Sunday, March 8, 1992
WHERE DID I GO?
Luke 4:1-13

A little girl, two and a half years old, was being toilet trained. One day, her dad placed her on the stool in an interior bathroom in their home. He quietly closed the door to give her privacy and then, without thinking, turned off the light — the switch being on the outside of the room. The bathroom was now in total darkness. After about 15 seconds, he heard a quiet little voice say, “Where did I go?”

“Where did I go?” Haven’t you felt at times that someone or something has turned the light out for you, and in the darkness, you have lost yourself? Where did I go? It’s a universal question for human beings. Some have asked the question in another way: “Where did I go wrong?”

Maybe you’ve looked at a photograph of yourself taken years ago, perhaps as a baby or young child, and now as an adult, you look at it and wonder, “Where did I go?” Or you look in a mirror and ask the same question, “Where did I go?” And you say to yourself, “I had so many dreams of what I was going to do with my life.” We can get lost in many different ways, and it can be difficult to find ourselves.

Sometimes we get lost because we give in to the temptation to follow the wrong path or live out the wrong story of what life is all about. The Gospels tell us that when Jesus was beginning his ministry at about age 30, he was tempted in that manner. He faced three major temptations. The first was to turn stones into bread, thereby abolishing hunger and poverty and benefiting countless people. Think how many individuals would have almost instantly become his followers. However, Jesus knew they would be following him for the wrong reason, and he would need to keep giving them food or risk losing them.

The second temptation was to jump off the top of the temple in Jerusalem without coming to any harm in public view of thousands of people, thereby proving that God would protect him, and it would have given him instant celebrity status and would have attracted the world’s attention to what he had to say. It would at the same time test whether or not God was truly with him.

The third temptation was a political one. He would use his power to take over the government and rule not only the Roman Empire but the whole world, where all people could live happily and prosperously ever after.

Jesus resisted all three temptations with God’s help because he knew that following any one of them would have taken him in the wrong direction, and he would be lost. Jesus knew there is a right way to lose one’s self and a wrong way. Later in his ministry, he told his disciples and followers over and over again, “Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake will keep it.”

The New Testament is filled with stories of men and women who came to find Jesus because they were lost. Nicodemus was lost in his personal search for righteousness. Zacchaeus was lost in his drive for personal wealth.

What are some of the ways in which we get lost today? Some people get lost in their work. It becomes an all-consuming passion so that there is no time left for anything else. Or here is an

individual who is lost in his pursuit of personal power, or someone else who is lost in his desire to get rich.

There are others who have no direction or purpose in life at all and are lost because they have no idea of where they are or where they are going. They wander around aimlessly. There are still other individuals who are lost in the past. They can't leave it behind and move on. Some of them are lost in anger, jealousy, and resentment. They are critical of others. They live in fear. They worry and procrastinate. They wallow in self-pity and depression. They try to change other people instead of changing themselves.

One person said it this way: "Too many of us choose the wrong story upon which to build our lives without being aware of it." Perhaps you've not thought of it in this way, but stories have a meaning and power beyond anything we usually recognize. All stories reveal underlying assumptions about the way the world works, what is important in life, and what is not.

Stories can lead us astray and get us lost, or they can lead us in the right direction, and we do not get lost. Listen to the stories in our culture. Who is the villain, and who is the hero? Who succeeds, and who fails? What is the object of life, and how does it turn out in the end?

All of us live by stories. Stories are a way of making sense in a senseless world. They shape our lives, give us meaning and direction, energy, and inspiration, and they can also get us lost.

When people have no adequate stories to guide their lives, they look for direction in other ways. That's why astrology columns in the newspapers are so popular. A Gallup poll indicates that 32 million people in this country believe in astrology. It's a search for meaning in life. Knowing where your stars are is like having a weather forecast of problems in life. Particularly in times of stress, people look for answers for their lives. The thirst for meaning and the discouragement at the lack of adequate stories to live by show up in the use of narcotics. If we cannot make sense of our lives, we can at least temporarily check out of our boring routine by "out-of-body" experiences with cocaine or heroin or crack or some other drug which will take one temporarily out of this world.

In our time, the stories that occupy many people and influence them are the stories that come to us through television. Soap operas, dramas, situation comedies, news programs, and commercials tell stories. One observer of our present culture claims that the underlying story that unites all the other stories on television is that we are supposed to learn to be good shoppers. That, it seems, is the purpose of life. That is our duty and joy.

Hardly ever is it stated this bluntly. But sometimes it is, as in a bumper sticker I've seen which said, "The one who dies with the most toys wins." Sometimes that seems to be the dominant story of our culture. What is the story line?

Life is a contest, a game, in which the play involves the accumulation of entertaining and diverting possessions, and the goal is having more than the next person. Happiness is to be found in the acquisition of the products of the consumer culture.

