

Lost *and* Found *in the* Stars

**From Jon McKeown–Green’s memorial service,
21st February 2015**

One of the things we want to celebrate today is how carefully and passionately John thought and spoke. Phillipa has chosen a piece Jon wrote for a church service that was held here just over a year ago. John’s essay is called “Lost and found in the stars” and it is based on a song “Lost in the stars” written by Kurt Weill. Here are the lyrics of the song:

“Lost in the stars”

*Before Lord God made the sea or the land
He held all the stars in the palm of His hand
And they ran through His fingers like grains of sand
And one little star fell alone*

*Then the Lord God hunted through the wide night air
For the little dark star on the wind down there
And He stated and promised He’d take special care
So it wouldn’t get lost no more*

*Now a man don’t mind if the stars grow dim
And the clouds blow over and darken him
As long as the Lord God’s watching over them
Keeping track how it all goes on*

*But I’ve been walking through the night and the day
Till my eyes get weary and my head turns gray
And sometimes I think maybe God’s gone away
Forgetting His promise and word He’d say*

*And we’re lost out here in the stars
Little stars, big stars, blowing through the night
And we’re lost out here in the stars
Little stars, big stars, blowing through the night
And we’re lost out here in the stars*

And here is what Jon wrote from the starting point of that song: Here is some guidance for celestial travellers who find themselves lost in the stars. Here are some thoughts that might be helpful for people who have tried hard to believe all the stories they have been told about how everything is under control and how there's a wise, caring, God watching over everything, but find themselves forced to take seriously the possibility that they're out on their own. It's just you against the world and the sky; and me against the world and the sky; and we're lost out here in the stars.

The Bible is full of some fantastic stories, about a great ruler who can't abide bad stuff, but who is merciful above all – a God who loves us; a God who knows the geometry and reflectance profile of every hair follicle on your body, as well as the serial number of every neutron in every star. It's like a lot of optimistic self-help books and ancient myths. In the Bible, we can read about a man who walks on the water, a shepherd searching for lost sheep, a father who welcomes his deadbeat younger son home and, in the very early pages of the book, a garden where a couple eat the wrong fruit and get into trouble. Great stories. But, of course, they've been handed down, translated and retranslated, interpreted and reinterpreted, miscommunicated and distorted. Who knows if we can remember them properly! And when you lose a close friend or family member, when you're facing a debilitating illness, when you just can't work out what to do next, you might feel cheated by all those stories.

You might feel abandoned – totally on your own. If you've felt like this, or if you ever will, here are some thoughts for you. We're going to think a lot more about those Bible stories. Here's something that Martin Luther wrote about the Bible back in the early 16th century. He said: "The first and chief article is this: Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, died for our sins and was raised again for our justification (Romans 3:24–25). He alone is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29), and God has laid on Him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:6). All have sinned and are justified freely, without their own works and merits, by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, in His blood (Romans 3:23–25). This is necessary to believe."

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This is the teaching on which all else is based, said Luther. There's a lot going on in that passage, but what matters for us is that we need to have faith in order to be in right relationship with God; and God himself gives us the faith; we can't rustle it up for ourselves. That means that God

is out looking for us. In fact, he knows where we are. He can see us. He has a present for us. We just have to accept that present.

Now if that's part of the fundamental teaching on which all else rests, maybe we can understand our Bible stories in terms of it. First let's think about the story in which Jesus walks on the water. We will read from Matthew 14, verses 22 to 29:

"Then he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat by this time was many furlongs distant from the land, beaten by the waves; for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" and they cried out for fear. But immediately he spoke to them, saying, "Take heart, it is I; have no fear." And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water." He [That's Jesus] said, "Come."

It's Jesus who issues the operative invitation here. Yes, Peter wants the invitation, but Jesus supplies it. Taking the initiative. Now Peter just has to follow. Same sort of thing in the stories where God is presented as being like a good shepherd. Luke 15, verse 4 says: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one

which is lost, until he finds it?" Maybe the sheep will have to jump across from a ledge or something, but the shepherd took the initiative.

So did the Father of the rebellious son in the parallel story. We are coming in half-way through. We are reading Luke 15:16–20. "But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven

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and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.'" And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. The father takes the initiative: his wonderful son is home! He goes out to meet his son!

Similarly, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit, God comes to find them. Genesis

chapter 3, verse 5 says that "the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you". In each story, God comes to fetch us.

So why isn't it that easy? Why does it seem like we are lost in the stars, when God is apparently reaching out to grab us? Because there's a small extra detail. We have to come to God when he calls. The Devil is in that detail.

First, why does God make us come to him? Why can't he just grab us. He can do anything. Right? The answer is that there's no point in God having a relationship with us unless we are willing. If my wife married me because she had been programmed to fall in love with somebody like me, that wouldn't be much of a marriage. What's amazing about my marriage is that I met somebody who decided that she loved me and wanted to be with me – and who was prepared to take the steps to make it happen. God needs that kind of commitment from us. So although he's offering a free gift, we have to accept it. And that's the detail that harbours all the complexity.

What happens in our four Bible stories? Peter starts walking across the water, because he's up for it. He's game. We read from Matthew 14 again, this time from verses 29 to 31.

So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus; but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me."

He becomes all too aware of what he's doing. He's walking across the water. Yikes! And that terrifying thought starts him on his downward plunge. He sinks, because he has not yet accepted the gift of faith that Jesus is offering: the gift that will enable him to trust his master.

