

Paw Prints in the Snow

On one cold Saturday morning during this past January our family had a near tragedy. It had been a long week: I had just returned to work after a month-long vacation, and the kids had just returned to school after our trip to Disney World. I was really looking forward to getting a good night's sleep that Friday night, but it was not to be. Samantha was feeling under the weather and was up in the middle of the night coughing. We finally got her settled down around 2:30 AM. Then, at about 4:15, Niki and I were awakened by a terrible sound. Our Cocker Spaniel, Sandi, was running around in circles in our bedroom letting out an awful, pained howl; a sound we had never heard her make. I picked Sandi up and took her into the hallway. There I set her down, and she ran for the door to go outside. Were I thinking more clearly, or had I benefit of hindsight, I would have put her leash on her, but I did not. I thought, "She wants to go outside." We live on the outskirts of Brownville, in the country, well back from the road, so, like so many times before, barefoot and in my pajamas, I opened the door and let Sandi go outside. Unlike any time before, I then watched dumbfounded as Sandi bolted down the driveway and out of sight into the snowy darkness.

If you don't know Sandi, this might not strike you as odd behavior, but odd it was. You see, Niki and I got Sandi when had been married for only a few months. For six years, before Andrew came along, Sandi was our baby (the cats would have no such nonsense). Sandi went everywhere with us. She went on geological field trips in Central Texas and toured castles in central Germany. She dipped her paws in the Rhine and sniffed the tulips in Holland. When Andrew and Samantha entered the picture, rather than becoming jealous, Sandi became maternal. The only time Sandi ever growled at me was when Andrew was a newborn and I failed to change his dirty diaper soon enough. Wherever we lived, Sandi figured out our territory and stuck to it, and she never wandered away. For fifteen years, Sandi was a loyal companion and a constant presence that was far more likely to be standing wherever you were about to step than she was to wander off.

So, as I stood there in the doorway, I realized that something was seriously amiss, and that it was time for action. It was 14 degrees outside, and the forecast had told me the temperature was supposed to drop further. I immediately threw on my boots, a hat, and ski jacket, grabbed a flashlight, and went out to look for Sandi. She was nowhere to be found. I got in my car and drove up and down our street, then ventured up Route 12, looking for our dog, but she was nowhere to be found. I even stopped at the spots where the road was snow-covered and looked for her tracks, but there was no sign of her.

At this point I was somewhat in despair. I returned to the house and told Niki I had no idea where Sandi was. We held each other and tried to reassure each other, but it did not work very well. I tried to comfort Niki, but with tears in her eyes she told me “Sandi is such a good dog; I can’t bear to think of her out there freezing to death!” This triggered something in me, and my despair turned to determination. I got dressed again (this time putting on socks under my boots) and set off into the darkness to find our little Sandi.

The search for Sandi took me far and wide. I drove for miles up and down neighboring roads. I walked along the side of the road looking for tracks. I hiked through woods and crawled under bushes, looking for Sandi’s paw prints in the snow. It is amazing how many deer there are in this area, at least based on the tracks I found that morning. I very cleverly figured out that Sandi would eventually go to someone’s house, so I even carefully looked around houses in our neighborhood.

It is amazing how quiet the North Country can be at dawn on a winter’s morning. As the sun came up I found myself walking cross-country, up to my knees in snow, stopping periodically to listen for Sandi’s bark. Even though I know Sandi is pretty much deaf now, I found myself calling her name over and over, hoping that she would answer my call. At around 8:00 AM that morning, I was still at it. The temperature had dropped to 4 degrees above zero. Fortunately, the sky was clear and for once there was little wind. As I trudged back onto the road, it occurred to me that I was not really that cold; in spite of the frigid temperature, as long as I kept moving, I was not in danger of hypothermia. That thought spurred me on: I thought that as long as Sandi was still moving, she was still OK. So, I returned to our car and began driving again, hoping that Sandi was still moving.

