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"Hidden Figures I -- Serach bat Asher, Keeping the Lost Found"

[Luke 15:1-10](#)

[Genesis 46:17](#)

[Numbers 26:46](#)

There are so many ways to be lost.

A thing can be lost accidentally — slip out of a pocket or fall to the ground when you open the car door.

Often, though, when we're honest, there is carelessness of a sort, involved or at least lack of attention or *intention*. I "lose" my keys when I put them down while I'm on the phone, or carrying too many groceries at a time. I was there when I "lost" them, but I wasn't paying attention — I didn't make a mental note.

Or things can be lost because you hide them too well. I find the perfect Christmas present for one of the girls in July, so I find a "really good" hiding place, where *they'll* never find it. Problem is, come December I can't find it, either. I've even been known to forget that I hid anything at all, only discover it randomly in March. Oops!

Something can become lost due to circumstances *beyond* you — someone "borrows" something of yours without asking. A breeze blows a paper off your desk into the recycle box. The dog actually does eat your homework.

I often experience having "lost" something, just because I am so stressed or rushed in the moment that I can't access my own common sense. Once I calm down, I can often remember quite quickly where I last saw the item. Sometimes I realize I actually looked in the right place already, but hadn't been able to spot it in my haste and stress.

The objects in the story from Luke today are "lost." At least that's what we've titled these stories. It seems to me that when we talk about lost objects, though, we are transferring blame most of the time.

Are those keys really lost? No, *you lost track of* the keys.

Is the sheep really lost? I highly doubt it. The sheep is moving from one clump of grass to the next, on a delightful journey of finding! and finding! and finding again! The sheep might get stuck, and realize it's alone, and perhaps then the sheep has a sense of being lost. But let's be real, what happened is that the shepherd *lost track of* the sheep, and no longer knew where the sheep was.

This is the way we cover most news in our culture, though. Our headlines say things like, "773,139 cars were stolen in the United States in 2017." They don't say, "A person stole a car 773,139 times in 2017."

We even report acts of violence the same way, "x number of people were victims of \_\_\_\_\_" Probably because it's less scary if we don't *really* pay attention to the fact that all those many times, a person chose to commit that act of violence.

Loss implies relationship. When we see a teddy bear alone on the sidewalk, we say "oh no! It's lost!" because presumably it is separated from its owner. But a teddy bear on a shelf in a store we would not call "lost," even if it's sitting alone, because presumably it is not claimed or owned by anyone. The sheep and the coin in Luke 15 are both "lost" because they are separated from someone that claims them — the shepherd claim the sheep; the woman claims the coin.

"Finding" a person, place or thing is often actually an act of restoring relationship —about returning to a state in which the location of the person, place or thing is known *to the person* in relationship with them. If I find your dog wandering down the street, the dog's location is known *to me*, but that doesn't make the dog *found*. Your "lost" dog isn't "found" until *you* know the location of your dog.

You might say that behind every lost object, is a loser and an act of losing. It's not a very flattering perspective, no one wants to be called a "loser" — least of all by a pastor! The loss might be through no fault of yours at all. But you are still a loser.

But hey, you're in good company! Because the Bible was written by a bunch of "losers," too. So, that was admittedly an unnecessarily provocative way of saying that the writers of the Bible,

and those who assembled and canonized it, quite literally allowed some really important people, places and things to *get lost* in the process of passing down the stories of our ancestors of faith.

They decided, intentionally sometimes and not intentionally sometimes, that some people, places and things were not important enough to *keep track of*. So, to them, it wasn't a loss.

It's one of ways in which Jesus was apparently very annoying to the religious authorities of his time. It's in the first sentence of the Lost Coin and the Lost Sheep stories today in Luke 15, that the Scribes and Pharisees were annoyed that Jesus was hanging around with people *not worth of keeping track of*, people of negative worth, in their opinion — “sinners and tax collectors.”

And to this, Jesus responds with parables about people frantically seeking out things that would perhaps not have appeared to have enough value to have their *lostness* be so catastrophic to their owner. The people in relationship to these things (the shepherd to the sheep, the woman to the coin) stop everything in order to restore relationship with the lost thing. And there was joy in having restored relationship with these lost things!