Often that's what happens to us. We know what we must do. We know what is right. But it involves doing something scary: phoning a friend who is angry with us and apologising; visiting boring people; having a terrifying operation; just having the faith to believe that the pain or the hurt that we feel now will run its course and will one day not be such a drain on us. Those are the things we have to do. And sometimes, we start out boldly, like Peter. But often, it's too much. It's like needing the courage to dive into the chilly sea at the beach. We don't have enough trust to carry us through. Even though we hear the voice of God, in some form or another, calling us to come to the water, we're lost in the stars.

The story of the lost sheep is not filled out in much detail, but we can imagine many versions. The shepherd tries to coax the crazy, frightened sheep to jump down off a rocky ledge, or to stay still long enough to be grabbed. But the crazy sheep is crazy and scared, like Peter became, and like we often are. Or the sheep just can't identify the shepherd's voice amidst the rattle of the branches and the torrent of the stream. (I'm making this up.) That's often our problem. We can't identify God's voice. Sometimes that's because the stories that tell us about God are have become so distorted by the time they

reach us that we wouldn't know what God would sound like if he called. Sometimes, it's because we don't pray to him. Sometimes, it's because somebody is meant to pass God's message on to us, but they didn't – like when God gave Jonah the task of telling the people of Nineveh to shape up – and he refused. Always, it's because the world is full of distractions that make it very, very, difficult to pick out God's voice – and so we are lost in the stars.

The younger son too puts up a barrier. (Luke 15–21.) “And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’”

He is ashamed and thus strangely unmoved by the sheer difference between his own stupidity and the benevolence and wisdom of his Dad. The same can happen to us. Sometimes, we are too ashamed to do what's right – and there we are, lost in the stars.

And what happened in the garden? Adam and Eve were terrified of the God who comes calling! Chapter 3, verse 8, of Genesis reads: “And they heard the sound of the LORD God have walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.” They were not merely ashamed. They had done something wrong and a punishment had been stipulated: if you eat that fruit, you shall die! And they were also embarrassed; the Bible says that they realised they were naked. So they deliberately separated themselves from God. When he called out to them – when

he came to meet them – they were actually hiding from him, which is pretty silly of course, because he would know precisely where they were. Now think of this from God's viewpoint. He must have been so disappointed with them for hiding. They had done something wrong, but beyond that, they obviously thought that God's anger and disappointment would be greater than his love. I had an experience with some people who worked with me. They had done something rather dumb and they were ashamed to tell me about it for a while. It wasn't that bad: they had been up all night, even though they would have to work the next day. But they thought it was shameful. I was mostly sad that they felt awkward about telling me. That was more of an issue for me than the daft thing they : done. We all got over it pretty fast, but at the time, it made me think of how sad God must have felt when Adam and Eve rejected him by hiding.

And sometimes that's what people do. They are terrified, because they expect bad, rather than good, from God. And, of course, often that's what they deserve. So when God puts out his hand in love, they hide. They stay lost in the stars.

All of these responses of ours are very natural, but they are also very unfortunate. Indeed, they are ironic: God reaches out his hand in love and so often we don't grasp it, because we don't realise he's there, or because we don't realise that he is offering us a way out. God himself knows that connecting with him is not easy. Jesus says that the way to Heaven is narrow and hard. The route that looks much more inviting is the one that leads us further into the thicket of stars.

We need to learn how to unhide. After all, it's pointless to hide. All we are doing when we hide is giving God a perfect view of a missing person. As the writer of Psalm 139, perhaps King David, reminds us: “Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, “Let only darkness cover me, and the light about me be night,” even the darkness is not dark to thee, the night is bright as the day; for darkness is as light with thee..” (verses 7–12)

We need to learn how to recognise God's voice and respond positively to it. We need to be prepared to go through the narrow door.

Fortunately, the times when we are most reluctant to take God's hand are the times when God works hardest to secure our cooperation. “Behold,” says Jesus in Revelations, chapter 3 verse 20, “I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” He is writing this to a bunch of Christians in Laodicea and he's not very happy with them. Yet he knocks insistently, even if we can't hear him knocking or don't recognise the code.

If we look at our Bible illustrations again, we see how hard God works to get us to accept him.

In verse 31 of Matthew 12, we read: Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “O man of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Notice that we don’t know how far away Peter was from Jesus at the time, but we can assume that he thought there was some distance. But Jesus was there to take his hand. Jesus will similarly take my hand or yours if he knows we are trying to reach him. Shepherds had all sorts of devices, including crooks and lots of patience. They used them to cajole, charm or persuade Crazy Sheep to come to the party. In Luke 15, verse 5 and 6, Jesus says: “And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which 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.” What did the father of the prodigal son do when the son begged to be made into a servant? He just took charge.

(Luke 15: 22–24.) But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ The younger son would have had to tear himself away to escape his father’s love – and he wasn’t about to do that. So God knows that we have trouble accepting his offer and he’s there to help.

What about Adam and Eve in the garden? Didn’t God realise that it was unsafe for them to stay in the garden? Didn’t he banish them? Yes, he did these things. So how was that meant to be a way of getting them to grasp his hand? Didn’t he just spurn them?

No. The story of the recalcitrant gardening couple appears right at the start of the Bible. The rest of the Bible is about what God did next – what he did to make things right with Adam and Eve and you and me. The culmination of that story is the career of Jesus on Earth and the huge sacrifice that he made. By dying, he took away the curse that makes Adam and Eve and all of us feel like we are out in the cold. Or at least, it’s because of his death that we have the invitation to receive the gift of faith: the gift that Martin Luther put at the top of the list of things to teach about. If you feel lost in the stars – and the Bible suggests that we all will – remember that there is somebody out there looking for you. He has already found you. So open the door when the starkeeper knocks.