It turns out that at about that very moment Sandi had just stopped moving. We are still not sure what made her bolt that morning. Perhaps it was an early episode of canine dementia. Perhaps it was a urinary tract infection that caused unbearable pain. Perhaps the Good Lord knew that Pastor Fred was going to ask me to cover one of his sermons, and knew I would need some material. Whatever the case, that morning Sandi ran and ran and ran. Whatever route she took, she wound up over two miles away, on Star Schoolhouse Road. Eventually she must have come to her senses and realized she was lost and that it was really, really cold. She could not find her way home, but having 15 years of experience with people, she must have figured that we all know each other, and that if she found a human, that person would help her. As I suspected, Sandi was going from house to house—not on our road, but on Star Schoolhouse Road. We know this because the folks up there found her bloody paw prints all around their houses and barns. Fortunately, around 8:00 AM, Sandi found a house that had a dog living in it. She must have figured that was her best bet: she lay

down, curled up, and waited. She must have only been there a few minutes when the owner of that house opened the door, like so many times before, and let his dog outside. Only this time, his dog started barking like crazy, and the man looked outside to see a small dog curled up in the snow next to his garage. Being a dog person, he collected the dog up and put her on a cushion in his garage. He looked at her collar, saw her name was "Sandi," and called the number on the tag. Niki answered the phone. I guess even though Sandi could not call us herself, she at least found someone who could.

If 17-1/2 years in the Army has taught me anything, it is to not get my hopes up. Even so, when Niki called me and said she thought someone had found Sandi, I thought the chances pretty slim that someone had found a different lost dog named Sandi that happened to have our number on its tag. When I got that call at 8:15 AM, four hours into the ordeal, I was only about a mile away from Sandi. I engaged the warp drive, and a few minutes later I walked into that garage, and saw Sandi look up at me. Normally Sandi would have wagged her tiny little tail like crazy, but clearly she had spent the last of her energy; there was no tail wagging, but the look in her eyes told the story: I had come for her, and she knew it was going to be OK.

At that moment, I knew that no matter what happened next, the story had a happy ending. Had Sandi passed away right then and there, in a way it would have been OK, because she would at least not have died alone. Happily, she did not die then and there. I picked Sandi up, wrapped her in the blanket we keep in our truck, and after thanking the nice gentleman profusely, I put Sandi in the passenger's seat and climbed in. As I pulled away, I called Niki and told her I had Sandi, Sandi was alive and alert, and we were on our way home. As I hung up I looked down at Sandi, who was looking up at me. At that moment, I finally let go: I wept. Now, the men of the Krenzel Family are not known for showing emotion. I for one never shout for joy, nor do I cry at funerals. I do tend to tear up when I hear "taps" played, but I do my best to hide it. On that Saturday morning, though, when I finally realized that my faithful little friend of 15 years had been spared the awful fate of dying cold and alone, I bawled like a baby. I almost had to pull over, and I had to clean the tears off my face before I took Sandi into the house.

When I did get home, as usual, Niki had thought of everything. She had made a vet appointment for later that morning; the vet would discover that Sandi had suffered no permanent harm, and prescribed the antibiotics that got rid of the infection we think was responsible for Sandi's escapade. More importantly, though, Niki had gotten Sandi's favorite pillow, and some nice warm blankets, and put them in the family room where Sandi could warm up and rest in the company of the family. Our little lost dog was home.

I am sure that being lost must have been a frightening experience for Sandi. The concept of being lost is one of those things that can be truly terrifying, for people as well as dogs. How many of us as children at some point had that awful realization that we did not know where our parents were? I remember a few times when I was young when I felt that sudden fear engulf me. Later in life, I spent a great deal of time and effort focused on not getting lost. In the Boy Scouts I was very diligent about learning map reading and land navigation. To this day I always wear a watch with a compass built in so I can at least tell which way is north. Now, as a parent, I do not really fear getting lost. In fact, now I never get lost, but I do occasionally take an extremely indirect route. As a parent, what I worry about is my children getting lost. I have known that terrible feeling of letting Andrew or Samantha out of my sight for a moment and then not finding them where I expected them to be. It just doesn't get much worse than that.

