



"LIVING LOST"

SCRIPTURE: JOHN 12:20-33

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, March 17, 2024, New Member Sunday, Lent #5

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

John 12:20-33

12:20 Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks.

12:21 They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

12:22 Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

12:23 Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

12:24 Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

12:25 Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

12:26 Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

12:27 "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say--' Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.

12:28 Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."

12:29 The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him."

12:30 Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine.

12:31 Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.

12:32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

12:33 He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

The Word of the LORD

Thanks be to God

Lost, a poem by David Wagoner (1971)

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
Must ask permission to know it and be known.
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,
I have made this place around you.
If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here.
No two trees are the same to Raven.
No two branches are the same to Wren.
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find you.

I have circled back to this poem many times—it seems to find me again and again when I am lost.

I can't remember when I first discovered it. I just remember that it located me in the lostness and found-ness of the way life works.

We are always here—found and lost.
We are always right here—getting our bearings,
Bearing up under the challenges that particular moment
Has to offer us.

I have been lost many times—every time John and I have moved, and that was a lot, I would always intentionally go out and get lost. It's the only way I could get my bearings in a place—to get lost there and find my way home—by another way than I had known before I got lost.

I've been lost in the wilderness—literally, lost out in the canyonlands of Utah.

(Canyonlands Image)

It's hard enough to find your way around when the sky is blue and the canyons clearly visible. It was close to impossible when an unexpected snow whited out the horizon and all rocks that marked any path through the outback.

I was with a friend that time. And we finally found our way. But it was the kind of lost where we rationed our food, and looked for ways to distract ourselves from the panic that was lurking in our minds as the hours and days passed.

(Take down canyonlands image)

I've been lost in grief—a miscarriage in a town where I knew no one. After college when there was no clear path for me. When my mom died. When I lost my dog, Tino, who had been the only way I slept at night through my twenties.

I've been lost in trauma—the disorientation of too much, too fast. The terror, the isolation, the lost innocence, the lost joy.

I've lost my faith, lost the different ways I thought I needed to understand God. I've lost the ways I prayed in the past. I've lost church before—said goodbye to it several times over.

Trust gets lost when we're human over and over again. This world gives us lots of trust falls where we either don't get caught at all, or we get caught so late that the damage is done.

I've lost money. I've lost time.
Lost memories, friends, and the will to draw the line.

I've lost myself in the shuffle at different turns.
And I've lost sleep with the ways the human heart
Yearns for something other than what we have
Or what our life is turning out to be.

There are all kinds of ways to be lost
When we see it as something that happens
Periodically instead of accepting it as a way of life.

Jesus finds us lost and doesn't really fix it the way
We want him to.
We want answers, clarity, companionship that we can trust
We want directions, maps, a path that is clear and
Unencumbered by cruelty, disappointment, and sorrow.

Jesus tells us we're going to have to lose even more—
More frequently, more materially, more spiritually, more humanely.
Just more—the less we want to lose, the more lost we will be.

So, this whole living lost thing—it's real—it's here, it's us, it's
The ways life unfolds.

We live lost in order to find our way to the home that was always here.
It sounds pretty elemental, simple, and painless.
But the truth is, it hurts and it can be terrifying at turns,
And no one is immune to it. And the more we fight the lostness,
The more we get lost in our confusion about what kind of lost
gets us free and what kind of lost oppresses us from the inside, out.

This passage in John is a swirl, a centrifuge of losing and seeing for ourselves.
The Greeks who come looking for Jesus are destabilizing. They are
The shift underway—that Jesus is not located in one cultural trajectory, but
Jesus is here for the whole universe—the cosmic Christ, the everyman, the one
Who understands, the one who has walked in our shoes and can speak into
Our experiences, speak in our mother-tongues, see our maladies and our tragedies, and our
capacities.

The Greeks here are not Greek speaking Jewish people, but the threshold to Hellenistic
culture.

Andrew and Phillip were called early in John's Gospel, and they facilitate this new
beginning, this next chapter being ushered in for those beyond their cultural experience.

True to form in John's gospel, the gospel writer takes the material from the synoptic
gospels and repurposes it. Remember the Johannine community is lost—lost in cultural
conflict, lost in seismic shifts in the ways they understood life, community, and themselves.
Everything was changing. And people they thought they aligned with, were now othering
them. This was a time of great upheaval, of loss on top of loss—loss of place, loss of people,

loss of power, loss of a sense of possibility. It was loss of friendships, loss of feeling known, loss of a sense of being home.

The gospel writer takes the Jesus of the synoptics and underwrite him with an all knowing quality—with a clear understanding of who he is in the big picture. The Jesus of the gospel of John is not confused, he is not trying to figure out why things are happening the way they are happening in his life. The Jesus in John's Gospel knows who he is and knows what he has to do. He has agency in his life and in his death.

This passage uses echoes of Christ's agony in the garden of Gethsemane that we see in Mark, and de-agonizes it. Jesus does not ask God to take this task from him—he willingly gives himself to the task of dying to live—losing to win. Jesus knows the way home. Jesus knows himself to be God's own beloved child.

Jesus is not lost.

John's Gospel even takes the language of losing your life to find it from other places in scripture and makes it even stronger—you've got to hate your life to get the glory that Jesus tells us we should want.

We spent a lot of time right here in Bible Study on Wednesday—about all that “hating our lives” brings up for us. There was lots of wisdom shared: like the danger of being told to hate your life by the church when the church teaches hate toward certain lives in particular.

Like when Jesus' words get tangled up with the self-loathing that we internalize from white supremacy, from ableism, from homophobia, from transphobia, xenophobia, anti-semitism, misogyny. We are in a battle to take our lives back, our souls back from the death dealing ways Christianity got appropriated to teach us to punish ourselves for just being ourselves.

And we explored the liberating edge of hating our lives when we are caught in the crosshairs of trauma and pain and being under-resourced financially and being in hostile territory in contexts and communities where we are not safe. In that way, hating our lives might be what allows us to find life—to believe that there might be something better for us.

We talked about the prophetic edge of clarity that things are not as they should be.

Living lost can be how we live out the truth that things need to change.

We've spent these last several weeks being intentional about naming our disorientation and our lostness—our practices together to find our way home by another way. The truth is Lent isn't the only time these things are true for us. Every day has some Lent lostness built into it. Every day we are challenged to locate ourselves in God's universe of promise and possibility when we feel we have everything and nothing to lose—maybe all at the same time, in the same place.

So, the way we practice together is the way we both befriend and loosen our grip on the way life can confuse us about what being lost and found are really all about. Self-loathing is not the answer. Hating others is not the answer. Those are the edges we know we are working within. And so, we live lost with an aspiration, with a hope, that we are never lost from God's embrace.

That's why here, now is a place we can find ourselves with a deep breath, and our feet on the ground, and mutual liberation as our compass, our shared dream. That's why living lost can be a promising way to find our shared humanity anew. That's why every time new people find their way to Grace Covenant, we receive them as a sign from God, that we are on track to find our way home together, by a way we are still learning and growing into in God's time.

(Kyle, please put the poem on the screen so that people can read it together. It may need to be broken into two slides for the people in the sanctuary)

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