But what Jesus is responding to, isn't just the people in power who were lingering disapprovingly nearby while he taught. I would argue that he was responding to what those onlookers represented, which was the whole of the religious institution up until them. Because, even though the scriptures they would have had access to at that time did already contain words and ideas like Jesus' —particularly in the prophets — he writers and passers-on and teachers of those scriptures had allowed a lot of the story to be lost. Had seen many people, places and things in the history of the children of Abraham as not worthy of keeping track of.

We are constantly doing this, as humans. Out of sheer necessity, we forget most of almost all of what we see and hear on any given day. I mean, what would we do if we remembered every single thing we'd ever seen, heard or thought? We must prioritize, for our own sanity, and we tend to do it Marie Kondo style — only keeping the things that spark joy, or that we feel are of enough value to us to keep track of.

And the Bible, does, amazingly, record many stories of people that should, by their own culture's standards, have been forgotten —like Ruth and Rahab, the Hebrew midwives, to name a few. But there are also many lost people and stories in the Bible

There is a Jewish form of exegesis called *midrash*, that speaks to these gaps — these losses, and I'm kind of in love with it. “Midrash is an interpretive act, seeking answers to religious questions, by plumbing the meaning of the words of the Torah.” (1)

According to Biblical scholar, Vanessa Lovelace (who happens to be the newly-appointed dean of Lancaster Theological Seminary!) midrash is “a Jewish mode of interpretation that not only engages the words *of* the text, *behind* the text, and *beyond* the text, but also focuses on each letter, and the words left unsaid by each line.” (2)

In her book, *Womanist Midrash*, Dr. Wil Gafney says: “In Jewish sacred literature, *midrash* is the primary rabbinic term for exegesis... Rabbinic exegesis is characterized by close reading of the biblical text, traditional midrash is also mystical, imaginative, revelatory, and, above all, religious... **In rabbinic thinking, each letter and the spaces between the letters are available for interpretive work.**” (3)

But what really caught my attention in reading her definition of midrash, was this: “In Biblical Hebrew the verb *d-r-sh* means, “**to seek**”; ... *midrash* is its derived noun.”

So, Midrash, you could say, is a way of seeking out the lost — the lost meaning, the lost people and places and ideas in the text. It is a way of seeing scripture, and everything in it (whether emphasized, or implied, or missing) as something of value, worth seeking out. It acknowledges that we're still connected, even to the things we don't bother to keep track of. Midrash is one way of honoring the lost, when the possibility of hearing the lost stories from the mouths of those that lived it simply isn't possible.

It is one such midrash that really inspired this whole fall worship series for me. In researching some other sermon in the last few months, I came across the story of Serach bat Asher. (4) It is because of Serach bat Asher that you have a mammoth passage of genealogy in your bulletin today. Don't worry, we're not going to read it out loud, but I want you to look at that long list, and look for the one name in bold.

She is identified as the daughter of Asher, which means she's a grand-daughter of Jacob, and a great-great-grandaughter of Abraham. I had the whole text printed to give you a sense of how easy it would be to overlook her name.

She's mentioned three times in the Bible, and all three times she's just a name in the middle of a long list of names. The other places are in Numbers and I Chronicles

What's interesting, though, is that out of those three mentions, there has grown a robust midrash collection about Serach. It seems to have started with people simply doing their math. Because the first genealogy she's named in, in Genesis, is the list of the descendants of Jacob who make their home in Egypt where Joseph, who was once abandoned by his brothers, welcomes his famine-stricken family to join him in Egypt. But then in Numbers, she's also listed among the descendants of Jacob who leave Egypt with Moses in the exodus, by crossing the Red Sea.

According to Exodus 12:40, "the time that the Israelites had lived in Egypt was 430 years." So, if you take it literally, this means she was alive for at least 430 years. This makes Serach bat (or daughter of) Asher, pretty magically old. She's still a pup compared to, say, Methuselah, but that timeline makes her stand out as unusually long-lived.

This did not go unnoticed by Jewish readers and scholars over the millennia. Who is this woman? Why did her name get recorded when so few other women in the genealogy had their names recorded? How could she have lived through this whole chapter of Judean history when no one else did?

So, Serach became a Jewish symbol of cultural memory — the keeper of lost memory — simply because she had lived to witness so much history, and she valued it enough to remember and hold it for her people, and bring it back to them when they needed it.

