins at my great grandparent's farm and finding that perfect hiding place in the tool shed behind the rakes and hoes and shovels that formed a kind of teepee in the corner. I remember hearing my siblings and my cousins looking for me and thinking, "They'll never find me here. They'll never find me here."

### ***They'll never find me here!***

Curtis Whitson was on a scenic, Father's Day weekend camping trip with his girlfriend and his 13-year-old son in the Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park in California when they got trapped at the top of a 40-foot waterfall in the Arroyo Seco Canyon.

Whitson had hiked the same route seven years before and descended the very same waterfall by rappelling down a rope provided by the park that was attached to its side. But this time, there was no rope. He and his son tried several alternative routes and were turned back every time by treacherous footing and impossible climbs.

So, stranded miles from the nearest campground with no direction to go and without cell service, he wrote an SOS note on a bar order pad his girlfriend brought to keep score playing card games: "We are stuck here at the waterfall. Get help please." He put the note in a green water bottle, carved "help" into its side, and tossed the message downstream. Then they hiked about 30 minutes back up stream to a small beach area where they made a campfire, spread out a blue tarp, and arranged white rocks on it to spell SOS.

Miraculously, about an hour later, two hikers found the bottle, hiked two miles to the nearest campground and called for help.

Todd Brethour and Tony Ramage are with the California Highway Patrol Air Operations Unit. They found Whitson around midnight, just hours after hikers found his floating message. Whitson says he heard the helicopter's rotor, a blinding light, and suddenly a voice booming out of the darkness: "This is the California Highway Patrol Search and Rescue. **You have been found.**"

The family was told to stay there and stay warm, and a rescue team would be back after dawn to get them to safety. Which they did. "It was one of the best feelings," Whitson later gushed, "nothing was sweeter than those four words uttered by CHP. You have been found."

The two men who found the message and called for help? Well, they left before the rescue happened and they didn't leave their names, but Curtis Whitson would sure like to find them and thank them. Oh, and his girlfriend bought him a new water bottle...with a love note tucked inside.

### **OFF THE RIGHT PATH**

A student of the prophet, Jeremiah, searches in vain to find any sense of order or chronology to the chapters and verses in this long and beautifully written book. The time and context for each section often must be discovered from within the section itself and then the best we can do is often an educated guess. A good commentary can sometimes help, however.

As is so often the case, this week's lectionary reading from Jeremiah needs to be read in context to be fully appreciated. Most commentaries include it in a longer reading – 8:4-9:1 – which is probably too long to be read in the worship service but can be easily paraphrased before reading today's selection.

Jeremiah, speaking for the Lord, begins chapter 8 by making an argument based on reason: When people fall, they strive to get up again, right? And when people stray from the right path and discover that they are lost, they make haste to get back on the correct path lest they become hopelessly lost, do they not?

So, what's wrong with the people of Judah, that they insist on acting irrationally? Can't they see that they have wandered from God's path? They just keep on stumbling down the wrong path, refusing to repent. They say, "What have I done?" as though they really don't know or they are innocent.

Can they really be that ignorant? Good heavens! Even the birds know when the time has come to fly south. Why can't the people see that the time has come to repent and change their ways? Even the leaders of the people are guilty. They are like people who are lost but can't bring themselves to admit that they're lost. They have corrupted the laws of God, bending them to their own desires and interpreting them to serve their own selfish needs and then they deny that they have done anything wrong.

All the time, God has been patiently waiting and listening for the people to confess their sins and repent, but all he hears from them is lies and denial.

In vs. 12b ff., Jeremiah describes the consequences that will befall Judahites for their lack of contrition and those consequences will come (or came) by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, who, in 586 BCE sacked and looted the city of Jerusalem, razed it and the temple to the ground, slaughtered thousands of people, executed the royal family, blinded the king, and took him and the leaders of the country back to Babylon to live there in captivity.

Jeremiah, who tried and failed to broker a peace agreement between Nebuchadnezzar and the Jewish king, Zedekiah, was witness to all of this destruction, pain, and death. He reminds

the people who are left that while they may want to blame God for what has happened (“Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?”) what has happened is, in fact, their own fault. It is the natural consequence of trusting their own wisdom and their own judgement and refusing to listen to the word of the Lord. It is the result of their apostasy and their idolatry.

That is not to say that it isn’t tragic, this utter destruction of the Holy City and its people. In one of the most beautiful and heartbreaking passages of poetry in the Old Testament, Jeremiah testifies to his own grief, a grief which he shares with the Lord, God. (vss. 8:18-9:1) There are not enough tears in him, he says, to adequately mourn what has happened to his beloved people.

### **A PRIMAL FEAR**

How long, we wonder, might Curtis Whitson and his family have been stranded above those waterfalls, had not those two anonymous hikers noticed his water bottle and seen upon it his cry for help? What would have become of them? It is scary to contemplate, is it not? To be lost, separated from humankind and helpless, is one of the most tragic conditions in which human beings can find themselves.

It is, in fact, one of what anthropologists and psychologists call the five “Primal Fears.” With the fear of death, the fear of injury, the fear of loss of freedom, and the fear of losing our own identity, the fear of separation from other human beings – being lost -- is one of the most compelling fears we experience. It is a fear that drives and motivates us and compels us to act, especially to seek out other people, to create bonds of friendship and love, to be part of a group of people, a community.

