

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday March 18, 2018 Lent 5B
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Text: John 12:20-33
Title: A Searching God

If you've ever read The Moviegoer by Walker Percy, the idea of being "on search" is a live notion for you. The main character Binx Bolling describes search in this way. "What is the nature of the search you ask? Really it is very simple; at least for a fellow like me. So simple that it is often overlooked. The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life." Being "on search" is how today's gospel story begins. Greek-speaking Jews approach a disciple of Jesus, hoping to meet the teacher. These Greeks are "on search"; they have heard of Jesus, they are curious and want to experience this spiritual teacher themselves. To be "on search" is something that is a frequent theme of faith. We have all heard the beautiful expression of this in Augustine's confessions, "You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."

In an age so full of diversions and promises of happiness, it is tempting to always be on search for the relationship, the experience, the connection, or the membership that will fill the need inside of us. To the careful observer, it is painfully obvious how fickle humanity is in trying to meet its divine hunger. The Greek philosopher, Aristotle, instructed us to pay attention to our desire. That we experience hunger implies some end to our hunger, that is food. That we do not like being alone but desire friends and companions tells us that we are made as social creatures. To pay attention to our desires, to know our hungers is to discover something important about ourselves. To fast during Lent is meant to awaken within us an awareness of not only our physical hunger, but our deeper hunger for God.

C.S. Lewis, the well-known lay Christian theologian and author of The Chronicles of Narnia, The Space Trilogy and many other works, wrote of his own search for God in the book, Surprised by Joy. In the book he chronicles his own desire for God from his earliest memory. All earthly pleasure, all creature comforts are but a fleeting shadow of what he seeks. He wonders why there would be a search, a desire for something more, if there was no object of desire, no place of fulfillment? But in the midst of his searching he discovers something truly startling. It is not his searching that is so important; it is his discovery that the object he has been pursuing is pursuing him. For C.S. Lewis the point of his search is the discovery that God has been searching diligently for him, that God has been wanting him, that God's love has been drawing him toward the relationship he most needs and desires.

Even for Augustine this became true, and you can find it in his writing. His book begins with "I searched, I read, I wanted,"...I,I,I.. and ends with You came, You touched me, You spoke.....You, You, You." The God that Augustine was reaching for was reaching for him all along. The search for God is not one-sided. It is not just us calling into the vast universe, "Hello, Hello.. Is anybody there?"

The Christian experience is that God is seeking us, just as we are seeking God. There is a wonderful section in Eucharistic Prayer D that captures this truth beautifully. “When our disobedience took us far from you, you did not abandon us to the power of death. In your mercy you came to our help, so that in seeking you we might find you. Again and again you called us into covenant with you, and through the prophets you taught us to hope for salvation.” Listen again, “In your mercy you came to our help, so that in seeking you we might find you.”

The truth is that God has been seeking us from the beginning. This is the kind of God that the prophet Jeremiah is talking about in our older testament reading. Jeremiah writes of a God who keeps coming toward his people, a God who keeps making promises to Israel, even when they break them or fail to live up to their deepest selves. Jeremiah actually talks of a New Covenant, a new kind of relationship between God and the people of Israel. It is a new relationship that will not be written on dead stones but on the living flesh of people’s hearts. For Jeremiah, God is always moving toward the covenant people. Even in times of crisis when many in Israel are wondering if God’s covenant with Israel has come to an end as enemy forces surround them, the prophet sees that God is still moving toward the covenant people. “The days are surely coming,” says the prophet, when God will write on our hearts, when God will come near to the center of our lives, the place of our affections, and write his love and desire on our hearts. God isn’t content with our relationship the way it is. God continues to reveal and pursue us. “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people.” God is ever coming closer, always drawing near.

In a surprising way today’s gospel confirms this pursuing action of God, but it is not immediately apparent. The Greeks who are seeking Jesus do not get a particularly warm reception. In fact, it is not clear whether Jesus ever managed to clear his calendar to meet them. Instead he delivers a rather enigmatic story about grains of wheat needing to die in order to bear fruit, of losing one’s life to find it. But then he speaks using a strange image of the time as one in which the Father will be glorified. “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself,” Jesus says (John 12:22).

In a real way this seems to be what Jesus has been about all along. He has been traveling about the countryside healing, teaching, proclaiming that the kingdom of God is near and drawing people to himself. He draws crowds wherever he goes, he has a faithful band of followers, and people from outside his ethnic religious circle are starting to seek him out. But he is troubled because things are getting dangerous and he is about to die at the hands of the powerful for challenging the status quo, offering a different vision of the world, stirring people’s hearts up which is always dangerous. Where is the glory in the cross? Where is the glory in dying a miserable and common death at the hands of powerful political forces? According to our story, it is the glory of God who is determined to have us no matter what the cost. The story of our faith is that God will risk everything to have us, even dying as a common criminal on a garbage heap outside of Jerusalem. “And when I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself.”

It is important to remember that God is nothing if not persistent. Jeremiah reminds us that God creating a people for himself was his idea. Moses was minding his own business, not looking for a flaming shrub on his grazing lands. It was God’s idea to shape a bunch of slaves and nomads into a covenant people. One way to understand the story of the Bible is as God’s infinite

creativity employed to find and be found by us. The prophets remind us of how often we have ignored God's advances, abused the trust, run away from intimacy, and generally made a mess of things. However, the prophets are hopeful sorts just as God is a hopeful suitor. A day is surely coming, says Jeremiah, when our very hearts will be invaded by God's love. Jesus proclaims that day has arrived as he is being "lifted up."

What we mean by "lifted up" here is important. If we mean that finally God, in human flesh, is making his escape from this earth, ascending into heaven away from the mess of humanity, might we be in trouble about God being in pursuit of us? However, if we understand his "lifting up," his death on the cross, not as being lifted away from us but rather closer to us, then the whole notion of God's search for us makes deeper sense. By being lifted up, Jesus moves closer to us. He moves into the heart of human pain, into the heart of human violence, the heart of human hatred, the heart of human cruelty, the heart of human abandonment, the heart of human suffering and trauma. When Jesus is lifted up, he is lifted deeper into the human experience, deeper into the heart of God, and closer to us.

As we stand on the threshold of Holy Week, our deep and patient meditation on the passion of Christ, let us consider what this lifting up is really about. **The lifting up of Jesus, tells us that God will stop at nothing to get to us.** God continues to pursue us and we can expect more surprises. God's pursuit is infinitely creative, without pretense or snobbery. God is even willing to use a cruel instrument of capital punishment to woo us. It is God's glory that through love and sacrifice, the cross, a symbol of hatred for human dignity, is transformed into a magnet that draws all into its potent field. The lifting up of Jesus is but another magnetic movement of God, drawing his beloved creation toward a deeper intimacy.

This gospel story about searching for Jesus asks each of us a question about our life's search. Who is doing the searching? Is your life best explained as your unending quest for something or someone that satisfies? Or is your life best explained as one long story of God's deep desire for you? Look back on the twists and turns of your life. Every step and misstep, even the ones you thought you were taking away from God, are, in the great mystery of God's love, made into real steps toward your Creator. Wherever you go, whatever moves you make, they are all within the magnetic field of the cross of Christ's love. "And when I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself."

May these gracious words be true for us as we journey into Holy Week, and may this be our prayer: Lord, in your mercy you came to our help, so that in seeking you we might find you.

I wish to acknowledge my debt to Will Willamon for his excellent writing about this new understanding of the lifting up of Jesus as being lifted closer to us which is a main idea in this sermon.