

Stephanie Paulsell: Well, choir, that must have been some retreat. Thank you. Would you pray with me? Oh, send out your light and your truth. Let them lead us. Let them lead us to your holy hill and to your dwelling. Then we will go to your altar, oh God. Oh God, our exceeding joy, and we will praise you with the harp, oh God, our God. Amen.

Congregation: Amen.

Stephanie Paulsell: When I was a child, I used to accompany my father when he preached in churches around Eastern North Carolina. He was a religion professor in the college in my hometown. But on weekends, he would sometimes fill the pulpits of churches that were between pastors. We would drive through the humming green mornings, my father's hardback Bible lying on the seat between us, his sermon folded up between its pages. The sermon of his that I loved the most was called Lost in the Mystery of God.

Stephanie Paulsell: I can still see the manuscript of that sermon in my mind's eye. The title centered at the top in all capital letters. The sermon, single-spaced and marked up with changes he had written in by hand. But frustratingly, I can't remember the words themselves. Like many books I've read and loved, I can only remember the way that sermon made me feel. It made me feel like God was shining on the surface of things, but also hidden in depths beyond my reach.

Stephanie Paulsell: It made me want to be brave enough to take risks for what is right. It made me want to lose myself in the mystery of God, whatever that might mean. I would give just about anything to read that sermon again. But unfortunately, my father's sermon about being lost is itself lost. That's okay. My dad always says, "It's a much better sermon in your memory than it was in real life." But more than 40 years after I first heard it, the memory of that sermon continues to tug at me.

Stephanie Paulsell: Religion is so often associated, at least in American culture, with certainty, with knowing where we are and where we stand. We believe or we don't. We are religious or we are not. We stand inside a religion or outside of it. We once were lost, but now we're found. It's hard to respond from these fixed positions to an experience of faith that is marked as the poet Fanny Howe has put it, "By constant oscillation and clearing and darkening, that if we can be lost in God, the boundaries between inside and outside, lost and found, might weaken enough for us to see that we are all standing under the same wide sky."

Stephanie Paulsell: There's actually a lot of wisdom in religious traditions about getting lost as an integral part of the life of faith. The apostle Paul preaching in front of the Areopagus recites the Athenians' own poetry to them in order to claim that we all have to grope after God as if feeling our way in the dark. The anonymous author of the medieval mystical text, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, wrote that if we ever went to feel or see God, we will have to get lost in the darkness where God dwells.

- Stephanie Paulsell: The great Muslim philosopher, Ibn Arabi, famously prayed to get lost. "Lord," he said, "increase my bewilderment of you." The great African theologian, Augustine of Hippo, made meditation on experiences that are lost to his memory a way to draw near to God. Like the rest of us, he couldn't remember being born. He couldn't remember being a baby, and it troubled him. "Where did my infancy go?" He asked. "Where did my childhood go? If I can't remember all the moments of my life, how can I know who I am?"
- Stephanie Paulsell: So much of our lives is lost to us. Even the present moment is already slipping through our hands. If he wants to know himself, Augustine decides, he will have to get lost as well. He will have to get lost in God because only in God is his lost childhood wholly held and remembered.
- Stephanie Paulsell: Now, God is portrayed as one who seeks and finds, gathers and remembers in our readings from this morning. In the verses from Psalm 107 that Alden read for us, God hears the cry of hungry, thirsty people lost in the desert, and God delivers them. Not by some startling miracle, but simply by leading them to an inhabited town. There's no water struck from a rock or any manna from heaven, just the miracle of other people whom God clearly expects will care for these refugees who have been out in the desert with no water and no food.
- Stephanie Paulsell: For the Psalmist, this is the miracle, the sign of God's steadfast love, that God trusts us to tend to each other, that God has placed us in each other's care. The reading from the gospel of Luke that Ayden read for us as one of three parables about lost things that Jesus tells in response to the criticism that he welcomes sinners and eats with them.
- Stephanie Paulsell: The first is the parable of the lost sheep. The second, the parable of the lost coin. And in our reading today, the parable of the lost son in which a man's youngest child asks to receive his inheritance early, squanders it, and returns home, hoping his father will take him on as a hired hand. While he's still far off in the distance, his father sees him, and filled with compassion, rushes out to meet him with an embrace and a kiss and a celebration.
- Stephanie Paulsell: The elder brother refuses to participate. He's been working obediently all these years and never had parties thrown for him. The father goes out to this son too and explains that they have to celebrate because it is a resurrection. "My son was dead and is now alive," he says. "He was lost and now he's found. This is what we do when the lost are recovered," he tells his son. "We rejoice."
- Stephanie Paulsell: This parable has an unfinished feel to it, in part because we never get to hear the older brother's response, and are left to wonder if he storms off into the night or consents to celebrate his brother's return. But it also feels unfinished because of the presence of the enslaved people who work for the man in the story. They are tasked with creating the celebration. "Bring a robe, bring a ring, bring sandals for my son," the man tells them, "And kill the fatted calf for the

party." In a story about welcoming home the lost, their presence reminds us that someone somewhere is scanning the horizon for them too.

