

“The Search”

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; John 1:43-51

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First Congregational Church UCC, Saugus, Massachusetts

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A child asked me once, “If someone doesn’t believe in God, does God still hear them?” This is like that age-old question, “If a tree falls in the forest, and there’s no one around to hear it, does it still make noise?” Or a favorite saying of my husband’s that goes, “If a man is alone in the forest, and he speaks, and there isn’t a woman there to hear him, is he still wrong?”

Getting back to the God question, if we don’t believe in God, does God still exist? This is a question that has challenged many people, more recently a revived atheist, or humanist, movement. Atheists are getting a lot of press these days. There are books with titles like, “The God Delusion,” “God” The Failed Hypothesis,” and “Parenting Beyond Belief: Raising Ethical Children without Religion.” Harvard University has a humanist chaplain, for those with no church affiliation or belief in God. A few years ago an organization called the Boston Area Coalition of Reason paid for huge ads to be posted on MBTA cars that read, “Good without God? Millions of Americans Are.”

It is understandable that a movement would spring up to counter the Christian Right’s loud call to “take back America” from the influence of non-Christian believers whose population in our country continues to grow. The Right is especially vocal against Christian liberals who speak of a still-speaking God who wants everyone to be included at the table. It is sad to see the religion of Jesus be hijacked in this way, the Jesus we know who tried to bring everyone together under God’s Big Umbrella.

I remember when I first began to attend church again after many years away. I was skeptical of organized religion but I had this strong urge – like something compelling me – to give Church another try. There were many reasons I felt this tug to church. I had a 7-year-old daughter whom I felt needed to go to Sunday school, like I had, to get a foundation in the basics of Christianity. I was also feeling dissatisfied with my job – a good sales job at which I had worked hard to be successful. But the money just wasn’t satisfying my hunger. The final push was when our family lost a child – my niece Sara at age 14 – who died in a car crash.

This final straw caused me to begin my search for God. I was propelled by the question, “If there is a God, why would did a child have to die?” I raged at God, “If you do exist, who do you think you are that you can cause such a horrible thing to happen?”

Jesus has just come from the River Jordan, having been baptized by his cousin John. He now sets about looking for people willing to follow him in a new ministry, the likes of which they had never seen before. As he walked through the Galilee region, he was drawn to speak to certain men he passed on the way. He met a couple of John’s disciples and they said to him, “Where are you staying?” Jesus replied, “Come and see,” and they spent the whole day with him. They traveled on together, meeting another man named Andrew who told his brother, Simon, about Jesus, saying, “We have found the Messiah.” When Simon came towards Jesus, Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon, son of John. You will be called Cephas,” (which means “Peter the Rock”).

Next Jesus traveled with his new-found band onto the next town and found a man named Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” Philip went and found his friend Nathaniel and told him about Jesus saying, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote – his name is Jesus of Nazareth, son of Joseph.”

Everybody knew Nazareth was just a backwater town, with nothing special to distinguish it. It had never been written of by the prophets as the place where anything significant had ever happened. So Nathaniel scoffed and said, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

“Come and see,” said Philip. So they went and found Jesus who told Nathaniel intimate things about himself. Nathaniel was shocked and declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.”

What was it that Jesus possessed that enabled him to look into a person’s eyes, right through to their souls, and see what their hearts hungered for? Jesus was a “spirit person,” (Borg, 32) that is, someone in such spiritual tune with God that he was able to channel God’s Spirit, and know all the things that God knows.

Another gift of the spirit was that Jesus could connect his spirit and ours, so that our longings were connected to his, a longing to fill our emptiness with something grander than ourselves, a purpose higher than our own. Jesus’ spirit joined with

ours, in our desire to find God, that Supreme Essence of love, compassion and inclusion.

Can God ever get too close to us? Are we uncomfortable knowing God is aware of our every thought and movement? The writer of Psalm 139 has been given this insight to God's character, and shares it with us:

“O Lord, you have searched me and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar....
You hem me in – behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me....
Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?”

People that Jesus encountered were made uncomfortable by his insight into their innermost thoughts and his knowledge of things they had done. In other gospel stories we will meet them: a father who asks for healing for his son lying in bed sick at home; a man who climbs up in a tree to see Jesus better; a betrayer who sold Jesus to the Romans for 40 pieces of silver.

In our lives, as we come to a crossroads in our journey, we are given choices. We can continue on the road we have always traveled, following the same routines, making the same mistakes, voicing the same complaints. We can play the same tape over and over in our heads: “My life is going nowhere but there's nothing I can do about it. Or, if only I was younger, I would make a change. Or, can anything good come out of Nazareth or Saugus or Lynn?” Or we can take a moment to ask ourselves, “Is something calling me to a better way? What makes my spirit depressed and what makes my spirit soar? Who has the power to help me make the changes I need to make?”

I have a beautiful handmade, ceramic plaque in my office that says, “That which you are seeking is causing you to seek.” For me these words speak of a longing to find God. They voice the hope that God is seeking us as much as we are seeking God. They speak of the miracle of God knowing us, whether we acknowledge God or not.

This week I watched a movie called, “The Fighter.” You may have seen it or read about it. There was a buzz around Oscar time last year because the movie was made in Lowell with local actors and was about a boxer from Lowell, “Irish Mickey Ward.” Ward had been boxing since a young age, and had an older brother, Dicky Eklund, called “The Pride of Lowell” because he once knocked down Sugar Ray Leonard in a fight. Ward was bumping along in his career,

managed by has-been brother Dicky and their controlling mother, Alice, and closely watched over by five jealous sisters. Ward never seemed to catch a break, as Dicky's crack addiction took precedence over training his brother, and Alice's hunger for money caused her to book fights for her welterweight son with bigger, tougher boxes who almost guaranteed her son would get creamed.

One day a man comes into Ward's life and offered to be his new manager, with the stipulation that Dickey and Alice no longer be a part of his team. Ward had to make a choice: forever be a loser or take a chance at a shot for a world championship. Although it's hard for Ward to separate from his family, he sees it as his only hope at success, and he takes the gamble.

Was there a power working in Ward's life, something that urged him to break away from dysfunction and towards a healthier way? What was the point at which he made a decision to follow a man he hardly knew toward a future that wasn't certain? How was it that this man appeared at just the right time in his life and offered Ward a way out?

Andrew, Peter, Philip and Nathaniel could probably tell similar stories. One day, it seemed like out of the blue, a man walked into their lives and said, "Come and see." What had they been seeking? What had God known about their hunger?

Today we have only the words of Jesus, printed on the page, to tell us of this remarkable spirit person and the signs and wonders he performed. These are not words to read today and forget about tomorrow. They are words that mean something to you and me and all of us here. They are living words from the Living God. These words need to be put on, like clothing or shoes, lived in and walked around in.

If someone doesn't believe in God, does God still hear them? Can anything good come out of Nazareth or Saugus or Lynn or Lowell? Is that which we are seeking causing us to seek? Yes, yes and yes. God searches us and knows us and cares deeply for us. I'm good with God – how about you? Thanks be to God. Amen.

References

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