

Lost

Luke 19:1-10

October 30, 2016

It is an eerie and unsettling feeling -- being lost.

This summer my son, Matt, and I went kayaking on Englishman Bay in Downeast Maine. We set out from the beach at Roque Bluffs State Park to do a twelve mile circumnavigation of Roque Island, a beautiful, crescent-shaped island marked by rocky cliffs and a long sand beach. We circled the island, enjoying a great paddle, and rounded Great Head at its northernmost tip, leaving an open water crossing of a little less than two miles to return to our put-in on the mainland.

Right at that moment, a fog rolled in, a broad and dense fog, engulfing the bay and leaving us with only forty or fifty yards of visibility in any direction. Landing on Roque is not permitted, but that really didn't matter. Our wives and Matt's kids were expecting us back on the mainland and the fog could remain for hours. It made no sense to try to wait it out.

So we set out into the fog, following a bearing on the compass I keep in the pocket of my PFD. The wind had come up. It was not terribly rough, but there were rollers and choppy waves, rough enough that you had to stay focussed to keep the kayak on course and upright. It was a handheld compass, so I could not take a bearing and paddle at the same time. I would check the direction, then hold the compass between my teeth while I paddled, then stop paddling and check the compass again.

We made some headway, maybe a half mile or so. It was hard to know what progress we were making because we couldn't see anything. Matt was paddling parallel to me about fifteen or twenty yards to starboard, and then, suddenly, he was over! Capsized! And that was the moment: Matt in the water ... can't see anything ... don't know how far we've come or where land is ... just ocean and wind and waves and Matt in the water. Eerie. Unsettling. Foreboding. Forbidding. Lost.

We were not lost, but in that moment, for a moment, it felt like it. I paddled over to Matt, steadied his boat, retrieved the hand pump off the deck of the kayak and pumped the water out of the cockpit. He climbed into the boat, I helped him secure his sprayskirt, and then we were paddling once more.

As we were doing the rescue, the fog lifted just a bit, just for a moment, and I caught a glimpse of land in the distance. The fog closed back in as we resumed paddling, but we followed the compass bearing and after some length of time, a length of time that seemed much longer than it surely was -- like forever! -- we landed on the beach.

We were not lost, but for a moment, it felt like it. But it is the reverse that is truly frightening: to be lost and not know it. To be lost and not know it. I have been there, too.

Zacchaeus was lost. What made him lost?

Was he lost because he was short? Yes, he was lost, he couldn't see, he couldn't see over the crowd, because he was short.

Just like we may be lost because we are too short or too fat or too slow or too silly or too shy or too old or too anything, any of the personal idiosyncrasies that make us who we are, but set us apart from everybody else and make us feel other, make us feel less, make us feel lost.

Was he lost because of the crowd? Yes, they were in the way. They were coming between him and what he wanted to see, between him and where he wanted to be, maybe even sometimes between him and what he wanted to be.

Just like we may be lost in a crowd, faceless and nameless in the midst of the great crowd of humanity: unremarkable, inconspicuous, overlooked.

Was he lost because he was a Jew? Yes, because he was a Jew, ruled by an occupying power -- they always seemed to be ruled by some foreign power or other! -- enjoying neither the rights nor the privileges of a citizen of the empire. It had been long, so long, since being a Jew carried any sort of public gravitas, any sort of dignity. Yes, his fellow Jews still went to Temple and held onto their hopes for a Son of David who would restore the fortunes of Israel, but not people like him, not people who knew better.

Just like we may be lost because we were born into the wrong ethnic group, the wrong social class, born with the wrong genes.

Was he lost because he was a tax collector? Yes, not because of the job itself, but because of what it entails: making a living by "sleeping with the enemy," Rome's lackey, turning his back and laying heavy burdens on his own people.

Just like we may be lost because we "do what we have to do," because we set aside our scruples or make exceptions or sacrifice friendships or even family to get to where we want to be or to stay on the right side of the powers that be.

Was Zacchaeus lost because he was rich? Yes, because it seems to have defined his identity. He was rich, which let him forget or not care that he was short, that he was otherwise unremarkable, that he was a Jew, that he was hated by Jews.

Just like we may be lost when we judge ourselves by how much we have, or judge others by how much they have, when we put our trust in treasure and not the Lord.

Zacchaeus was lost, but did he know it? It doesn't seem so. I know from my own experience that you can be lost and deep down know that you are lost, but manage to convince yourself that you are not. He's rich. He's a tax collector, a chief tax collector. He is trusted by the Romans and feared by the Jews. He is an important man. He is not lost.

He wasn't looking for Jesus because he thought he was lost. He just wanted to see what all the chatter, all the commotion, was about. He wasn't looking for anything, hoping for anything. He was just curious, just wanted to see. But he couldn't see because of the crowd, so he ran ahead and climbed a tree. Lost Zacchaeus sitting in a tree!

And there, Jesus found him!

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. He was just passing through. He had no plans to stop in Jericho. By Luke's account, this was the very day Jesus would enter the city of Jerusalem, riding on the back of colt, surrounded by large crowds shouting praises to God for the "king who comes in the name of the Lord."

There was excitement among the people, a palpable sense of something extraordinary about to happen before their own eyes in their own time. And in Jesus' mind and heart? Grief over the city, because it was lost, because it didn't understand, because it couldn't see, because it failed to see, what God wanted to do, what God was doing. And he knew what was coming. He knew the anger and bitterness and horror and pain that surely would be his to bear in only a matter of days.

But Jesus noticed him. Jesus saw Zacchaeus sitting in that sycamore tree and there was a change of plans! Do you get it? Hear if you have ears to hear! Jesus had places to go, things to do, heavy things, literally the weight of the world, on his heart and mind and he stopped ... for Zacchaeus, for one little man, one little lost man, sitting in a tree.

I saw a presidential candidate do that once -- stop for one little man -- and I will never forget it. Jesus stopped for Zacchaeus. And if Jesus stopped for Zacchaeus, Jesus will stop for you!

Jesus stopped and called him by name and Zacchaeus climbed down that tree as fast as he could. The bystanders started grumbling because Jesus had clearly picked the wrong man to go home with, but Zacchaeus was filled with joy. Because? Because he had been found! Because he had been saved! That's what Jesus said: "Salvation has come to this house today."

Was Zacchaeus saved because he pledged to give half his wealth to the poor? Because he promised to repay many times over any he had cheated? No, that gets it backwards. Salvation came to his house quite literally, because Jesus came to his house! Because Jesus found him, because Jesus noticed him, because Jesus spoke his name, because Jesus wanted to be with him.

He was lost, but now he was found! To be found is to be saved, to matter to somebody, to matter to somebody that matters, to be found by God. His change of heart, his gesture of generosity, is not the cause of his salvation, but its result. Because he has been found. Because he is no longer lost. Because his own people, all of his own people, rich and poor, are no longer lost to him.

The people grumbled, but they didn't get it. This is what Jesus came to do, to seek and save the lost. Like Zacchaeus. Like ...

Like you? Are you lost? The truly frightening thing is to be lost and not know it. But if you are lost, even if you are lost and don't know it, take heart. Take heart and don't be afraid! Jesus will find you.

Just be sure that when he calls your name, you get yourself down out of that tree and take Jesus home with you!