It does seem to be a different story, though, when the people who are lost are not dear to us. Then being lost becomes a cause for scorn or contempt. We mock the rock climbers who need to be rescued or the ice fishers who drift off into the middle of Lake Erie. In fact, not long ago in my circles in the Army, one of the subtlest but gravest insults one Soldier could pay to another was to describe him or her as "L.I.D." or "Lost in the Desert."

This probably goes a long way to explain the contempt we tend to feel for the Israelites of the Exodus. They wandered around the Sinai for 40 years: let's face it, you can't get more "Lost in the Desert" than that! What is particularly galling about the Israelites' case is that they got off to such a good start. God sent them a leader, Moses, who established some pretty rock-solid credentials. He led them out of Egypt, and the Israelites witnessed the destruction of Pharaoh's army. In lieu of a topographic map and dashboard-mounted GPS, Exodus chapter 13 [verse 21] tells us that "By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night." And yet in spite of having visible evidence of the Living Presence of God, the Israelites were not satisfied. Exodus chapter 15 [verse 22-24] tells us that within three days of the destruction of the Egyptian army, the Israelites were already complaining! Indeed, after such miracles as the manna from heaven, the defeat of the Amalekites, and water flowing from rock, the Israelites still rebelled against God and raised up the golden calf at Mount Sinai, even as God was delivering the Covenant to Moses. When God led the Israelites to the Promised Land, they did not trust in Him, instead sending out spies to investigate the land, and refusing to believe that the Lord would give this land to them.

It is easy to imagine God's frustration with the Israelites at this point. What sign could He show? What miracle could He perform that would convince these people to just believe in Him, to just trust in Him and let him lead them home? To us, today, it

seems maddening. After all He did for them, why wouldn't the Israelites just trust in the Lord? Those Israelites are just so impossible to understand. Or are they?

When you really look at it, the Israelites were not physically lost in the desert. They spent 40 years wandering the Sinai because they were spiritually lost; they failed to trust in the Lord their God. Are we so very different?

No one would argue that many Christians spend 40 years wandering in the Sinai. But I do think that many of us have forgotten to trust in the Lord, our God. Compared to the Exodus, things seem a bit more subtle today. It is true that we have no visible pillar of cloud guiding us by day, and that we have no pillar of fire to guide us by night. Certainly we do not build golden calves, and we may or may not speak against God. We do, however, turn to our own modern idols, and we do grumble about the situations in which we find ourselves.

In our current economic crisis many of us find ourselves struggling to make ends meet. We worry over the loss of investments or retirement savings. Some fear they will lose their jobs or have in fact already lost them. In an effort to keep our jobs or make more money, many of us sacrifice our families on the altar of careerism. In our personal lives many of us struggle with broken relationships or loneliness. Yes, many of us are missing something in our lives, and many of us go astray trying to fill that void. We all know examples of those who have gone astray and not been found; there is the teenage girl who knows she will be happy if she could just lose one more pound. There is the businessman who knows that he just needs to make that next promotion and get that next bonus, if he doesn't get laid off. There is the young man who just wants the respect of the guys in the gang, even if it means walking into a convenience store with a gun. There is the veteran who knows the nightmares will go away if he takes just one more drink. When things get tough, too often, too many of us turn away from Christ and look for happiness in the wilderness of destructive substances, behaviors, and relationships.

Yes like the Israelites, many of us are lost. But the truly remarkable thing about the story of the Exodus is not how many times the Israelites failed, but how many times God was faithful. Yes, He was stirred to anger, but he so loved the Israelites that he forgave them and saved them from themselves. Just as He had Moses lift the bronze serpent to save the Israelites, so he had the Soldiers lift Christ upon a cross to save us. The Cross is our pillar of cloud and fire: if we follow, if we believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, and we call on Him, he will deliver us.

