



## SUNDAY SERMON

# Participants in the Vision of God

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*A Reading from the Book of Exodus, chapter 32, verses 7-14*

*The Lord said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" The Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation." But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.*

*The Gospel according to Luke, chapter 15, verses 1-10*

*Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*

You and I know that deep in our hearts we have a desire for deep union with God. From this depth within, we desire, too, the restoration of those relationships that are grown distant or fractured; the restoration of community; to be at peace, even in love, with one another.

God planted the seeds of this desire from the earliest of days. Through Moses and the prophets, God gave us a vision: The vision of a promised land; a land of milk and honey, of fresh springs of water, rich soil, and ripe pomegranates; a land of abundance and plenty; with a vineyard and home for every household; a beloved community of peace.

When Moses first gave voice to this vision, it was in response and spoken to a people who were losing hope – enslaved in Egypt, toiling away their lives in fruitless labor. "I have heard your cry," said God; "I have witnessed your suffering. Behold, I will lead you to this promised land." And though skeptical at first, the eyes of the people grew bright with the vision, their lips moistened and mouths watered with the prospect of melons with cream and honey. Even though they did not know the way, they knew they had to go; they had to seek the promised land.

*Continued*

### DATE

The Seventeenth Sunday  
after Pentecost  
Sun., Sept. 11, 2016

### PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

### READINGS

Exodus 32:7-14  
Psalm 51:1-11  
1 Timothy 1:12-17  
Luke 15:1-10

Their story is our story. Their journey is our journey. There is planted within us a deep longing for God's promised land.

I don't know what you told yourself about why you chose to be here today, why you came this morning, or what it is you are seeking. But I know that I am here this Sunday and every Sunday because this is for me a time and place in which, I may be still and remember that that vision from God is alive and burning deep within me. I believe with all my heart that you are here in response to that same vision and yearning, that God drew you here to remember and rekindle the dream God planted in you.

So, whatever else we do this day, let's take a moment to honor and savor this truth deep within us... Let our cry to God be one of thanks for this gift of promise, hope and possibility....

Because boy oh boy do we forget an awful lot of the time!

Today's reading from Exodus is not about people faithful to God's implanted dream; it's about people distracted with misplaced hungers and shiny baubles. Moses embodied the vision of God's promise, and the people could not see Moses. He'd gone up a mountain out of sight. In the scheme of things he disappeared for the briefest of moments, but how quickly we forget. We lose sight of our true selves and our chosen path. "Wait a minute," we think; "I'm all alone out here, far from home." We get twitchy and anxious and look about for something to appease our insecurity. In those days, they made a golden calf. Today, we go shopping, or eat more desert, or have another drink, or do something – anything – to ease the rousing emptiness within, the gnawing fear that we're out here all alone, and that it's up to us to find our way.

To the Hebrews then, as to us today, God proclaims – as only an exasperated mother or father might – "Oh, for heaven's sakes! People, I was out of sight for two minutes! Look at the mess you've gotten yourselves into." While it took a moment for that loving-parent-God to take some deep breaths and regroup for the umpteenth time, God did so. "It's all right, I forgive you. Now remember that vision, reclaim that promised land, and let's get cracking."

The Book of Exodus illumines this overarching narrative for our lives: of being on the way, getting lost, and returning to the path once again. And it is through encounters with the sacred, with the living God, that we are invited time and again – no matter where we've strayed or what tawdry self-serving mischief we've gotten ourselves into – to reclaim the dream.

The promise Jesus offers through parables today of the shepherd seeking a lost sheep, the woman seeking a lost coin, is less about a path going from here toward there and more about a vision of wholeness; of being complete, a full complement, with nothing left out and no one lost. The movement of this promise is one of restoration.

A shepherd had one hundred sheep. One day, one of the sheep was missing. The shepherd left the ninety-nine and went in search of the one. The shepherd did not stop searching until he found the sheep, and brought it back rejoicing. Jesus tells this story as a way of telling us that if or when we get lost, God will come looking for us, and will not stop looking until we are found and restored to the community, and then God rejoices. And that is very good news, especially when we are lost; to know that God is out there, beating the bushes, calling our name, looking for us.

The restoration of the one is not only about the one who is found. It is very important for that one of course. But the restoration of the one is necessary for the whole. Without the one, the ninety-nine are not whole. Ninety-nine is a lot of sheep and the sheep themselves may not have noticed that their sister or brother was missing, at least not right away. But ninety-nine is not the whole flock. In order to be whole, the ninety-nine need to be joined by the one who was lost. That's how this works: the love of God reaches every single person and every living thing. We are all in this together.

For Jesus, it is all very well that we ourselves enjoy ripe melon with cream and honey, but the journey is not yet complete, the dream not yet fulfilled, the beloved community not fully rounded, until every single one is present for the feast.

Now, let's take these promises and consider their place in our lives: What have you lost? Who have you lost? Who is not yet at the feast? Or perhaps today you are the one feeling lost, or have lost some part of yourself.

The change in our daily routine as we return to school or work may give us opportunity to see with new eyes those who feel left out, left behind.

The loss on my heart these days has to do with diminishing trust in our political and economic leaders to act for the good of the whole. I don't want to lose my trust in our social contract, or succumb to corrosive cynicism. I want to restore hope for my and children and their children, to call forth the best of humankind. I don't want to lose sight of those children impoverished in this country, deprived of a shot at decent education, or of those incarcerated, or those we separate for race or creed. I want to see with eyes of God and act with heart of compassion and justice.

I am mindful today of those who await the return of one who never will return, except in the mystery of love and the life to come – of those who've lost a child, lover, parent, friend too young. We are mindful of their loss especially on this 9/11 anniversary.

Mindful of our losses, how shall we orient our lives toward God's promise? How shall we make space in our lives – every day – to remember the promise in our heart? And how shall we align ourselves and participate in God's movement of restoration – of seeking, finding and restoring – in our own communities? That we may be, as Isaiah says, "repairers of the breach, restorers of streets and homes in which to dwell."

A host of ways large and small: In making sandwiches for the homeless, we may see those who are homeless. In walking with sisters and brothers of other faiths, we may grow to respect different paths. In walking the labyrinth, we may befriend the fears within. In singing with others, our own voice dances in harmony. In visiting those who are alone, we are reminded of our own hunger for belonging. Be bearers of the light,

My dream for us – for each one of us, and for our congregation – is that in all that we do and in all who we are, we encourage and support one another to call forth time and time again ... God's promise of beloved community; that we teach our children and teach one another of that promise, that we go as individuals and in community to gather the lost, repair the breaches, and participate in the restoration of the whole, to the ends of the earth, and for all time. Amen.