

SEARCHING FOR WHAT IS ALREADY HERE

(01/29/2023)

Scripture Readings: Psalm 27:4,8; 139:1-12, 23
Isaiah 55:6-7
1 Kings 19:1-13
Matthew 2:1-12

*“Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near.”* (Isaiah 55:6)

Our son Corey’s current six-week incredibly rich journey through India and Sri Lanka reminds me of the summer of 1999 when Corey and I embarked upon a six-week trekking pilgrimage through India, Nepal, and Tibet. When we returned home, a reporter from one of the area newspapers asked if she could interview me about my trip.

When we met for the interview, the young woman asked if it were true that I was a Christian minister. When she said “Christian” my radar went up (which is kind of sad). I said I was. I told her that in addition to being an adjunct faculty member in the Psychology Department of Assumption College in Worcester and a psychologist/pastoral counselor/Jungian analyst in private practice in Foxborough, I served as the Pastor of the First Community Church of Southborough.

Then she said, “So, I assume you went to India, Nepal, and Tibet to convert the people there to Christianity.” I, somewhat horrified, told her that that was the furthest thing from my mind! I went there to learn more about Tibetan Buddhism, to get a feeling for a land and a culture and a people for whom, for some strange reason, I feel a strong affinity. I asked her why she thought I would want to talk people out of their religious beliefs, religious beliefs that were not only important to them, to the living of their lives, but which touched me, which spoke deeply to me as well. I told her that I went there not only to learn, which I could do from books, but also to experience.

She was clearly surprised by my response. She asked me why I wouldn’t want to preach the truth to these people. I told her that one of my favorite quotes from my favorite existentialist philosopher and theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, is “Truth is Subjectivity.” While my truth is important to me, I respect the Tibetan Buddhists’ truth; I want to understand it more deeply; I want to learn from it. About then I began to realize why my radar had been triggered at her first question. I also began to doubt if our meeting was going to convey to her readers what this experience meant to me, or even whether our interview was going to see the light of day.

She then informed me that there has to be only one true religion, and, consequently, all other religions and religious views, since they differ from the one truth, must be false. The one

true religion, is, of course, Christianity. She didn't say it, but I suspect she was speaking of her form of Christianity, a theology that not only I but many other Christians do not hold. I told her I didn't see it that way. I told her that I think of the spiritual journey to which we are all called as different paths up the same mountain. The terrain, the view, would, of course, be different depending on which path we take, but the goal, the top of the mountain, is the same for everyone.

She said she just couldn't accept this. She said there must be one true picture or understanding of everything, or, consequently, every view would be false. At this point, I held up a book to her, a book by the theologian John Dominic Crosson entitled *Jesus—a Revolutionary Biography*, which I happened to have been reading. (Actually, I thought the title should have been *Jesus—the Biography of a Revolutionary*, but that's not the point.) I held the book so she could see only the back cover. I asked her what she saw when she looked at this book.

She said she saw a whole bunch of words broken into paragraphs and a label with a bar code. One of the lines read, "From the World's Leading Expert on the Life of Jesus." I told her I didn't see that at all. I asked her if she could see the word "Jesus" in large print. She said no. I asked her if she could see the picture of a 4th century bas relief sculpture of Jesus laying his hand on a person's head, healing the person, a sculpture which is in the Museo Nazionale delle Terme in Rome. She said no, she saw none of that. Since I was looking at the front cover of the book, that is exactly what I saw.

I then asked her which of us had the one true picture of the book. I knew what I saw; it was real to me, and she knew what she saw; it was real to her. I asked her if it were possible that we both had partial pictures of the same book, and that if we wanted to learn more about the book, we might consider going around and looking at the book from a different perspective; we might try to see what the other person saw. I said that, as a marriage and family therapist, I have found that couples, whether gay or straight, can work through 75% of their problems if they would simply try this. The other alternative, whether as two people in a relationship or two different religions, is to fight about which of us has the one true picture. Then I said, "If there can be more than one true picture of something as simple as this book, which is a thing, doesn't it make sense that when it comes to something as complex as a relationship, and even more so when it comes to something as mysterious as God, there not only could be many pictures, many experiences, there would *have* to be?"

