

May I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Let me begin by thanking everyone who's offered me their condolences this week on the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth. And I must say, as someone who's been a subject of hers for my whole life, it is odd to suddenly not have a queen. So, thank you for all of those who've shared your condolences. And I'm very mindful today is the anniversary of 9-11, as well, so we are today, two nations united in grief. I thought you might like to know that the first hymn we sang today, Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven, was actually the Queen's favorite hymn. Very appropriate that we sang it today, as did many churches across England include that hymn in their service today.

So, turning to the gospel set for today, many Bibles, mine included, have subtitles, and the subtitle for the gospel set for today is invariably the parable of the lost sheep. And I think that subtitles aren't always helpful, and this is an example of that being the case, because it invites us to read the passage in a certain way. And I think such subtitles can actually limit our understanding of scripture because there's often more than one way of reading a story. That's especially the case today with our gospel. Of course, it's a story about a sheep that is found, but there's more going on in the story than that. So I want to offer three ways of reading this gospel story in an effort to bring out the full meaning of the text.

But I'll begin by reading it as a story of a lost sheep, which is the most obvious and familiar reading. I do wonder how the sheep got lost. I'm not very familiar with sheep, and you don't see that many of them in California, but I don't remember them from being particularly adventurous creatures. They're very timid and they like to stay together in a flock. We even use the word sheepish to describe a certain timid kind of behavior. So, I can't imagine that the sheep in the story made a big, bold escape for freedom. That doesn't seem their style. Rather, I think this sheep just got her head down in a particularly lush piece of grass and kept on munching and kept on munching till they realized that they were separated from the rest of the flock. It nibbled its way into lostness.

Most of us nibble our way towards lostness. There are those like St. Paul, who in the epistle we heard, did as Augustine said, and sinned boldly. He recognized himself in that passage as a blasphemer, a persecutor, a

man of violence, and then he had that dramatic conversion on the Damascus Road when his life was turned around, and he was made very aware of how lost he'd been. Similarly, John Newton, the foul-mouthed slave trader, who wrote the hymn Amazing Grace, with the line, "I once was lost, but now I'm found," he, too, had a dramatic sense of conversion of turning around towards God, of recognizing how lost he'd become, how far he'd wandered from the right path.

But for most of us, it's just a case of nibbling away. It's not that we are incarcerated in some dingy cell, and we suddenly realize that our life has gone off the rails. It's more likely that we've just got so caught up with living life that we get to the point that we recognize that we've moved away from God. We haven't taken a dramatic step. We haven't done something terrible. We may not have even ever made a conscious decision to move away from God. It's just that we've nibbled away.

Another thing I've noticed about this sheep in the story is that it's not always been lost. It's part of the shepherd's flock. It's one of the hundred sheep. It's not that the shepherd is going out and looking for the hundred and first sheep he's looking for the hundredth that's wandered away. And so often we understand this story as being about a sheep that's outside the fold. We see this as a non-Christian sheep who comes to faith and becomes a Christian, but actually this story can be read about a sheep like us. This is a church-going sheep in the story.

Lostness is not just something experienced by those who aren't Christians or who don't come to church. Lostness happens to God's people. It's not that we cross over once and for all from sinful lostness to righteous foundness. We get lost over and over again, and God finds us over and over again. Lostness can mean many things. It can take many forms. It can mean we have lost our sense of belonging, our sense of God's presence with us. We can get lost in grief or in the throes of addiction or bitterness.

And the amazing truth of this parable is that God continues to search for all of us who are lost, which leads me to the second way of reading this story, not so much as a parable of a lost sheep, but rather as a story of a good and determined shepherd. And the story is actually told from the shepherd's point of view. And it's quite clear that we're invited to see God as being represented by the shepherd. We're told nothing about

the sheep in the story other than that it was lost. It's the shepherd who loses the sheep, who goes after it, who brings it home rejoicing. It doesn't say in the story that the shepherd put the joyful sheep on his shoulders. No, it's the shepherd who joyfully puts the sheep on his shoulders. The shepherd doesn't think, "Well, I've got 99% of my sheep. I've only lost 1%. Why risk losing more? I'll cut my losses and leave him wherever he is." No, the shepherd sets out in pursuit of the lost sheep.

How amazing is that? We're being invited to think that the God who created the world, who made all of us, can be interested in one lost person. One might think that God had enough on His plate just looking after the universe, but the Bible's quite clear that God, like the shepherd in the story, pursues the lost. The lost sheep does nothing to aid being found. She doesn't bleat, she doesn't cry out, doesn't send up a flare. The finding is all the work of the shepherd.

This parable is a story about God's grace, which is evident from the context. Jesus tells the story when He hears the Pharisees, the religious leaders, grumbling about the fact that Jesus was eating with sinners, not good, righteous, church-going holy people like themselves. Being found, being saved is not something we can achieve for ourselves. It's not a prize. It's not a reward for being holy. Salvation comes as God's gift. We're totally dependent on God's mercy and God's grace.

There's a famous English glamour model called Samantha Fox, and some years ago she became a Christian and she gave her story to a tabloid newspaper, which retold the story under a suitably glamorous picture of Samantha Fox with the headline, Sam Fox Finds God. And some wag the next day wrote in and said, "Oh, I didn't know God was lost." We don't find God so much as God finds us. He's the one who sets out to pursue the lost.

Now the final and third way of reading this story is particularly relevant for us on this Rally Sunday, as our community life picks up and we gear towards the new term, especially so given the long pandemic hiatus that we've all been on. Today is a day which we've identified as trying to get back to how it was pre-pandemic.

This is a story about a sheep. It's a story about a shepherd. It's also the story of the restoration of a flock. When the shepherd brings back the lost sheep, the 100 sheep in the flock are back together again, reunited.

There is an individual aspect of this story, the finding of the lost sheep. There's also a very important corporate aspect, the importance of the restoration of the whole. We each make our spiritual journey on our own. It's an individual journey, but we travel together in community, and our communal and community life is very important. We belong together. Together we make up the body of Christ or God's flock, if we are to carry on with the image of the parable. And St. Paul is very clear when talking about the church as the body of Christ, that each part of that body has an important place in the body. And a role to play.

This Rally Sunday is a community day. We celebrate being the body of Christ here in La Jolla. There's a sense of coming back together at the end of the summer, of community life. As we get going again, we celebrate being Christ's body, and this is a good season in our community life. It's a season of growth and development. And after our service, there's the normal coffee, and our life is getting so much back to normal that the scones are back just as a sign of return to normality. And you'll see that there are booths out there and a barbecue, and everybody's welcome to stay for lunch, and there's people in the booths who are involved in different aspects of church life. And you're invited to go and talk to them, to find out about what our church does, how we are busy in the week, where we reach out to those beyond our community.

So, it's an information sharing day and also an opportunity to see where we might make a contribution where there are gaps, where we might play a part. So, I encourage you to talk to people on the booth. They'd love to talk to you. See if there's something that you are interested in, an opportunity to serve. There are plenty of ways that we can together be the body of Christ and live as Christ's body in this place.

So, in conclusion, let me encourage you not to pay much attention to subtitles. Let's not restrict our understanding of this parable to being a story about a lost sheep. It is a story about a lost sheep. It's also a story about a determined shepherd and a restored community. Amen.