One of the Midrashim about her, says that when the children of Israel were preparing to leave Egypt, everyone packing up their stuff to make the exodus, but Moses was frantically searching all around for the remains of their ancestor, Joseph. This was because, according to Exodus 13:29, Joseph "had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, "God will surely take notice of you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here."

Seeing him run about, Serach asked Moses: "My lord Moshe, why are you tired?" He replied: "For three days and three nights I have been going round the city to find Yosef's coffin!" Said she to him: "Come with me and I will show you where it is." She took him to the river and said to him: "In this place have the magicians and astrologers made for him a coffin five hundred talents in weight and cast it into the river, and thus have they spoken to Pharaoh: 'If it is your wish that this people should never leave this place, then as long as they will not find the bones of Joseph, so long will they be unable to leave.'" (5)

So, Moses called forth Joseph's bones from the Red Sea, and the coffin rose to the surface, and they were able to leave Egypt, because they were taking Joseph's bones with them. All because Serach had been there all along, and remembered. The bones were not lost to her, therefore they were not lost to her people.

There is a whole lifetime of meaning in that story alone! How a people could not leave a place of enslavement without finding and bringing the bones of their ancestors with them. How a way to have power over a people, is to separate a people from the bones (the stories, the names) of their ancestors. How vulnerable a people can be when they are separated from those stories, from those bones. I can think of countless parallels to current days.

There are other stories equally fascinating stories of Serach in the Midrash, she's worth looking up! (6)

But what of all the women whose names didn't even appear once in those genealogies? There's no midrash for them ... yet ...

I have to believe that those people, those stories, live within *our* bones, even if we don't have a Serach to tell us where to find their bones, or to tell us their names or their stories. If neither life, nor death, nor powers nor principalities can separate one from the love of God in Christ, then certainly the disregard of the writers of history can't keep the lives of so many astounding, if unrecorded, humans from impacting and being connected to their descendants and the world.

And a final thought about what is lost, and how to find it. On your bulletin cover, you'll see a rather unusual map. It's one of 15 maps of the Mississippi River, drawn by Harold Fisk, in 1944, as part of a report for the Army Corps of Engineers. (7) These 15 maps trace the historical banks of the Mississippi from southern Illinois to southern Louisiana. You can lay them all out end to end contiguously, if you want, to see the whole beautiful tangle. They show the meanderings of the Mississippi River over the eons ... the dotted lines indicate speculation about prehistoric riverbed

locations.

This is one of the challenges of searching for something that's been lost over eons,, which is what we're up against when we do midrash, or seek to find the lost bones (or names or answers about life and love and God and the world) in these ancient scriptures and stories that we love.

We can trace our steps as precisely as we might to the place in the river where Joseph's bones were once buried, but if the river itself has moved ... what then? You need a Serach to be able to tell you not only where Joseph's bones were last seen, but you also need a Serach to be able to remember and tell you where the water was then, compared to now.

I am greatly comforted by this map. I have often wondered whether some of my ancestors of faith might look at where I am now, and proclaim me "lost," because I interpret some matters of faith very differently than they did.

But faith, like a river, is a permanent but ever-changing thing. The river of where I am now, overlaid with the rivers where (and when) they were, might look a lot like this map. But it is the same mighty river, the same living water. And I'm guessing that in the God's eye view, often we are much less lost, and much more valued and sought-after, than we fear.

(1) <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/midrash-101/>

(2) Vanessa Lovelace. *Horizons in Biblical Theology*. 40 (2): 212–215.

(3) Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*. pp. 4-5

(4) Rabbi Leah Berkowitz, "How Serach bat Asher Became My Patron Saint." *Jewish Women, Amplified*. <https://jwa.org/blog/how-serach-bat-asher-became-my-patron-saint>

(5) Wilda C. Gafney, "Search Bat Asher," *Womanist Midrash*. Pp. 164-5

(6) Just one example: Jewish Women's Archive: <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/serah-daughter-of-asher-midrash-and-aggadah>

(7) Howard Fisk, from his 1944 report, "Geological Investigation of the Alluvial Valley of the Lower Mississippi River," for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Plate 2 of 15. (this is a different plate than the one pictured on the bulletin cover)

