Sunday, February 29, 2004
LOST AND FOUND
Luke 4:1-13

Here's a story I've used in a sermon before, and I'm using it again because it's one of my favorites. 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, as the switch was on the outside of the room. The bathroom was now in total darkness. After a few seconds, he heard a quiet little voice say, "Where did I go?"

Where did I go? Haven't you at one time or another felt like someone or something has turned off the light, and you ask yourself, "Where did I go?" It's a universal question for human beings. Some people have asked the question in another way: "Where did I go wrong?"

A few weeks ago, I was looking at some old photographs of myself as a baby, then as a young boy, a teenager, and a young man. Then I looked at my college yearbook from when I was a senior, and I hardly recognized myself. I thought to myself, "Where did I go?"

I'm sure you've had the same experience. Or maybe you've looked in a mirror and asked, "Where did I go?" And then you might have continued to think, "I had so many dreams of what I was going to become."

You could get lost because you were tempted to follow the wrong path or live out the wrong story of what life is all about.

According to the gospel story, when Jesus was beginning his public ministry at about the age of 30, following his baptism, he went into the wilderness to consider his future. There, he faced three major temptations. The first was to turn stones into bread, thereby using his power to abolish hunger and poverty and benefit countless people. You can imagine how many people would almost instantly become his followers. But after considering this, he realized that people would follow him for the wrong reasons, and he would need to continue giving them food or risk losing them — and in the process, he too would get lost.

The second temptation was to jump off the top of the temple in Jerusalem to see whether or not he would be hurt. If he did this in public and no harm was done to him, he would have instant celebrity status. He would attract the attention of countless people, and they would certainly listen to what he had to say. Furthermore, it would, at the same time, test whether or not God was truly with him.

The third temptation was to 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.

With the Spirit of God guiding him, he resisted all three temptations. He came to the realization that giving in to any one or all of the three temptations would have taken him in the wrong direction, and he would be lost. He knew there is a right way to lose oneself and a wrong way. Later in his ministry, he told his disciples 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 Bible 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 people today get lost? Some people, maybe even some of you, get lost in your 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 her desire to get rich.

There are others who have no direction or sense of purpose in life and are lost because they have no vision or dream to follow. They wander through life aimlessly. There are others who are lost in the past. They can't leave it behind and move on. There are also those who 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. Even church congregations can get lost.

One wise person I know described it this way: "Too many of us choose the wrong story upon which to build our lives without being aware of it, and therefore get lost in the process." Maybe you've never thought of it this way, but stories have a power and meaning beyond what you might think. All stories reveal underlying assumptions about life, what is meaningful, and what is not.

The wrong story can lead you astray and get you lost, while the right story can lead you in the right direction and keep you from getting lost. Pay close attention to the stories in today's culture. Who are the heroes in these stories? Who are the villains? Who succeeds and who fails? Who finds happiness and who finds despair? What is the purpose of life according to the story, and how does it turn out in the end?

All people live by stories. They are a way of helping you make sense of life in a world that all too frequently appears senseless. Stories shape your life, give you meaning and direction, energy and inspiration. But there are also stories that can lead you in the wrong direction, and you can get lost.

When people have no adequate stories to guide their lives, they look for direction in other ways. That's one reason why astrology columns in newspapers are so popular. I saw a poll recently that estimated that 32 million people in this country have some belief in astrology. It's a search for direction in life. Knowing where your stars are and if they are in the right alignment is like having a weather forecast of your problems. Especially in times of stress, people look for answers to their problems. The thirst for meaning and the discouragement that comes from the lack of it can sometimes lead people to other, more destructive forms of escape, such as alcohol or narcotics. If you cannot make sense of your life, you can at least temporarily check out of your boring routine through "out-of-body" experiences with drugs.

In this day and age, many of the stories that influence people come through television. Soap operas, dramas, situation comedies, news programs, and commercials all tell stories. One observer of our present culture claims that the primary underlying story that unites all the other stories you see on television is that you are supposed to learn to be good shoppers. That is the purpose of life. That is your duty and joy.

Of course, it is never stated this bluntly. Sometimes, however, it is — like in the bumper sticker that says, "The one who dies with the most toys wins." For some people, that seems to be the dominant story of our culture. What is the story line? Life is a contest, a game, in which the

goal is the accumulation of entertaining and diverting possessions. The purpose is to have 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 line that guides their lives. Yet as I observe the way many people live and what occupies their thoughts, where their energy goes, the bumper sticker is not too far off target.

The key question is, does that kind of story help you find yourself, or does it get you lost? Does the story hold up in the end? Is this an adequate purpose for which to live?

Not too many years ago, the New York Times had a story about Jennifer Dawn Levin, who was strangled to death by Robert Chambers, Jr. Both of these young people were from affluent families. Both had attended superior preparatory schools and had access to the vast culture of New York City. Both came from homes that had been split by divorce, and both had been given everything except what truly matters — a dependable and loving family life. Neither Jennifer nor Robert had strong parental ties. Neither had the socializing effect of religious faith. The night of the murder, they had come from a bar. They were sexually free and apparently jaded. They had walked into Central Park to have sex. The sex became violent, 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 that families and loving, caring relationships are not important — spending money is what’s important.”

The owner of the bar where these two young people spent a lot of their time and had left together that evening 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.

There is a lot of talk about homeless people in our time. These two young people and many others like them were, in the deepest sense of the term, homeless. They were not homeless in a physical or financial way, but desperately homeless spiritually and psychologically.

When Robert Chambers was interviewed at 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 this story? Does it give you hope for the future?

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

Such stories are not idealistic enough. They do not appeal to the nobler instincts in you, 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 will not carry you through the pains, disappointments, losses, and reversals that sooner or later will be a part of your life. They cannot equip you to face the agonies and confusions that will come. They do not bring out the best in you. Rather, one day, like the little girl in the bathroom when the light was turned off, you will ask, “Where did I go?”

There is another story that followers of the way of Jesus know. It has for good reason been called, “the greatest story ever told.” It is the story of God’s love for you, for all people, and for all creation.

It is the story that tells you that you are created in God’s image and that the Spirit of God dwells in you. It is the story that tells you that God always loves and forgives you and that God will never give up on you. It is the story that tells you that God created the world to be good and you as good. It is the story that reminds you that you will find your life by living for others. It is the story that tells you that life with God continues after this life. It is the story that declares, “If God is for you, who is against you?” It is the story that is the basis for all human freedom.

It is a story so powerful that it has freed slaves and given people the courage and power to overcome addictions of every kind. It is a story that has been set to music over and over again. Many of the world’s enduring songs are based on this story. “I love to tell the story of Jesus and his love.” In fact, a good test of any story you choose to live by is whether or not the story can be made into a song that will endure. Only some stories are worthy of being set to music. Would you want to sing a song with the words, “The one who dies with the most toys wins”?

Or how about a song that glorifies greed or hate? Would you want to sing it? It is no accident that the subject matter of most songs is love.

You need the right story to keep you from getting lost. You want a story that will give you courage and strength when you need it. You want a story that will rescue you when you are lost. I love to hear and to tell the story of Jesus and his love. Amen.