

## **No Hiding Place**

Psalm 32:1-7

Luke 15:1-7

In 1942, in the Dutch town of Haarlem, a carpenter built a secret room inside the bedroom of a young woman named Corrie ten Boom. The ten Boom family, Corrie, her sister and father, were devout Christians involved in hiding people from the Nazis. They saw it as God's work. The Dutch Underground brought them Jews mostly, but also Christian pastors who had spoken out against the Nazis, Roma, and even a few Germans who had collaborated against the Reich. The ten Booms would harbor them, then send them to their next stop on the way to Allied lines. It worked for nearly two years. But then a Dutch traitor led the Gestapo to them. Corrie had the flu when she was arrested but was stripped naked and forced to stand outside in a prison yard. It was February. Her father caught pneumonia and died. Corrie and her sister spent the next 15 months in German prisons, ending in Ravensbruck, one of the death camps.

But then a most un-German thing happened. A functionary made a clerical error and Corrie ten Boom was released before she was gassed. Some years later, with help from John and Elizabeth Sherrill, she wrote of her experiences. The title of her memoir is The Hiding Place, for the secret room back in their bedroom in Haarlem. In one touching scene she recalls telling her sister she could not stop thinking of their Nazi captors. "I know," sister Betsie replied, "I pray for them every day." Made into a

movie in the late '70s, The Hiding Place continued the ten Booms' story into the post-war years, when they toured the world sharing their memories and the Gospel to thousands. They always said they learned the hard way there really is no such thing as the perfect hiding place, not from God at any rate.

In Luke 15 Jesus has long since “turned his face to go to Jerusalem.” He has reached the home stretch, the final days of his preaching ministry. He is headed for the cross and he knows it. Ten verses before our passage the Gospel's author tells us, “Now great multitudes accompanied him...” Expectations have reached a fever pitch. Will Jesus throw off the proverbial cloak and reveal his super-hero status as the Messiah? In our chapter we find a number of Pharisees traveling with him. Some of them look for the slightest slip-up on his part, the faux pas, the misstep they can use to keep him off the Supreme Court, as it were. Others wait to see whether he really is the Messiah. But all the Pharisees unite in one thing at least: their disdain for “tax collectors and sinners.”

New Testament scholars speak of Luke's “universalism”. Let us say first what this does not mean. Outside the context of Luke, universalism refers to the belief that God saves all people, regardless of whether they confess their sins, strive to live holy lives, or even believe in God at all. But in Luke universalism means that in Christ, God has **offered** salvation to all people. Some accept it; others do not. This may not seem especially controversial to us. But Luke was the only Gentile to write a Gospel included in the Bible. The other three writers were Jews, and to a Jew the idea that

Yahweh might invite the Gentiles into the fold was unthinkable.

Probably a Syrian by birth, Luke became a traveling companion of the Apostle Paul. Paul referred to him by name in three of his New Testament letters. Luke was an educated, Gentile Christian who understood that Jesus, a Jewish rabbi, had come to offer salvation to **all** people. In Luke's rendition, Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep to an exclusively Jewish audience. Matthew is the only other Gospel writer to include this parable. There, Jesus has just finished warning the Pharisees not to cause any of "these little ones" to stray. From the Matthean context we see Jesus means his disciples, possibly including the inner circle of men and women including the Twelve. So Mathew has a more focused definition of who the lost sheep could be.

Luke the Gentile keeps the setting of a disagreement with the Pharisees and scribes, but he adds the detail that "tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to hear him." It is too late for me to say, "Not to belabor the point" but I have gone on about it because it is so important. We want to believe that Jesus would come looking for us, Gentile sinners that we are, when we wander off into the dangerous wilderness. The Apostle Paul made a career of bringing Gentiles back into the safety of a relationship with the living God. Between the two of them, Luke and Paul wrote over half of the New Testament. We can trust their views on this subject. They taught that Jesus offered to rescue **all**, Jew, Gentile, tax collectors, sinners, **all**.