Very few individuals would openly admit that this is the story that guides their lives. Yet, as I observe the way many people live and what occupies their thoughts, where their energy is concentrated, and what captivates and fascinates them, the bumper sticker is not too far off target.

But does such a story help us find ourselves or get us lost? Does it hold up in the end? Is this an adequate faith to live by?

In 1986, in Central Park in New York City, Jennifer Dawn Levin was strangled to death by Robert Chambers, Jr. Both of these young people were from affluent families, both had attended superior preparatory schools, and both had access to the vast culture of New York City. Both came from homes which had been split by divorce, and both had been given everything except what really matters: a dependable family life. Neither Jennifer nor Robert had strong parental ties. Neither had the socializing effect of religion. The night of the murder, they had come from their group in a bar. They were sexually free and apparently jaded; they had walked in Central Park to make love. Sex became violence, and the young woman was strangled to death.

Commenting on this strange killing, Dr. Bernice Berg, a psychologist in Manhattan who studied the case and interviewed the families, said, “When parents spend 90% of their time making more money and 5% of their time with the family, these values are passed on to the children. It tells them families are not important. Making money, having money, and spending money is.”

The owner of the bar where these two young people spent a lot of their time and had left together that evening of the killing tells of the great need of these young people and their friends for hugging, touching, and just being around someone who cared for them and showed it.

We talk a lot about homeless people in our time. These two young people were, in the deepest sense of the term, homeless. They were homeless not in a physical or financial sense, but desperately homeless spiritually and psychologically. When the murderer Robert Chambers re-enacted the murder scene, there was a profound pathos in his repetition of the phrase, “I wanted to go home, I wanted to go home.” But he had no home in a spiritual sense. He was lost. Our society is filled with these kinds of homeless people, and many of them are children and young people.

“The one who dies with the most toys wins.” Is this a big enough story to live by, especially when tough times come? Can you build your life on that story? Will it give you hope for the future?

Jesus knew that such stories cannot sustain us. He knew that if he sold his soul to any one of the three temptations that came to him, it would not be enough to base his life on.

For one thing, such stories are not idealistic enough. They do not appeal to the nobler instincts in us, but rather to such base instincts as greed, lust, and envy. There is no call to sacrifice, to stretch, to live for something higher and deeper than petty human concerns and desires.

Furthermore, all the toys, trinkets, promotions, and status symbols cannot carry us through the pains, disappointments, losses, and reversals that sooner or later will be a part of every one of our lives. They cannot equip us to face the agonies and confusions that will come. Such stories will not keep us on course. They do not bring out the best in us. Rather, one day, like the little girl in the bathroom when the light was turned out, we will ask, “Where did I go?”

But there is another story that we Christians know. It has for good reason been called, “The Greatest Story Ever Told.” It is the story of God’s love for us and for all people and all creation. It is the story of God’s coming among us in Jesus. It is the story that tells us that God so loved

the world that God gave the only Son. It is the story that reminds us that “wherever two or three or more are gathered together in the name of Jesus, God is there among us.”

It is the story which tells us that we are all created in the image of God and that God continually dwells in us. It is the story that tells us that God always forgives us and that God will never give up on us. It is the story that tells us that God created the world good and us as good. It is the story that reminds us that we find our life by losing it, by giving it away for a higher purpose. It is a story that tells us that life with God continues after this life. It is the story that tells us that the chief end of life is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. It is the story that tells us, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” It is a story that declares, “If God is for us, who is against us? Nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God.” It is the story that is the basis for all human freedom. It is a story that has freed slaves and given people the courage and power to overcome addictions of every kind.

It is a story that can be, and has been, set to music. Most of the world’s enduring songs are based on this story. “I love to tell the story of Jesus and his love.” “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee, God of Glory, God of Love.”

Do you know what’s a good test of the stories we choose to live by? Can the story be made into a song that will endure? Only some stories are worthy of being set to music. I doubt, for instance, that the line, “The one who dies with the most toys wins,” will ever become a song that we all want to sing. Would you want to sing a hymn with the words, “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Ourselves"?

There are many stories that simply will not work as a song. It is as if the music refuses to carry stories that are unworthy. Have you ever heard a song about hate or greed that you wanted to sing? It is no accident that the subject matter of most songs is love. Love is a story that can be set to music.

Choosing the right story and song to live by — nothing could be more important. That is what we are helping our children to do in Church School. We are giving them a story to live by, one that has stood the test of time, a story that will sustain them more than all the other stories they hear all around them every day.

What we want for our children is the same thing we seek for ourselves: a story that can stand up in all times and circumstances, a story that will not desert us at the precise moment when we need a sustaining story the most.

The right story, the story of God’s continuing love for us, can not only keep us from getting lost but can also find and tell us where we are when we ask, “Where did I go?” Amen.