

### *Straying Away*

Now, it is commendable if, because of one's understanding of God, someone should endure pain through suffering unjustly. But what praise comes from enduring patiently when you have sinned and are beaten for it? But if you endure steadfastly when you've done good and suffer for it, this is commendable before God.

You were called to this kind of endurance, because Christ suffered on your behalf. He left you an example so that you might follow in his footsteps. He committed no sin, nor did he ever speak in ways meant to deceive. When he was insulted, he did not reply with insults. When he suffered, he did not threaten revenge. Instead, he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He carried in his own body on the cross the sins we committed. He did this so that we might live in righteousness, having nothing to do with sin. By his wounds you were healed. Though you were like straying sheep, you have now returned to the shepherd and guardian of your lives.

1 Pet. 2:19-25 (C.E.B.)

In 1872, Leo Tolstoy told the story of a merchant named Ivan<sup>1</sup>. Ivan, it seems, was traveling with a companion when his companion was found dead. Ivan was falsely accused of murder and sentenced to life in a Siberian prison.

In prison, Ivan kept to himself. He prayed. He read his Bible and he read the stories of the saints. He neither laughed nor cried, and while bitter about his unjust sentence, he simply and quietly lived the life of a model prisoner.

Over time, he became respected by the others as if he were a saint himself. He was sought out when there were disagreements among the inmates. Even the guards and prison officials came to trust his insights.

After being there for twenty-six years, during which time he had lost all contact with his family and his neighbors, all connection with his former life, Makar arrived at the prison. The new prisoner was from Ivan's hometown and brought news of his family.

Ivan received the news with mixed feelings. His family was well, but he had not been a part of their lives. In fact, Makar made it sound as though his family had long since given up believing Ivan was innocent.

But in their conversation, Ivan realized that Makar was the true murderer. Ivan was serving time for Makar and they both knew it.

Ivan's anger began to rise, but he quickly realized he could not change the past. He had been in prison too long to go home. He had found peace with himself and with God in the daily life of the prison.

So when Makar became involved in some wrongdoing while in prison, Ivan both saw him in the act and refused to tell about it. Ivan's inexplicable act created an enormous sense of guilt for Makar.

Makar responded by pleading with Ivan for forgiveness. He confessed to the murder twenty-six years earlier as well as the recent prison event.

He begged for mercy.

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<sup>1</sup> "God Sees the Truth but Waits," 1872.

Ivan simply told him that it is up to God to forgive. The evidence of his own forgiveness was his choice to not inflict punishment on Makar. Ivan chose not to incriminate Makar. And in that act of mercy, Ivan found more peace than he had ever known. A burden had been released.

Makar, for his part, told the truth to the prison officials who passed the word to the judge who decided to free Ivan. But when they came to get Ivan, he was dead.

He had died a free man, but more importantly to him, he had been released of a burden he had carried far too long – the burden of bitterness. He had been bitter for twenty-six years before he saw the face of the one he had come to loathe.

He had served that man's prison term and found freedom when he gave Makar the opportunity to go free. He also suggested that the more important reconciliation Makar needed to make was with God.

Tolstoy doesn't say what happened to Makar after that. It was a short story, after all, not a novel. I can only hope that he changed the way he lived in response to the love he had received from Ivan.

My mother used to tell a story that happened when I was three years old. I don't honestly remember the story personally, but based on her telling of it, I have a vivid picture in my mind of the events of that day.

My best buddy and I were outside riding our tricycles. It was one of those early days of summer when the weather was predictably nice. The ice cream trucks with their familiar tune had come through the neighborhood; much like a pied piper might come to gather children.

And in a very predictable way, my friend and I excitedly ran to ask if we could get some ice cream.

- Predictable because we did that every day.
- Predictable because we asked as if we had never heard the sound before.
- And predictable because we asked as if mom would say, "Yes," even though she almost always said, "No."

On this particular day, my buddy and I were so dejected about my mother's response that we decided to follow the ice cream truck. It's hard to tell what a three-year-old was thinking, but I suspect we were hoping he would take pity on us and give us some ice cream when we finally caught up to him.

Whatever was in our minds, we took out after him racing as fast as our little legs on tricycles could take us.

It wasn't long before we lost sight of the ice cream truck, but we kept going.

Now, my mother says we lived in a trailer court at the time and she had no idea about our attempt to follow the ice cream truck until several hours later. Now, to be fair to my mother, I was a three-year-old. She also had an 18-month-old and an infant to care for. I was safely playing with my friend in a safe neighborhood.