Stephanie Paulsell: The philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, once wrote that God's nature is best imagined as that of a tender care that nothing be lost. And that care, he believed, was a judgment on the world. The judgment of a tenderness which loses nothing that can be saved. The judgment of a wisdom which takes what the world regards as moral wreckage and carries it forward into eternity.

Stephanie Paulsell: God's impulse to save, to gather, to remember, is a judgment on the way we render people disposable. And it is a judgment on the way we calculate which losses we will sustain, how many deaths in the desert or in detention centers we will tolerate. How many lives lost to war or incarceration or gun violence will we bear? How many cuts to the number of refugees we receive into this country will we allow?

Stephanie Paulsell: The number, apparently, and I indict myself here, is quite large. How can we learn to be those people in the inhabited town that God trusts to care for the refugees coming in from the desert? How do we learn to keep our eyes on the horizon and not look away when it gets too difficult? We might have to get lost in order to find our way.

Stephanie Paulsell: There's an old quest tale that doubles as a kind of instruction manual for getting lost on purpose. The 13th century quest of the Holy Grail. It's a kind of pilgrimage. Although, on the face of it, pilgrimage seems like a practice whose purpose is to keep us from getting lost. There are way-markers on a pilgrimage. There are well-trodden paths to follow, and fellow pilgrims to keep us on track.

Stephanie Paulsell: But going on a pilgrimage is also about getting lost. Even if we're following a well-worn path in the clearly marked footsteps of others, the practice of pilgrimage moves us beyond the boundaries of what is familiar to us and into a liminal space in which anything might happen. If we're going to be transformed, if we're going to shake free up the status quo and cultivate a new vision, we're going to have to get a bit lost.

Stephanie Paulsell: Now, you probably know some version of the story. The knights of King Arthur's round table are called to go out into the world to seek the grail, a holy object powerful enough to heal the land. But there's no map for this quest, no sure path to follow. The knights have to begin their journey by getting lost deliberately in the woods. They avoid the clearly marked paths and launch themselves into the most trackless parts of the forest in the hope of encountering some sort of adventure that will make the next step of their journey clear.

Stephanie Paulsell: Every adventure presents them with a choice, a moral choice. And if they choose well, then the next little part of their journey unfolds. And that's how they move toward their goal. Little by little, choice by choice. They learn as they

go to pay close attention to the world around them, to choose mercy for their enemies, to sacrifice themselves on behalf of strangers, and to cultivate the courage to defend the vulnerable.

Stephanie Paulsell: The worst thing that could happen on their pilgrimage is that they stay on the well-marked path and have no adventures at all. Those few knights who do find the grail in the end also discover that reaching their goal is not the most important thing they've done on their journey. The most important thing is that they've learned to navigate the world responsively, attentively, compassionately, intuitively.

Stephanie Paulsell: This is not just a strategy for finding the grail. It's training for a new way of living. When they do find the grail, God urges them not to linger, but to keep moving. "Go where you think you might be useful," God says, "and where adventure leads you." Now this can go badly. The grail quest has been marshaled for projects from the crusades to colonization. It can be all too easy to get lost in the cruel and violent projects of powerful leaders.

Stephanie Paulsell: We see this all around us in our own country. The adventures that have called to these knights are ones that demand the attention to the kinds of moral choices that they and we face every day, including the choice to be co-opted for powers' ends. If they have something to teach us, it is to seek encounters with the world's beauty and its pain, and to seek to engage with the lives and struggles of those around us and beyond us, and let those encounters open the way before us. Let this be our map, our waymarker, and our guide.

Stephanie Paulsell: According to Augustine, the God who cannot bear to lose even one sheep or one coin, and for whom no one is disposable, is a God who remembers everything. We, on the other hand, have to work with the fragments of our memories. But fragments are often enough to piece together a sense of our lives. When I try to remember my father's last sermon, lots of other lost things float up that seem just as important. My dad and I in our green Chevrolet, the windows wound down to catch the breeze, fields of brightleaf tobacco shimmering in the heat on either side of the road, the rattle and whine of insects, my theological questions, "Dad, do you think there's really a hell?" And his thoughtful answers, "Why would God build a permanent place for evil?"

Stephanie Paulsell: The crunch of our tires on the gravel of church parking lots and the elders smoking outside waiting for us to arrive. The way my dad would look for me and catch my eye when he came out into the chancel, the way the backs of my legs would stick to the pew on hot days. The young man in one church who leaned forward to listen when my father preached as if he would drink every word like water, if he could.

Stephanie Paulsell: I remember taking out a sheet of loose leaf notebook paper after church one afternoon, writing the words Lost in the Mystery of God across the top and composing my own sermon. I can see that sermon in my mind's eye, too, one

long paragraph in big looping, cursive. But that sermon is also lost, lost in the mystery of God, where every story is remembered and every forgotten thing is shining. Amen.