I don't remember what she said. It was clear that she was deeply committed to her viewpoint. It was important to her that there was one correct way of understanding God and Jesus, and that was her way. It began to dawn on me that what was coming between us was more psychological than theological, and that there was no way to reconcile our viewpoints without her

losing a sense of security that was very important to her. So, I let the matter drop. She finished the interview, and it was eventually published in the local paper. However, I don't think it helped people understand what the pilgrimage meant to Corey and me.

I guess what I am saying is that I am not trying to sell you a packaged religion. Quite frankly, I don't have a nice, neat package that I could sell you. I believe there are different paths up the same mountain. I also believe that not all paths are equal; some don't even lead up the mountain; they lead somewhere else. I also know that there are times when our belief system, our theology, if it is too small, too distorted, or psychologically unhealthy becomes a barrier to experiencing and deepening our relationship with God. At times like that, it might be helpful to look at things from a different perspective. It might be helpful to open our minds to what other pilgrims, other travelers throughout the ages have seen, heard, and experienced.

In addition, as a Protestant, I believe that the church is not called to be a gatekeeper, to present itself as the only way to God. It is called to provide you as individuals with the resources you need to experience God, to deepen your relationship with God, and to help bring about the kingdom of God on earth. The most important set of resources for us as Christians, of course, is the birth, life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus. I am aware that my point of view might be skewed because I am an introvert, but I think that what is most important is our individual faith journey, and how this journey shapes both us and the world.

Today is the Fourth Sunday following Epiphany. Epiphany, January 6, twelve days after Christmas, marks the church's celebration of Jesus' baptism; Jesus' first miracle, changing the water to wine at the wedding he attended in Cana; and the visit of the wise men to the manger. Today, I would like us to think about the wise men, in particular their search for the Christ child.

This past week I saw one of my favorite bumper stickers. It said, "The Wise Still Seek Him." I like it because it is a humble bumper sticker; it doesn't treat God as a possession that I have but others don't have. I am not a big fan of theological articulations that treat God as a possession, because I think of my (and our) relationship with God as a work in process.

The bumper sticker describes the Christian faith as a journey or a pilgrimage. It encourages us to think of our relationship with God as something that is always growing and evolving. It encourages us to think of our faith journey as a quest, like the quest of the Knights of the Round Table for the Holy Grail, the divine archetypal feminine that had become lost to the institutional church of their day. This message is especially appropriate in the liturgical season of Epiphany.

The Protestant reformer John Calvin, in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tells us that the more deeply we understand God, the more deeply we will understand ourselves. I believe this is true from both a spiritual and a psychological perspective. Whatever we learn about God or ourselves in this spiritual journey will enrich our knowledge of the other because each of us is an incarnation of God.

The search for God is a complex process. We gather this morning because we seek to understand and experience God more fully. We gather either in person or online because we seek to understand ourselves more fully and to experience that spiritual dimension of life and of our life from which we often become separated in the busyness of our everyday life.

We might assume that if we need to embark upon a search for God, God must be separate from us, must be separated from us. However, this may not be true. We may, in fact, be searching for what is already here, what is already within us and among us.

I think we would all agree that there are times when we feel separated or alienated from God. We may feel separated from God because of our sin. We may feel separated from God because we have neglected to nurture this relationship, and God has drifted off our screen. We may feel separated from God during a time of personal loss when we can't understand how a loving, caring God could allow us to experience this much pain.

The common denominator in these experiences is a lack of faith, at least if we understand faith as the quality of our relationship with God. During what John of the Cross called a "dark night of the soul," we may feel alone; we may feel that God is not with us. We know the feeling of being separated or alienated from God, from our fellow human beings, and from the deepest core, the true center of ourselves.

