

Text: Luke 15:1-10
Date: May 2, 2010
Title: “The End of LOST: Can I start over?”
Theme: The message of the gospel is that yes, we CAN start over.

Ok, let's start this way

In 250 words or less, who can tell me what LOST is about?

Just kidding. It's a complicated show. I'll spare you the details.

Even those who have watched it from the beginning are confused by the details – well, either confused by or obsessed with – trying to find meaning in everything

Now, there are only a handful of episodes left, and fans like me (I've been watching since 2004, though I did almost give up on it several times) are wondering: will all the mysteries of the show be revealed?

For those who never saw it, here's a quick overview: a group of people whose plane, Oceanic Flight 815, crash-lands on a seemingly deserted island

Though it's beautiful, the island is also frightening: weird things happen – they hear whispers in the jungle, people are pursued by a plume of black smoke

They are attacked by people the 'Losties' call the 'Others' – people who were already on the island before they arrived

As they explore, they find evidence of a long-abandoned research program called the 'the Dharma Initiative' which was studying the island

And perhaps, most strangely, they learn that the island is a place where the living and the dead meet up – certain of the 'Losties' start seeing people who have died on the island or even members of their own families

Sound complicated? You bet. And I didn't tell you a tenth of it.
So why do people like it?

It forces you to work harder than most of anything on TV – you can't miss
The characters are complicated, but likeable – they grow, they develop, they change – they're real – their lives intertwine, they interconnect, often in surprising ways – not unlike ours

You're never sure whom you can trust – it's clear that part of the story is that there is a battle going on between good and evil, but you can't tell which side is which (that's often not far from real-life either)

The way the stories are told is interesting – in the first couple seasons, we learned a lot through flashbacks – got a lot of backstory that way – then through flash-forwards – now through something called a flash-sideways (don't ask, I'm not sure I can explain it)

The storytelling echoes an important part of the plot, which is about time-travel – that's what the Dharma Initiative was studying on the island

I'm hoping that you might be interested enough to watch a bit – I wanted to show you, even spent \$15 to express mail my request to ABC to show you clips, but no dice. I did get a nice email back from Gloria Stabolito, who coordinates clip licensing for ABC Studios:

Pastor Monahan,

I regret to inform you that the decision has been made to deny your request for use of footage from **LOST** as part of the Succasunna United Methodist Church Sermon series, which will be held in April. Due to the number of requests we receive daily, we have established strict guidelines regarding the usage of our material and are unable to grant your use.

I am sorry we are not able to accommodate you and wish you success with your sermon series.

Sincerely,

*Gloria Stabolito | Coordinator, Clip Licensing
ABC Studios*

I kind of read it that she felt bad about it, which is something. So anyway, I will post links, along with these sermons, to some of the episodes illustrating the points I'm trying to make so you can see for yourselves.

Now an even more important question: why is this worth preaching about? I think it's worth preaching about because LOST deals with questions that are important, like:

- how can we make moral decisions?
- how do you know whom to trust?
- what would you sacrifice to save someone you love?
- what does real leadership look like?
- what happens when we die? (week 3 of the series)
- is it true that our lives have a purpose, or does everything happen by chance? (week 2 of the series)
- is it possible to start over? (this week)

One of the show's primary directors, Jack Bender, says that LOST is "all about redemption and rebirth."¹

Sounds like another story we know, right?

Jesus said, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.”
(John 3:3)

The clearest person to see that with in the series is Kate, a character played by Evangeline Lilly

When Kate gets on the plane that crashes, she gets on in handcuffs
She’s in the custody of a federal marshal, who captured her in Australia
She’s wanted for murdering her father – an alcoholic who abuses her mother – she blows up the house around him while he sleeps one off
Clearly she is a violent, angry person – no question
She runs halfway across the globe, only to get turned in for the reward by a rancher whose farm she’s been working on

In the plane crash, the marshal is severely injured

He can’t talk much, but the little he does say to the other Losties – and especially to Jack, the doctor who is taking care of him, is a word of warning: “She’s dangerous.”

“No matter what she does, no matter how she makes you feel...don’t trust her. She just wants to get away.”

After being so fearful that someone will learn her secret, Jack puts Kate at ease. As she starts to tell him what she’s done, he says,

“I don’t want to know. It doesn’t matter, Kate, who we were, what we did before this, before the crash. Three days ago we all died. We should all be able to start over.”²

But is it really possible to start over? To get a second chance?

