

**Joy**  
Luke 15:1-10  
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In the summer of 2018, in a remote northern province in Thailand, just as monsoon season arrived, twelve young soccer players and their twentysomething coach descended into the mouth of a cave and disappeared.

The monsoon rains came, and the heavy downpour and rising waters inside the cave trapped the boys while they were adventuring, forcing them deeper underground than they ever intended to go, almost three miles from the entrance. They took shelter on one of the few elevated areas inside the cave that wasn't submerged under water and then did the only thing they could do: wait to be rescued.

The unbelievable story of what then unfolded is retold in the movie *Thirteen Lives*, directed by Ron Howard, which was released last month on Amazon Prime. If you haven't seen it, I recommend it.

Unfortunately, there's only one way in and one way out of this now famous cave. Rescuers searched the surrounding mountains for an alternative opening the boys might be able to exit through but never found one.

Seeing that only a few of the boys knew how to swim, and none could scuba dive, rescuers had no way of getting them out of until the water receded, which officials warned at the time wouldn't happen until the monsoon season ended in four months.

It took ten days to find the boys. At first, Thai officials took a couple of days trying other rescue methods—pumping water out, building a shaft, searching for alternate exits—before they heeded the advice of the British cave explorer, Vern Unsworth, who recommended that two divers from the British Cave Rescue, the best cave rescue team in the world, be asked to help. Then there was the challenge of the cave itself. It was very dark and circuitous, full of narrow chambers, sharp-edged stalagmite, dead ends, side routes, double backs, and, by the way, practically the whole cave is now underwater.

When the British divers arrived, they described their initial dive as "whitewater caving" due to the strong current and said the water was chocolatey brown and full of "man-made hazards" as well, like telephone wire and cables. Navigating those waters and extending guidelines so that others could follow their trail and join the search was a slow process that, due to the conditions, couldn't be sped up.

Scent is powerful, and it's ultimately what led the divers to the boys. When the divers finally surfaced in an air pocket a couple of hundred yards from the boys, the divers smelled something unexpected and turned around to see the boys emerge from the darkness and walk down to the edge of the water. It was pure joy.

The boys ask how long they've been trapped, what day it is, and whether they can leave right away. One of the divers asked one of the boys how they managed to survive for 10 days. He said that their coach had taught them how to practice Buddhist meditation, which kept them calm and focused in the darkness. But they *were* hungry.

One of the British divers believed that the only way the boys could be successfully navigated out of the treacherous cave waters was if they were sedated for the underwater journey to safety. So, the diver rang up a diving buddy of his, an Australian anesthesiologist named Harry Harris and asked him to join the rescue operation. Harris was understandably reluctant. Aside from the possibility that the mission would likely fail, as nothing like this had ever been tried before, what was being proposed was illegal.

To allay Harris's concerns, the Thai Provincial Governor agreed to take the blame if things went wrong and offered Harris and his two medical assistants diplomatic immunity.

Harris ultimately agreed and prepped a potent ketamine, Xanax, and atropine cocktail. The mixture ensured that each boy, wearing scuba gear, would be knocked out cold during the six-hour, mostly underwater journey back to dry land. Harris also had to teach the rescue divers, whom the boys were clipped onto and who were responsible for swimming the boys to safety, how to inject the drugs underwater because they only lasted 30 minutes.

When Harris was asked what it felt like to sedate and submerge the boys, he replied: "It felt like putting a mask on a rag doll. I didn't feel comfortable in any way, shape, or form about what we were doing." Comfortable about it or not, Harris's risky plan worked, and all thirteen members of the soccer team, including the coach, arrived safely at the mouth of the cave, three days after the rescue mission officially began and 18 days after the boys had entered the cave.

In one of the final scenes in the movie, the boys are in a hospital ward recovering from the ordeal, and the parents come into the viewing room, ecstatic, crying, overcome with joy. And, at the end of this 18-day ordeal, with over 5,000 volunteers from seventeen counties involved in the operation and with the entire world watching, we too, were overjoyed.

And that's how God feels anytime someone chooses life, or lives into his or her potential, or helps another, and in all these ways is found. Joy. Pure joy. In the two stories before us this morning from Luke, the religious leaders, the Pharisees, and scribes don't get that. They don't realize that God is primarily about love, rather than rules, and therefore about joy, rather than anger, fear, retribution, or impatience, or all the other things it's easy to imagine God is about.

When we focus on lostness, for lack of a better word, we miss the joyful character of these stories and of God. But we also might miss that in both stories, there's far less attention on what's been lost than on the one who is searching. I mean, these stories aren't about a lost sheep or coin, not really. They're about a shepherd who risks everything to go look, and about a woman who sweeps all night long to find. These stories are about a God who will always go looking for God's children, however they may be lost.

More than that, though, when you think how ordinary were the persons representing God – a shepherd who stands at the very bottom of the socio-economic ladder in first-century Palestine, a woman with only ten silver coins to her name – you realize that maybe these aren't just metaphors for God, but rather that they are reminders that God often works through ordinary people to do the extraordinary work of helping to find someone.

In another poignant scene in the movie, Thai government engineers conclude that rain must be diverted away from the seep holes on the mountain where the rainwater was entering the cave. The only option is to build a makeshift pipe system to divert the water on to the neighboring farmland, which would flood in the process. The provincial governor proposes the idea to the farmers, who will lose an entire year's wages as their crops would drown. Unanimously they say, "for the boys, we will do this."

The rescue of thirteen lives. Strangers who flew halfway around the world to help harness the best of medical knowledge and the skills of cave diving, knowing the risks, and the possible sacrifices. Tragically two divers lose their lives in the rescue operation. Ordinary people doing extraordinary work. And on this 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of 9/11, we are also reminded of so many other ordinary people who lost their lives in rescuing others.

You know, I think there are many ways we can be lost. Sometimes being lost is imposed on people by society. African American youth, especially males, have been called the "lost generation" as too many are traumatized, wounded, and killed by gun violence in

our cities. Lostness occurs when people abuse one another, leaving victims with physical and emotional scars.

Lostness can be self-imposed, as when we pursue the false path of living only for ourselves. We can also feel lost in the midst of intense suffering and physical pain. We may feel lost after the death of someone we dearly love or the rupture of any relationship that grounds you and helps you know who you are. You may feel lost when the dreams you long carried are not becoming reality. Being lost—feeling isolated or uncertain, aimlessly drifting, taking a wrong turn—is an experience many of us have known.

And usually when we are lost, we cannot find our way home by ourselves. We need another to find us, and we want to know that someone is looking. In these parables, the shepherd and the woman search until they find what was lost. They don't search until it grows dark, too dangerous to continue, or too hard to see. They don't search until, bone tired and bleary eyed, they figure that the sheep has fallen off a cliff or the coin was pocketed by a visiting neighbor. They search until the sheep is safely back with the flock and the coin is pressed in the hand of the woman. These stories presume that what was lost *can* be found. That's what gave the Thai soccer team hope in that dark cave. That was the driving force behind this incredible rescue.

That's the point of these parables in Luke. God is searching for anyone who feels lost, for whatever reason. Often working through ordinary people like you and me, searching so methodically, searching so carefully, searching so diligently through the wilderness of our lives to find us and reclaim us and to invite us to share God's joy in the finding.

Thanks be to God. Amen.