

## Lost and Found

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*One time many tax collectors and outcasts came to listen to Jesus. The Pharisees and the teachers of the Law started grumbling, 'This man welcomes outcasts and even eats with them!' ...*

“Where’s Sam?” I must have asked this question a thousand times over the years. Sam is my younger son, now six years old and ready for the adventure of first grade. I was familiar with all of the answers, “He’s upstairs,” “He’s on that rock,” “I don’t know, oh there he is,” “Putting on his shoes.” Sam is a wanderer. It is good to check in with him often. But this time, in the fading light of day on forest trail, my older son Alex replied, “He’s not with *us*.”

Seven of us had been hiking the trails at Elk Creek Falls. I and my two sons, Jeff and his two sons, and our friend Jerry. The four boys had enjoyed running ahead in the maze of trails and “ambushing” us and playing all manner of boy games. They were the first to arrive everywhere and the first to strike out on new journeys. The warm temperatures, the sunshine, the forest, the picturesque waterfalls, all combined into a restful peaceful outing.

With sunset only an hour away we decided it was best to make our way back to the cars. The four boys ran ahead while the adults much more slowly climbed their way up switchbacks to the main trail. At the junction we spotted boys off to the right and made our way across the slope toward them. When we drew near I noticed them just above us at a rocky outcropping. I did not see Sam and my “Where’s Sam?” came reflexively. The three older boys glanced around then looked at me. “He’s not with *us*.”

Sam was not with any of us. Somehow, I had managed to lose Sam. And so, as they say, everything changed. My heart needed the “right” answer, the one that says, “Here he is!” Now everything was focused on getting that answer.

I had to be quick. He could not be very far away. I had to leave my older son there at the rock. I turned to Jerry and asked him to stay with the boys. I turned to the boys and told them to stay with Jerry. A step in faith. Then Jeff and I took off running.

In just a couple of minutes we reached a second junction. I stared up one trail then the other. Back and forth. “Where’s Sam?” We stood there and prayed. We prayed to the One who did know the answer. We asked for safety. We asked for wisdom. We asked for guidance.

Three trails, two people. I sent Jeff back to the last place we did see Sam. I took off down the trail we had all hiked up on. I ran all the trails we had hiked. I called for Sam. I ran. I listened. I prayed for strength. I prayed for Sam’s safety. I prayed that he would not feel frightened. In the dim evening light, I ran on and on, it did not matter how tired I was. I thought to myself that when I find Sam I will grab him and hug him and hoist him onto my shoulders. On the shoulders of your dad you are safe and cannot be lost. I prayed for clarity to hold back the fear.

When your son is missing, there are ten thousand places where he is not. I found every one of those places, twice. After the second search of the trails we had to return to the cars. It was dark and we needed help. And there was Sam. I did not know where Sam was for over an hour, in a forest, at dusk. My dread turned to joy! My lost son was found! I know where Sam is! “He’s right here!”

We prayed a prayer of thanksgiving that evening! Jeff captured the mood, “We should celebrate!”

*... So Jesus told them this parable, “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them – what do you do? You leave the other ninety-nine sheep in the pasture and go looking for the one that got lost until you find it. When you find it, you are so happy that you put it on your shoulders and carry it back home. Then you call your friends and neighbors together and say to them, ‘I am so happy I found my lost sheep. Let us celebrate!’ In the same way, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine respectable people who do not need to repent.” Luke 15:1-7*