When she came looking for us, however, we were nowhere to be found. She tried the neighbor's house. She called down the street. She walked to the corner and called for us.

She then got in a car and went looking for us. By this time, the whole neighborhood was frantically looking for two three-year-old boys on tricycles.

When they found us – about two miles down the road – we were still racing as fast as we could. By then, we had forgotten about the ice cream truck. We were looking for a candy store. I suspect that a toy store might have captured our attention if we had come across one, but we were found before that happened.

When we were found, we didn't know we had been lost. When we were found, we had no idea how many people had been searching for us – and I'm still not sure I know how many people were involved in the search.

What I do know is I was returned home.

And the next time the ice cream truck sounded a tune through the neighborhood, it was my mother who heard the siren sound. And she watched more keenly to make sure I didn't try to wander off again.

As many times as I heard my mother tell the story, I never thought to ask her how I was punished, so I called my dad. What I suspected was true. The only real punishment was borne by my parents who experienced the anxiety and fear of not knowing where I was.

My return brought so much joy into her life that there was no longer a need for punishment. She bore the pain of my wandering and chose not to inflict any pain on me.

For my part, I don't think I ever wandered off again without letting my mother know where I was going. She was punished, but I learned the lesson.

Just like Makar learned the lesson from Ivan's punishment.

In our scripture for this morning, Peter reminds us that all of us have a tendency to wander (1 Pet. 2:25). We follow our own interests and cravings and end up in places we never intended to go. We are like sheep that meander from one clump of grass to another, never realizing how far from safety we have wandered.

Peter is referring to an image Isaiah first penned. Isaiah was speaking about a servant who was willing to suffer on behalf of the straying sheep (Is. 53:6). The servant, according to Isaiah's vision, knows the sheep wandered off by their own accord and still steps in to be punished for their deeds.

“Like sheep we [have] all wandered away,” Isaiah says (Is. 53:6a). Sometimes we recognize when we wander away and find our way home. More often, however, we remain lost until someone finds us and returns us to where we belong.

I'm sure you all know the nursery rhyme about Little Bo Peep. But maybe you've never really paid attention to it, or you only know the first stanza.

*Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep  
And can't tell where to find them.  
Leave them alone,  
and they'll come home  
Wagging their tails behind them.*

Really? If you lose something, is that what you do? Leave it lost and see if it comes back to you? (Of course not!) That's why my mother went looking for me! The rest of the nursery rhyme tells how Little Bo Peep went looking for her sheep – but when she found them, their tails were gone!

*Then up she took her little crook*

*Determined for to find them  
She found them indeed,  
But it made her heart bleed  
For they'd left all their tails behind them!*

How many of you knew that stanza? She was happy to have her sheep, but she kept an eye out for their tails and the day she found them, she was even happier.

*She heaved a sigh and wiped her eye  
And over the hillocks she raced;  
And tried what she could,  
As a shepherdess should  
That each tail should be properly placed.*

Little Bo Peep could pretend her sheep were safe. She could “leave them alone” and see what would happen. She could even dream they were safe, as another stanza of the nursery rhyme suggests.<sup>2</sup>

- Some parents, unfortunately, think that’s the best way to raise children.
  - Leave them alone. They’ll come home.
- Some churches think that’s the best way to treat their members.
  - Leave them alone. They’ll come home.
- Some employers think that’s the best way to treat their employees.
  - Leave them alone. They’ll come home.

And there may be times when that is good advice; but Bo Peep’s sheep didn’t know they were lost. I didn’t know I was lost when I was three years old. Makar didn’t realize he was lost until Ivan refused to accuse him.

It can be argued that Bo Peep’s failure to go looking for her sheep allowed their tails to be taken away. That’s why I’m glad my mother didn’t leave me alone to find my own way home.

The good news is that God comes looking for us when we go astray. In fact, God sent Jesus to find us.

And, according to Peter, our wandering, our sin, has been laid on Jesus who bore the punishment (1 Pet. 2:24; Is. 53:6b).

Just as my mother bore the pain of my wandering.

Just as Makar’s sin was placed on the life of Ivan.

Peter is suggesting that in so doing, we find ourselves returned to the shepherd of our souls (1 Pet. 2:25). And we are invited to live a life dedicated to good in honor of the one who is so overjoyed that we have been returned that there is no punishment.

Ever.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> That stanza reads “*Little Bo Peep fell fast asleep/and dreamt she heard them bleating/but when she awoke/she found it a joke/for they were all still fleeting*”.

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