That God has love for all sheep, no matter how sinful, no matter their ethnic or

religious identity, should be clear to us. With Betsie ten Boom and Jesus himself, however, we need to take the next step toward the full implication of this truth. **We** need to love all the sheep, no matter how sinful they are, no matter whether their fleeces are the same color as ours. Betsie ten Boom prayed for her Nazi tormentors. Jesus died for all, including his tormentors. Who can say which of them, moved by his sheep-like sacrifice, came to accept his offer of redemption?

On its surface, Psalm 32 may seem a straightforward call to confess our sins. “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven,” it opens. “Blessed is the one to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity...” Or, “Blessed is the one in whom the Lord finds no sin.” Ah, but verse three develops the theme in a slightly surprising way. Translated literally it reads, “When I failed to declare my sin, my body wasted away to become as a potsherd.” A potsherd is a fragment of a clay pot. The image was completely familiar to the ancient Middle Eastern peoples. They used recycled, crumbled pots as the foundations for the walls of their houses. The timeline of a potsherd might be said to start when a potter combines clay with water. Then he turns it on a wheel to make a pot. It hardens and becomes water-proof. It functions in whatever way the family needs until, old and brittle, it cracks. Then the family smashes it into bits, which it stores. Those bits are utterly dry and broken.

King David wrote Psalm 32 following his recovery from a disease that threatened his life. His body felt dry and broken. And he attributed his sickness to his sinfulness. When he failed to confess he grew ill. His “strength was dried up as by

the heat of summer.” Then verse 5b: “I said, 'I will confess my sins to the Lord'; then thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin.” In David's mind, just as his sin caused his illness, his confession led the Lord to heal him. We claim we no longer think this way. But we can in fact draw a straight line, on a strictly medical basis, between certain sins and certain kinds of illness. What we lack is a metaphysical belief that our sinful natures lead to physical illness. Nevertheless, both Psalm 32 and Luke 15 carry the message that we might want to think a bit more carefully about this. Not to return to what we might consider superstition, but to return to a profound sense of gratitude that God forgives and saves.

“Thou dost encompass me with deliverance,” David writes. He uses the Hebrew mood that conveys awe and joy. He sees that the Lord surrounds him with spiritual protection and he gives profound thanks. Jesus speaks of the joy in heaven when a lost sinner gets found, saved, rescued. By implication his parable tells the Pharisees to stop carping about sinners and to start giving thanks the Shepherd loves all his sheep, even them, enough to go find them when they have strayed.

Just as Corrie ten Boom learned there was no hiding from the Nazis, not forever, at any rate; so Jesus teaches that we cannot hide from the shepherd, from himself. Further, he seeks to rescue us. Forever. There is no hiding from him. Within just a few years after his resurrection two debates flared up in the growing Christian community. One revolved around the question of whether Jesus was a corporal human being or the ineffable God. Was he tangible, physical? Or was he a spirit?

Clement was the second bishop of Rome. He died around 98 AD. He may personally have known Peter and possibly Paul as well. His answer to the debate over whether Jesus was physical or spirit was, in essence, "Yes." Jesus is **both** a physical, and a spiritual, being. Re-read the Nicene Creed to find a good summary of this.

The other major debate in the Church was whether one had to become a Jew first in order to become a Christian. This argument consumed the Apostle Paul. He maintained people could come straight into a saving relationship with God. No need for males to get circumcised, no need for anybody to become a Jew if they were not already one. In his writings he then continued to develop a larger point. We are all sinners. We all need rescuing. When we believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior, and confess our sins, "God is faithful and just, and will forgive." As it happens, Paul was a Pharisee. But he considered his considerable Jewish credentials irrelevant to the discussion of getting rescued, getting saved.

We cannot hide from God. We cannot hide our sins. We cannot hide our need to be rescued. Why even try? Come out from your room. Allow Jesus to carry you to safety. Confess your sins. With David, experience the joy of forgiveness. Join the flock. He loves us all, even me, even you.