

In her collection of essays called *Small Wonder*, author Barbara Kingsolver describes an incident that occurred Iran not long ago.¹ “On a cool October day in the oak-forested hills of Lorena Province,” Kingsolver writes, “a lost child was saved in an inconceivable way.” Kingsolver then tells this story: While a young husband and wife were working in their fields, their 16-month-old son wandered away from his caregiver, a teen-age neighbor girl who looked after all the village children who were too little to be in the fields. You can imagine the parents’ reaction when they heard the news that their baby was lost: at first stunned disbelief, their insides turning to stone, and then sheer panic as they rushed to gather all the neighbors to help them look for their son. But as they began to scatter over the rocky outskirts of the village it grew dark, then cold, then hopeless. Nightfall descended. The search stopped until the next morning. Then another day of search parties combing the stony hills. They ventured closer to the caves and oak woods of the mountainside, where bears and wild pigs were known to live. Another nightfall, another day, and some began to give up hope. But not the father or mother, because there was nothing else to do but hope. The father found several men willing to go all the way up into the mountains, into the caves, five kilometers away. It seemed impossible that the baby could have wandered so far, everybody knew this, but still they went, up the mountains, over the rocky soil, then into the trees and checking every cave they saw. Kingsolver writes, “At the mouth of the next cave they enter...they hear a voice. Definitely it’s a cry, a child. Cautiously they look into the darkness, and ominously, they smell bear. But the boy is in there, crying, alive. They move into the half-light of the cave, stand still and wait while the smell gets danker and the texture of the stone walls weaves its details more clearly into their vision. Then they see the animal, the dark, round shape of a thick-furred she-bear lying against the wall. And then they see the child. The bear is curled around him, protecting him from these fierce-smelling intruders in her cave.” The baby was alive, unscarred, and perfectly well after three days—and well fed, smelling of milk. The bear had been nursing the child.

You can imagine the father’s joy as he quietly reached for his son, taking him up, and swiftly leaving the cave, praising Allah and this strange bear-mother who had worked Allah’s will. You can imagine the joy of the baby’s mother back in the village, tears streaming down her face when the father placed her son in her outstretched arms. You can imagine the joy and relief of the neighbor girl on whose watch the child had wandered away. You can imagine the partying, the singing and dancing and feasting that took place in the village that night as the villagers rejoiced that the lost child was safe and home.

It’s the same thing with God, you know, every time he finds and rescues a lost sinner. God’s joy is boundless, and there is a great party in heaven to celebrate the return of the lost soul. This is the point Jesus makes in today’s gospel reading. We’re told that all the tax collectors and sinners in the neighborhood are coming to listen to Jesus. In New Testament times, tax collectors and sinners were the religious and social outcasts of society. They were despised and shunned, not only by the religious and social elite like the Pharisees and scribes, but also by ordinary, mainstream folk. No one wanted to be associated with them. So imagine how amazed and relieved and humbled they feel to hear Jesus’ message, a message that tells them that even they, the quintessential outsiders, will be included in the kingdom of God. And imagine how thrilled they are to have this message reinforced by Jesus’ own actions, for he not only welcomes their presence but even breaks bread with them, fully embracing their presence at his table.

On this day, September 11 2016, it is hard to believe that a 15-year-old American student entering high school has never known our nation to be at peace. We are all, I believe, war-weary. And as we mark this 15th anniversary of 9/11, I wonder whether future historians will look back and compare this time to the Hundred Years’ War between France and England during the 14th and 15th centuries, or the Thirty Years’ War in Central Europe during the 17th century.

This state of endless war is definitely *not* what God wants for us. For what God wants for us and for all creation is *shalom*--in other words, peace, harmony, wholeness, completeness. In the pursuit of war, we have strayed like sheep from God’s ways. We have, like a lost coin, tumbled onto the floor and rolled into a dark, dusty corner. In the pursuit of war, we are lost sinners.

¹ Barbara Kingsolver, *Small Wonder* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002) 1.

You don't even have to open a newspaper, check Google News, or turn on the radio or TV to know that after all this time we are still in a state of war. Fifteen years plus one day ago, to board a plane you didn't have to take off your shoes and belt, or limit your liquids to what can fit in a quart-sized clear plastic bag. And every time I drive onto the ferry between Plattsburgh and Burlington, I pass the sign indicating the Maritime security alert level on that particular day. Yet war is all our children know--our little ones who just went to Sunday School, our high school freshmen. Even an 18-year-old, a legal adult, has but a dim memory, if that, of our nation at peace.

Is this what we want for our children?

If you feel that something is wrong with the world, you are right, because the world is out of synch with what God wants for us. The perpetuation of war, the human love affair with violence, destruction, and division is sinful. We are lost in sin, and God is calling us, seeking us.

For like the shepherd in Jesus' parable, when someone is lost in sin God drops everything to go find the lost one and bring him or her home. Like a shepherd God tenderly lays the lost one on his shoulders and carries him or her home, rejoicing. Like the woman who lost the silver coin, God is so hugely anxious about the lost sinner that he spares no effort in his search and doesn't stop until he finds the lost one who is so precious to him.

When God finds us, how will we respond? As God is faithful to us, can we be faithful to God? Can we work with each other, and work with God, on putting things right? Will we stop the destruction and division, and work instead for peace and restoration, for *shalom*? We can't do it alone, of course. We must work together; but we also must rely on the strength and wisdom of our God. We have God's promise of help and forgiveness as we struggle to bring peace to our time.

A few minutes ago I asked you to imagine the joy that the parents of the lost child felt when their son was found. Now I want you to imagine the feelings of that child when he was reunited with his mom and dad. He had been so scared, you know, when he was lost. He hadn't meant to wander away from the village, it had just happened, and before he knew it he was in a wilderness he had never seen before. The mountains were filled with rocks and trees and shadows and mysterious, scary noises. He got hungry and thirsty. He was dirty and scratched by the brambles. And when night fell he was terrified. Then he wandered into a cave and was confronted by a huge, fierce-looking bear. But instead of eating him, some maternal instinct made the bear take him gently to her belly and feed him. He was crying from hunger; she had milk; so she nursed him. But even when he was no longer hungry, he was still lost and frightened. He was still in a dark, smelly cave with a predator. He still cried. He still wanted his mom and dad. So when his father found him and picked him up, he clung to his father like a barnacle, burying his face in his father's neck. And when he reached home and was placed in his mother's arms, he wouldn't let go, even to be put to bed. Instead, his mother had to wait until he fell asleep in her lap before she could lay him in her very own bed. The child's parents weren't going to let him out of their sight, now that he was found, and home, and safe.

God our Shepherd is searching for each of us. We are precious to him. He wants to bring us home. He wants us to live in *shalom*. Let him find you. Trust him. Let him set the direction for your life, and work with him on creating a world of peace and safety for our children. Let him take you in his arms, put you across his shoulders, and bring you home. When you do, you can be sure God will throw a huge party, and invite all the angels to dance.