

## Lost

It happened in the food court of a mall in downtown Halifax at noon hour. Every parent's worst nightmare. My three-year-old son was missing. I thought he was with my wife and she thought he was with me as we carried our food to the table. It took only a split second for us to realize that, in that crowded place, filled with office workers, tourists and shoppers, Nathanael had gone missing. My second thought, there would be lots of people just waiting to nab that cute little redhead. As I looked around, I just wanted everyone to hit the floor so I could see where he had toddled off to. Kathy waited with the other two children, I frantically ran between tables...and then I found him, calmly wandering around looking at people, not a care in the world. I scooped him up in my arms, squeezed him tightly, vowing never to let him get lost again. Years later, when he is was a teenager, I still worried that he would get lost when he took the bus to go skiing, or when he ventured downtown with his friends. I won't even get started on my worries when my teenage daughter emailed home that she was taking the subway alone at midnight while in France!

People get lost in war. The Canadian movie *Paschendale* and other movies describing the trench warfare during the First World War show us how easily young men lost their lives and then their bodies were lost in the muddy fields of Northern France. It is to these young spirits that many of our communities have memorials to the lost soldier. One such soldier was Private David John Carlson, who was killed in 1916 at Vimy Ridge in a battle that took 160,000 lives during five months.

His remains were never found and his sister made a number of trips to Europe to see if she could find any clues as to what happened to him. A few years ago, some British tourists stumbled across some spent shells and a body in a field. The body still had its dog tags, those of David Carlson. One of his nieces described her joy at the find, saying that it was great to have finally found her uncle.

In Jerusalem is Yad Vashem, the memorial to the Holocaust. One room is dedicated to the memory of the children. There, in a dark room, a candle burns continually and someone reads aloud the names of the hundreds of thousands of children who were lost. Somehow, hearing their names gives some sort of credence to their brief existence and acknowledges that they didn't just vanish into thin air. They have not been forever lost.

There are many ways of being lost. A friend in Toronto was telling me how difficult it is to talk with his son. His son lives a life on his own terms. My friend said, "When it comes to knowing what to say to him...I'm lost." The other day, I was talking with someone who told me that she had been offered two jobs, in two different parts of the country. She doesn't know which one to accept and says, "The decision is overwhelming and I'm lost."

Moving between the different stages of life is difficult. Try being a teen with one foot in the adult world and the other foot in childhood. I love the cartoon which depicted a teen who, in the first frame is yelling at his parents, "I'm leaving home, and I'm never coming back!" The second frame

shows him slamming the front door behind him. The final frame depicts an open door with the youth sticking his head around the corner asking, "Is it okay if I borrow the car?" Is it any easier moving from midlife into our golden years?

Sometimes in life, it can seem as if one bad thing after another happens to us. It just gets piled deeper and deeper upon us. You have health concerns, you have financial concerns, you have family concerns. Each day overwhelms and right there in the middle of a crisis, it can seem as if you are lost. I am sure that many of us here today could find an area of our lives where we feel lost, whether talking to our children, dealing with medical issues or even just trying to keep up with the changing world around us.

Feeling lost is perhaps the number one affliction of our times. Is that why anti-depressants are the most prescribed drugs today? We might have GPS, but many have lost their own personal compass in life. When the painter Rembrandt was 30 years old, he painted a self-portrait. It is an interesting picture, of a young man carousing with a lady in a brothel. Rembrandt entitled it "The Lost Son in a Brothel." At the time, he said it described where he was at. He was totally lost and he couldn't find his way.

There is the minister who tells the story of becoming lost: When I was a young minister, a funeral director asked me to hold a graveside service for a homeless man with no family or friends. The funeral was to be at a cemetery way out in the country. This was a new cemetery and this man was

the first to be laid to rest there. I was not familiar with the area and became lost. Being a typical man, of course, I did not ask for directions. I finally found the cemetery about an hour late. The back hoe was there and the crew were eating their lunch. The hearse was nowhere to be seen. I apologized to the workers for being late. As I looked into the open grave, I saw the vault lid already in place. I told the workers I would not keep them long, but that this was the proper thing to do. The workers, still eating their lunch, gathered around the opening. I was young and enthusiastic and poured out my heart and soul as I preached. The workers joined in with, "Praise the Lord," "Amen," and "Glory!" I got so into the service that I preached and preached and preached, from Genesis to Revelation. When the service was over, I said a prayer and walked to my car. As I opened the door, I heard one of the workers say, "I never saw anything like that before and I've been putting in septic systems for twenty years."

In Jesus, the disciples found someone whom they felt could give them some direction in life. The Gospels are full of people who are lost in some way, seeking to get their bearings in life. The hymn, *Amazing Grace*, puts it quite well, "I once was lost, but now am found." John Newton penned these words after he had the experience of being lost at sea. A sudden, violent storm blew up and the ship he was piloting was blown off course. Just moments after he had been relieved from his shift on deck, a rogue wave came overboard and swept overboard the man who had replaced him. Reflecting on his experience, he wrote: "Through many dangers, toils and snares we have already come. 'Twas grace

that brought us safe thus far...and Grace will lead us home."

This morning's reading tells us something of a day in the life of Jesus. He was so busy that he found little time for rest so he would get up early in the morning and seek a place of solitude to pray. One morning, the disciples wake up and Jesus is gone. They are searching everywhere for him. When they eventually find him, they exclaim, "Where have you been? Everyone is searching for you." I think that in Jesus people found someone who spoke to their situation. He wasn't judgmental, instead he was full of God's grace and in such a way he enabled people to find their way back to God and their way in life.

A number of years later, Rembrandt painted a second self-portrait which he entitled, "The Return of the Prodigal Son." In the first painting he was lost, but in the second painting Rembrandt alludes to Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son saying that he has been found by God and God's grace. Jesus told the story of a son who was fed up with his father and went to a distant land and squandered his inheritance. When the money runs out he realizes that he is totally lost, financially, spiritually and morally. He finds his way back home to his father and tries to sputter out words asking for the father's forgiveness for his waywardness. Rembrandt captures this scene in his self-portrait. The amazing thing about the picture is the look on the father's face. There is no lecture about having squandered money. The father looks at his son with pure compassion. In that face, Rembrandt has captured God's grace.

I will never forget how I felt when I found my son. A complex mix of emotions: relief, thankfulness, joy.

I hugged him tightly. Carlson's niece was so glad to find her uncle. Jesus told his followers, "you know how it is when a parent finds a lost child. Think of what it must be like when a lost child finds the way back to God."

A few years ago, busses across Britain rolled out with the advertisement, "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." It was the result of a campaign of a British comedian who was fed up with evangelical advertisements. As things tend to do, the campaign had made its way across the Atlantic. The United Church had a response...one of our church's beliefs is that we come to faith through discussion of our beliefs. The church saw this advertising campaign as one way of opening up dialogue with more people. The United Church took out its own ads to continue the conversation. Those ads read: "There probably is a God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life."

There is a God. This God of love lets us wander along on our own, allowing us to become lost in our own lives. But this is also the God who is continually waiting to welcome us home with tenderness, compassion and grace. It is this God who wishes all creation to be able to sing in harmony, "I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind, but now I see."

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