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One of the stories that my great grandfather used to tell often was about how the little Destroyer he served on during World War II sailed into a Typhoon. It was no accident; they saw the storm coming, and instead of turning, their Captain ordered the ship into the Typhoon because he believed his crew full of new sailors would learn from the experience. They sailed full speed ahead right into the middle of the storm, and according to the records into waves fifty-foot tall and winds at 80 miles an hour. My great-grandfather said they held onto whatever was bolted down as the ship rocked back and forth. Finally, after what seemed like days, they made it through the storm but a little off course. Once they caught up to the rest of the fleet, the Admiral radioed 1 Peter 2:25. My great-grandfather, who was in the bridge at the time said they scrambled to find a Bible, and finding the passage read, *For ye were as sheep going astray, but are now returned unto your Shepherd.*

We hear part of a story with a similar moral in the Old Testament Lesson for today. Thankfully, we get to hear the prophet Jeremiah, who was nicknamed “the crying prophet” on what must have been a good day for him. Jeremiah had the unenviable task of warning Israel what would happen if they did not turn from their sinful ways, and when they refused to do so, he prophesied over and over the coming destruction of Jerusalem and exile into Babylon. What we hear in the lesson from Jeremiah this morning is that God is going to be as a good Admiral, as a good father, and allow them to learn a hard lesson for their own benefit. Once they had learned their lesson, and returned to Him, He would lead them out of exile rejoicing. The amount of joy contained in this one passage, the promise of rejoicing and feasting, far outweighs and outshines the punishment and suffering that precedes it.

This morning, the Scriptures helps us to understand the different aspects of God’s character. God is a loving Father, and yet He allows us to be tested, and when we wander away, He warns us repeatedly, as He warned the Israelites repeatedly that the path they were traveling down would only lead to exile. God’s character is such that he does not cause any evil or suffering. Punishment is really the sin itself. The effects of the sin are what God permits to come about as he respects the reason and free will of his human creation. What the Ancient Israelites suffered was a record of what they brought upon themselves. Some commentators wish to tell us of the God of the Old Testament against the God of the New Testament. And this entirely false, God

is never vindictive. He merely allows the reason and free will of his fallen creatures to run their course. As we see through the Prophet Jeremiah, God is as prone to joy and rejoicing as to wrath and disgust.

We meet Him again in today's Epistle, where St. Peter reminds us that he is mightier and stronger than the devil, since faith enables us to resist the Devil through His Grace. The whole point is that what we can and cannot do if our faith trusts in God is greater than what the Devil threatens. In today's Gospel, we learn that the character of the same God, who permits punishment for sin, also seeks us out lovingly. We see that God is like a good Father, who allows us to make our own decisions, even if we wander away from Him in doing so, and then comes to find us and bring us back into His fold. We learn the lesson, repent of the wrong decisions we made, and there is great rejoicing in heaven for us. While we might err and stray from God's ways, God's character is such that His love forever pursues us, even in our lost state of sin, to find us and reconcile us to Himself.

We see this also in the parable of the *prodigal son*, which follows these parables we heard this morning. Had the youngest son not gone astray, learned his lesson, returned and repented, there would have been no rejoicing, no feasting, no restoration. The older brother of the prodigal son brings this fact up to his father, and the father says, *son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.* The older brother reveals that maybe he too can learn a thing or two from his prodigal little brother. God still loves all sinners, even in their sin, and desires to redeem them. God loves *the publicans and sinners* in today's Gospel, and for this reason, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, will forever seek out *the lost sheep* or fallen man

Taken together, these lessons raise an issue which is near to the heart of what the Bible is all about. We can imagine that Christianity is about showing off how virtuous we are and being very proud of our own spiritual accomplishments. Or on the other hand, we can remind ourselves that God has come to earth to look for each one of us and to find us, who are his lost and fallen sheep. He looks for us not because we are good, but because we are not good. He looks for us and finds us so that He might make us good, even better, by His Grace. Like the *lost sheep*, He seeks us because we have erred and strayed from His fold. Like the *lost coin*, He seeks us because we are of greatest value to Him, not in ourselves and by ourselves, but by, in, and for Him

and His kingdom. If we will admit we are not always good, he will take us to himself and love us and be delighted that he has found us at last. And the truth is that we are all the better for having had the experience. As Charles Spurgeon writes so eloquently, *No stars gleam as brightly as those which glisten in the polar sky. No water tastes so sweet as that which springs amid the desert sand. And no faith is so precious as that which lives and triumphs through adversity. Tested faith brings experience. You would never have believed your own weakness had you not needed to pass through trials. And you would never have known God's strength had His strength not been needed to carry you through. Amen.*