I imagine all of us have done something stupid enough, destructive enough, dumb enough, or mean enough to wish that we could just go to the proverbial deserted island and get a fresh start

We wish we could leave it all behind, wipe the slate clean

The name of that episode where Kate is offered a new start? “Tabula Rasa,” Latin for ‘blank slate’ (more or less)

Sometimes we’ll go to extremes to get it: sometimes people someone will pick up and move in order to get the space to start over in a place where people don’t know their history, where no one has any expectations

But it's not so simple, is it? Sometimes we're trapped in what people expect of us – we're lost in wildernesses of our own making
If we've always been looked at within our family as kind of a screw-up, it's hard to break away from that
If we've damaged relationships because of a behavior we've had trouble getting under control – say an addiction – it's hard for us to keep going back and getting that second chance, that third chance, that fourth chance
I think anyone who has been in that situation, who has been in recovery, can tell you that it's not always possible to undo the damage, to regain trust – maybe you can get back in Mom's good graces, but with everyone else, who knows?

We understand that this is true, and we feel it in ourselves – the tendency to hold grudges, the unwillingness to give that second and third chance
And so we suspect somehow that God is the same way

That's because humans – with the possible exception of mothers and fathers (in the best cases) – can't come close to loving like God loves
God's love is so deep, and so wide, that we can't fathom it
We can't understand how forgiveness can cover over everything we've done, and yet there it is. It's part of the promise. Listen to this, from Psalm 103, v. 11-12:
“As high as heaven is over the earth, so strong is his love to those who fear him. And as far as sunrise is from sunset, he has separated us from our sins.” (The Message)

See, what's impossible for us is not impossible for God – Jesus himself says so (Luke 18:27)

And that's really the heart of the gospel – God's joy over finding the lost
Jesus says so when he tells the stories we read earlier:

“Which of you, having 100 sheep, would not leave the 99 to look for the one that was lost?”

“Which of you, having 10 coins, would not forget about the 9 to search for the one that was lost?”

And who does he tell these stories to?

He tells them to the tax collectors and sinners – to those who were lost and in need of a fresh start, of a clean slate

And he tells them in the hearing of the scribes and Pharisees – those who complained about how he ate with and welcomed these people
These are the clergy, the professional interpreters of the law, the scholars and experts on how God would have people live
He tells the story to them, saying, “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” (Luke 15:7)
He tells this to them, people who may well have taken away something very different in their study of the law: that God celebrates to see the downfall of the wicked³
It’s not within their realm of comprehension that God is capable of working a change in the lives of these sinners – so their inclination is to stay away, to keep their distance, to preserve holiness by keeping out of the dirt
Christ’s inclination is to wade in, to get close, to get dirty, so that he can show the love of God to the screw-ups, even screw-ups like us

Can we start over? Absolutely.
With God, all things are possible.

Let me go back to our friend Kate
If you’ve seen the show, you know that
Kate goes from being a killer that people rightly ought to fear to being an acknowledged leader in the group
Now you still don’t want to be on her wrong side
But she’s shown that she’s willing to risk for others
She stands by her code of ethics, even if it’s sometimes misguided
She loves, and even becomes an adoptive mother to a child born on the island

That’s what makes Kate’s story a gospel story – she is able to start over
That’s what encourages me as a pastor
I’m happy to know that our society as a whole is looking for gospel stories, even if they’re inside the wrapper of a story about a wacky, time-traveling island

The gospel message of a fresh start is still powerful for us because it is something we all need: every day, every morning, a chance to come out of the wilderness, to come out of our lostness, and draw close to God

Jesus talked about it: the shepherd seeking the sheep, the woman searching for her coin
But more than just talking about it, he lived it – he told his stories to the outcasts, to those who were on the edges, to those who felt like no one cared – he sat with them at their parties and told them that the lost could, in fact, be found
Jesus believed in the message so much that he died for it – and kept proclaiming it, even to the thief on the cross

Our task as the church is to first, know it for ourselves – to believe it, to embrace it – to know we can be found, to know we can start over – blank slate
And second, our task is to show others that same love – that love that will cover any distance to share a message of hope to the lost, that will give people the benefit of the doubt, that will allow the repentant to start over

Friends, this is the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.
Thanks be to God.

By Joe Monahan, Succasunna UMC, Succasunna NJ

¹ The Lostopedia is a wealth of info if you love this show. This quote comes from there. See <http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/Rebirth>.

² Season 1, Episode 3, “Tabula Rasa.” The episode title contains a double reference. First is to an element of the epistemology of John Locke, the English Enlightenment philosopher for whom the character on the show is named. The second is pointing to the opportunity to start over: *tabula rasa* means (roughly) “clean slate” in Latin.

³ See Proverbs 11:10. This is an important idea too, that God delights in justice and so is pleased when the wicked are overthrown (see also Mary’s song in Luke 1). But the question is which side of the coin we want to emphasize. In Luke 15, Jesus celebrates that the wicked are converted and drawn into God’s embrace. As depicted in the Gospels, the Pharisees and the scribes refrain from interacting with sinners – in a way, writing them off as being incapable of conversion. Tractate Amalek reads: “Let not a man associate with the wicked, even to bring him near the law.” While again there is truth to this – the old proverb that “bad company ruins good morals” is good advice – Jesus realized that *someone* needed to minister to these folks. See volume 2 of Darrell Bock’s extensive commentary on Luke (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), p.1302.