Being separated from other people with the fear of possibly being forever alone is one of the darkest, most horrible fears we can experience,

And then comes the voice from behind the light in the darkness above: **“You have been found!”**

What relief must have washed through those stranded three. What tears of joy must they have shed upon hearing that voice. Indeed, the reporter for CNN said that Whitson still choked up when he talked about it, days after the rescue. To be lost and then rescued is at once one of the worst and best things we can experience.

History tells us, however, that certain things must happen before those who are lost can be rescued.

Dr. Holly Parker, is a practicing clinical psychologist at the Edith Nourse Rogers Memorial Veterans Hospital in Bedford, MA and Dr. Cynthia Divino, is executive director for the Boulder Institute for Psychotherapy and Research and, together, they have done extensive research having to do with the phenomenon of being lost, especially among wilderness hikers.

They say that there are **three vitally important things** that must happen before a lost person can be saved:

**First**, they must come to realize and admit that they are lost. (This is extremely difficult for experienced hikers and nearly impossible for experts.) But only when they bury their egos and admit that they're lost can they summon the ingenuity to scratch a message on the outside of a water bottle and enclose within it a note asking for help. Spiritually speaking, it is only then that they can confess that they have gone in the wrong direction, taken a wrong path, repent of their error, and return to the true and righteous path of the Lord.

**Secondly**, they who are lost must STAY CALM.

Panic is a natural response to being lost, the experts tell us, but it is extremely unhelpful. It causes us to act on adrenaline fed impulse and not reason. It makes us hyperfocus on one or two things like guilt or blame, and miss other things that might be more important – like water, or tracks, or other signs.

Instead, they suggest that people who are lost, and I would add physically or spiritually lost, stop and sit down. Do some deep breathing exercises. Move your gaze and focus about your surroundings and name each thing you see three times. Pray. Then make a mental list of things you need to do in step three.

**Thirdly**, STAY PUT. Don't walk, or worse, run around trying to find your way back to the right path. The chances are you will only get more lost and make things worse.

Find or make a clearing for yourself and then do things to help the searchers find you. Build a fire. If you can't make it to a clearing, tie a rope or cord to a tree branch so you can make it move so aircraft will notice it. Build a rudimentary shelter. Find water. Eat that protein bar you brought along. Get comfortable. If you must walk away from your camp, leave arrows on the ground or ribbons tied to branches so you can find your way back.

This, too, has a spiritual application. Stop doing the things that are making your situation worse. Realize that you're lost and you need help. And help those who can help you, help you.

On the morning of April 26, 2007, Mary Ellen Walters (68) and Ada Wasson (80) left Otterbein Home where they lived in Lebanon, Ohio on one of their many shopping trips, this one to the Outlet Center in Carolton, Kentucky, a place to which they had been many times.

This time, however, they were never heard from again.

Five months later, in late October, two deer hunters found their car in a gully in the middle of an abandoned hay field about half a mile from I71. Ada Wasson's body was in the car. Mary Ellen Walters's body was about 600 yards away in the direction of the highway.

The coroner's reports listed their cause of death as exposure to the elements over a prolonged period of time. In other words, dehydration and starvation, possibly heat stroke. He

conjectured that, given their intended destination, it looked like they got off the interstate at the wrong exit and had tried to turn around, got disoriented, made several wrong turns and wound up on a dirt road that led to the field in which they got stuck. After some time, driven by desperation, Mary Ellen had tried to walk to the highway to get help but had not made it.

I knew Mary Ellen. Not well, but she was a retired United Methodist Minister in this conference and our paths had crossed, so I was struck, personally, with how sad this was and how it was made even sadder by the fact that it looked like they were not prepared in any way for the emergency that befell them. No cell phones, no water, no food, no sweaters or blankets. They had done nothing to help people who were looking for them find them. (Experts suggest that in such a situation you should set your spare tire on fire to make smoke as a signal to attract attention.)

How often does this kind of tragedy happen when people are lost spiritually? Rather than seek out help or signal that they need help so those who care about them can find them, comfort them, advise them, they suffer in silence, often to their detriment and destruction.

### **YOU HAVE BEEN FOUND**

In his commentary and reflection on The Book of Jeremiah (*New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VI*), Patrick D. Miller speaks of how, in this longer passage 8:4-9:1, we are "given a picture of a listening God...attuned to hear human voices." First, comes God's openness to "human need and human appeals," something for which God actively listens. The cry for help. Secondly, "this text suggests that one of the primary things God listens for is the confession of those who have done wrong, the repentant cry, 'We have sinned.'" Jeremiah reminds us that the urgency with which we pray for protection, healing, and deliverance from suffering can be just as appropriately applied to prayers of confession and repentance.

And thirdly, this passage shows us that "the responsiveness of God is such that God's intention can be affected and even altered by words of confession and repentance." Indeed, most biblical examples of God's change of mind come as a response to repentance and the decision of God to "not bring judgment when the community has sinned greatly." For examples of this we need look no further than "Moses' prayer on behalf of the people when they made the golden calf or as in the story of the repentant Ninevites in the book of Jonah."

God is waiting to hear our cry for help, our confession that we have wandered down the wrong path, our repentance from the direction we have gone and our desire to return to God's way. And the promise of scripture is that the God whose grace and love is from everlasting to everlasting will hear our cry and come to us and utter those words that we all, from time to time, so desperately want and need to hear: "You have been found"

**Amen**