



On your marks

The parable of the lost sheep appears twice in the gospels. In each case, it is set in the context of the way in which Jesus welcomes those people who others don't see as important, be they disreputable tax collectors and sinners as in Luke's version, or the little ones, including children, as in Matthew's gospel.

This is such a well-known and much loved story that it can so easily just be reduced to a cute tale of the finding of a poor lost sheep. But it isn't just about sheep or even a shepherd, but about God of course. Jesus is likening himself to God, the good shepherd, and is letting us know the surprising lengths God is willing to go to make sure we are back home safely in the family fold. The rich shepherd of the parable could so easily have sent one of the servants to do the job but, instead, he himself goes off in search of the one missing sheep. No human shepherd would probably have bothered with one in a hundred, especially if it meant leaving the other 99 on the hillside, but the ways of God's kingdom are different. Everyone matters, whether it is one in one hundred or one in seven billion on our planet.

Get set

You can find the story in Matthew 18:12-14 and Luke 15:3-7. There are helpful retellings of the story are available online or in books - for example:

- [The Gospels Unplugged](#) - a fun monologue spoken by the shepherd
- [Cecil the Lost Sheep](#) - a version from Australia available online

If you are telling the story as the shepherd, as is suggested below, then the following simple props might be helpful:

- a stick like a crook
- a toy sheep dog
- a kafil to drape over your shoulders.

Go!

Opening up the story

Perhaps the simplest way to tell the story is to relate it as a 'we are going on a sheep hunt' participative version. Make sure you include lots of impossible hurdles to go through on your journey - for example, a steep hill, a high fence, prickly thorn bushes, a deep river, a muddy meadow, a dark forest, sharp rocks, craggy boulders, creeping past dangerous animals - which you will need to revisit on your return, carrying the lost sheep that has been found.

Or if you have a 'puppet' team, you might like to consider retelling the story using appropriate



characters.

Telling the story

After introducing yourself, find out other people's names. Then re-pronounce these names making the vowel reverberate like the sound of a sheep – almost any name can be made to sound like a sheep name in this way:

Cha-a-a rlie, Ja-a-ason, E-e-emily, Ma-a-asie

So now you all sound like a herd of sheep!

But what would happen if one of you went missing? This is exactly what happened once to a shepherd looking after his flock of 100 sheep. Jesus told this story...

Ask if anyone has ever been lost and let each person tell a bit of their story briefly. Then ask who they think is possibly the most worried when someone is lost. Usually, it's not the person who is lost but the one who has lost someone.

This opens up an insight into the story, where it is clear that it is the shepherd who gets most distressed about losing one of the sheep from his flock. In the same way, God is the one who is really worried about us being lost, whereas we ourselves don't often realise there's a problem. Begin the story, building on this thought...

Talking about the story

This story really shows us what sort of God Jesus was talking about.

God is a surprising God – God bothers about the one in a hundred, which is a statistic so easily discounted in our present society. God is also very un-shepherd like, in that he doesn't send his servants to do the searching but goes after the sheep himself.

God is a searching God – God is a God who comes looking for us; who takes the initiative to find us. He takes risks to do so and won't give up trying to bring us home to safety.

God is a saving God – God wants to rescue us from danger and make sure we are safe from harm.

God is a shouldering God – God lifts us up to a place of safety, close to himself, and carries our burdens and takes the weight of our lost-ness on to himself.

God is a smiling God – God loves to celebrate you and me and share that joy with others.

Reflecting on the story

Pick up on some of the actions in the story – namely:



- *Searching*: invite everyone to shade their eyes and look all around the room
- *Carrying*: invite everyone to imagine holding a heavy sheep on their shoulders
- *Celebrating*: on the count of three, invite everyone to punch the air with a great cheer

Now use these three actions together and link them to three short spoken prayers, such as the those that follow:

Thank you, Lord, you came looking for us. Help us to be on the lookout for others who are in need of help in our communities.

Thank you, Lord, you share our burdens and problems. Help us to follow that example and share the loads of those who are feeling overwhelmed by what they have to cope with.

Thank you, Lord, you love us to be at home with you. Help us to show the world that you are a God who loves to celebrate and wants everyone to experience the joy of heaven right now on earth.