

“Absurd Joy”  
May 2, 2021

Luke 15:3-7

In what he refers to as “a spell of pandemic boredom,” a twenty-two-year-old college student from Arizona hatched a crazy idea a year ago. On a whim, Josh Swain decided to sift through numerous Facebook pages and find every “Josh Swain” who shared his name. Then he picked a random set of geographic coordinates and invited the matching names he found on Facebook to meet him at that precise location for a duel to determine who would have the right to be known as the true “Josh Swain.”

Highlighted by the ridiculous premise that whoever won the duel would be able to keep the name “Josh Swain” while everyone who lost had to change their name, the original Josh Swain sent out actual online invitations to this event. And in that invitation, he gave invitees a year to make travel plans and hone their battle skills, never expecting he would get any response. But lo and behold, people all over the internet, including numerous men and boys named “Josh,” responded to Josh Swain’s idea. And on April 24th, just over a week ago, around a thousand males named “Josh” actually traveled from around the country to engage in “The Battle of the Joshes.”

I trust a few of you read this absurd story. The original coordinates Josh Swain chose for the site of this battle wound up falling in the middle of someone’s private farming property, so Swain decided to move the battle to nearby Air Park...a public park in Lincoln, Nebraska.

When the battle started, Josh Swain of Arizona and Josh Swain of Omaha, Nebraska engaged in a tense, best of three, rock-paper-scissors battle to determine who would be known as the rightful “Josh Swain.” And the “Josh Swain” who created the event won when he threw out a rock to crush the other “Josh Swain’s” scissors. All to the uproarious delight of the hundreds of “Joshes” who were looking on.

What followed next was an all-out brawl in which not a single person was hurt. Men named Josh and boys named Josh, wearing face masks and armed with styrofoam pool noodles, entered the fray. Some of the Joshes even dressed in elaborate costumes, like Spiderman and Darth Vader. Meanwhile, thousands more viewers from places as far away as Norway and Sweden watched the event as it was livestreamed. The video of the battle has now been seen on YouTube more than seven million times...almost as many times as our worship service this morning will be viewed.

By the time the dust cleared in Lincoln, Nebraska, eight days ago, a four-year-old by the name of Josh Vinson, Jr. won the Battle of the Joshes. For his bravery and his perseverance, Josh Vinson, Jr., dubbed by the other participants as “Little Josh,” earned a Burger King crown, a professional wrestling style belt to wear around his waist, a trophy, a triumphant ride atop the shoulders of a fellow pool noodle brawler, and lifetime bragging rights as the undefeated, victorious Josh.

If he had received an invitation, my own son named “Josh,” claims he would have tried to make his way to Lincoln, Nebraska last weekend. I don’t blame him. While the whole idea may have initially been hatched by Josh Swain during a spell of pandemic boredom, “The Battle of the Joshes” turns out to be one of my favorite stories of the past year.

And here’s the stunning postscript. Once he noticed the overwhelming response, Josh Swain incorporated a charitable component to his plan. As a result, the Battle of the Joshes raised over ten thousand dollars for a nearby children’s hospital, along with dozens of bags of groceries for a local food pantry.

Something so absurd leading to something so good...

Once, Jesus told a story about a shepherd who left ninety-nine sheep behind to go off and search for one lost sheep. And in many ways, it’s one of the most ridiculous stories in all of Scripture.

Mind you, the people who listened to Jesus as he went around the countryside preaching and teaching would have included farmers and shepherds. And they would have known better than anyone that the primary job of any shepherd was to protect the flock of sheep. Keeping the flock away from dangerous wolves or lions or jackals or human thieves was priority number one.

No shepherd in their right mind would risk the well-being of ninety-nine sheep, exposing them to predators and weather elements and any other lurking dangers, to go on a mission to find one lost sheep. Especially in light of the fact that finding one lost sheep might be a fool’s errand, filled with hours and days of searching across vast wilderness with no guarantee that the one missing sheep would ever be recovered.

The math simply doesn’t add up. To be sure, any farmer or shepherd would value the life of one individual animal. But not over and against the lives of ninety-nine other animals. There’s too much risk involved. Why not just write off the one sheep as the cost of being in the shepherding business?

Not to mention other possible problems. Like what if the shepherd spent so much time looking for the lost sheep that they wound up neglecting the other ninety-nine? Or worse yet, what if the other ninety-nine sheep ended up lost because nobody was watching them while the shepherd was off looking for the stray? And if the one lost sheep was never found, God forbid...hadn’t the shepherd just wasted a bunch of valuable time?

So why would Jesus tell a story that made no sense? Did he expect anyone listening to take him seriously...?

Then again, the moral of today’s Gospel story depends on the perspective through which you see it and hear it.

If you listen through the ears of a shepherd, it doesn't matter what Jesus was driving at when he first told the story. To you, it will never make any sense. There is no scenario you can conceive of where you would leave ninety-nine sheep behind to go off on a wild goose chase for the one that got away.

Use your imagination for a moment, though, and put yourself in the place of the one sheep who is lost. What if you happen to be the one hundredth sheep...?

We've all been the one who is lost at some point in our lives. And when you were the one lost or I was the one lost, the only thing that mattered...the only thing that made any difference...was that someone came looking for us.

When we were the person who liked to socialize and go to parties. And there came a point in the evening where everyone else put their drinks down but we kept on going because we couldn't stop. Until finally, someone told us we were an alcoholic. That same person took us to a twelve-step meeting. And they never abandoned us on the long and rocky road to recovery. Thank God someone took the time to look for us.

Or when we were the person who started withdrawing and becoming distant in social situations. We stopped returning phone calls and came up with reasons not to get together with friends and family members. We didn't have much energy or much emotional affect and people started avoiding us because they couldn't figure out how to make conversation with us.

Until finally, someone asked us about our mental health. That same person helped us find a trusted counselor to work through various issues and they brought up the idea of medication that might help with bouts of depression and anxiety. And they never gave up on us and walked away when we needed them to companion us through the struggle. Thank God someone took the time to look for us.

We've all been there in some way. Lost in heartbreaking grief and sadness. Lost in divorce and a broken relationship. Lost in PTSD caused by military combat or childhood abuse or trauma of various kinds. And someone was willing to set aside ninety-nine other things going on in their lives to search high and low for you or for me.

The story of the lost sheep is totally absurd. Unless or until you find yourself astray for whatever reason. In which case, this morning's story might just become your favorite story in the whole Bible.

And here's the stunning postscript to this morning's Scripture lesson. We worship a God who cares as much about one of us as God cares about the other ninety-nine of us. A God who promises to come looking for us even if the idea sounds completely ludicrous.

What's more, we follow a Savior named Jesus who was once dubbed, "The Good Shepherd." A Jesus who refuses to write any of us off. No matter how lost you or I might be, a Jesus whose love compels him to keep searching. Amen.