That's not to say things will be easy. On the day he was crucified Jesus himself told Pilate "My Kingdom is not of this world." [John 18:36] If we follow Him, He does not

promise us the easy life, or wealth, or democracy in the Middle East, or a happy family, or the American dream. Far from it, Christ tells us we must take up our cross and follow Him. What He offers us in this life are his life and the sure knowledge of Salvation.

Having given you plenty examples of those who are lost, I will offer you a few examples of a people who did finally get found. One was a man of little account, who for various reasons had fallen afoul of the law. Maybe it was a broken home or a bad economy. Whatever the case, he took to thievery to make a living. He had a few run ins with the law, and finally the law had had enough. One Friday, the Soldiers dragged him out of the city and hung him on a cross. In that incredible scene in Luke 23 when Christ is on the Cross between two robbers, one taunts Him, but our man, the other robber, other asks for Christ's mercy. "Jesus," he says, "Remember me when you come into your Kingdom." In this, the lowest point of his life, this lowly criminal recognized the divinity of his Savior, and asked to be remembered.

What did Jesus offer this man? Scripture tells us that He did not say "I tell you the truth, in 15 minutes my followers will whisk you off to an undisclosed location where you will enjoy a low interest mortgage, a healthy 401k, and a life membership to the health club of your choice." No. He promised the only thing that could have eased our man's tormented soul and given him hope: Our Lord said, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with Me in paradise." Christ knew this man's faith was true. Imagine the feeling of hope and comfort our reformed robber must have felt, knowing that after the physical pain was over, what awaited him was joy.

We heard another example of one who was found a few weeks ago when the missionary Andrew Bush visited First Presbyterian. He told us the story of Moonir, a Palestinian Muslim, and a former member of Yasser Arafat's Bodyguard. Moonir grew up a faithful Muslim, but Islam did not provide him an answer to the violence he saw all around him. Moonir sought something more, and he took the courageous step of reading the Bible. In Christ, Moonir found the answer, and in Christ, Moonir was found. Moonir still lives on the West bank, and his life is in constant danger, yet he continues to work with the Living Stones Ministry, spreading the Good News among the Palestinians. Moonir believed, and he called to the Lord, and in the midst of despair Moonir found hope.

And so it is with us. Whatever ills or hardships we face in this life, they cannot compare with the remarkable reward awaiting us if we don't get lost along the way. "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." Each and every one of us can enjoy that feeling of hope and comfort...the joy of being found. I cannot guarantee an end to your earthly troubles...far from it. We live in the real world. Like the robber and Moonir we

face real fears and hardships and dangers. The free will with which God blessed us is a double-edged sword, and we will face grief and loss and pain from which our works will not deliver us. That does not mean we should withdraw from the world. Far from it. If we truly believe in Christ, our actions will show it, and we will know the peace of mind that comes from knowing our Salvation is assured. As the Apostle Paul so eloquently told the Galatians, "Nothing counts but faith expressing itself through love." If I loved my silly little dog enough to spend 4 hours in the bitter cold looking for her, how much better off are we? The Lord loves us so much He sent his only Son to death on a cross for us. I sure don't love Sandi so much I would allow harm to befall Andrew because of her. But our Heavenly Father loves each of us enough to sacrifice His Son for us.

So whatever troubles you, whatever your fears, remember that you are not alone. You may be lost right now, but the Good Shepherd is looking for you. He is trudging knee deep in snow and is looking under bushes for your foot prints. And His voice--that glorious voice that drove out demons, healed the sick, and calmed storms—that voice is calling out YOUR name. Stop and listen. He so wants to hear you call to Him. All you have to do is to believe and to call His name. Our Lord Jesus Christ wants nothing more than to pick you up in His loving arms, to weep tears of joy at your return, and to carry you to the place that is waiting for you in his Father's House. Amen.