At those times when we feel separated, alienated, and alone, we need to follow the guidance of scripture and turn back to God. We need to seek God. We need to seek to reestablish our relationship with God. We need to open ourselves to God's presence. We need to seek healing for our brokenness and forgiveness for our sins. At times like these, we need to remember the promises of Jesus: that those who truly seek will find.

Throughout the scriptures, we find the admonition, the directive, and the encouragement to seek God. In the first Book of Chronicles, we are told to

*seek the Lord and his strength,
seek his presence continually. (I Chronicles 16:11)*

As we heard this morning, Psalm 27, a psalm of devotion, tells us

*One thing I asked of the Lord,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the Lord,
and to inquire in his temple. . . .
“Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!”
Your face, Lord, do I seek.
Do not hide your face from me.*

Jesus tells us time and again to seek first the kingdom of God and all else will be given unto us.

We know what it means to feel separated or alienated from God. We know what it means to seek God in scripture, in prayer, and in worship. We seek to discern God’s will for our life. We seek to become aware of where God encounters us or touches our daily lives.

In his spiritual exercises, Ignatius of Loyola advised us to set time aside in the middle of every day and again when we go to bed to examine our conscience. The purpose of this discipline was to help us reflect upon our thoughts, our feelings, our behavior, to enter an attitude of confession for the ways in which we failed to be the people God calls us to be.

Since Vatican II, this discipline has come to be called the examination of consciousness. It is now understood as a time that we set aside every day to discern God’s presence in our lives, to see where God has encountered us in our daily activities. This practice has the goal of helping us to become more conscious of God’s presence in our life.

This evolution of the understanding of the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius is an interesting development, because it witnesses to another fundamental truth about God. It challenges us to think about what it really means to seek God since we can never be separated from God. It is not as if God is in some places and not others. It is not as if God is with us when we are good and distant from us when we are bad, though this is what many of the ancient Israelites believed, and which many Christians now believe. However, the writer of the 139th psalm says to God,

*Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.*

The apostle Paul reminds us that nothing can separate us from the love of God that was shown to us in Christ Jesus. Houston Smith, whom I recently quoted, suggests that,

*To the monotheist, there is one God.
To the polytheist, there are many gods.
To the atheist, there is no God.
To the mystic, there is only God.*

If the mystics are correct, if there is only God, our search for God would be like a fish setting out on a journey to seek the ocean. The ocean is not only all around the fish; it is inside it. And yet, even though we can never be separated from God, it does make sense to seek God because we can be separated from an awareness of God's presence. God's love is a reality that can never change. However, if we are not conscious of that love, that acceptance, that forgiveness, we live our life as if God were not.

The legend of the Magi, which appears only in the Gospel of Matthew, is a story about seeking. It is a story about a search for God. It tells us that the search involves a journey, for Jesus was not born into the countries where the wise men lived. And yet, from a different perspective, the Christ was there as well. The wise men didn't realize it, but they were searching for something or someone they already had.

The story tells us that we are given a sign, just as the wise men were shown the star, but it is up to us whether we embark upon the journey. It reminds us that the faith journey doesn't seem to make sense; the "practical people" see it as a waste of time. It reminds us that the journey is beset by dangers--the regressive and power-dominated Herod-systems of the world and, also, of our own psychologies. But the journey leads to discovery and to new life for all who embark upon it.

At the end of their journey, just as Calvin would have predicted, the wise men not only found the Christ child; they also found themselves. In finding the little infant lying in a manger, they not only gave him their gifts; they received a gift in return. They were totally changed by the experience!

In T. S. Eliot's poem, *Journey of the Magi*, one of the three wise men, reflecting on their journey many years ago, says,

*'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey;
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'*

*And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.*

*Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.*

*All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.*

As we mentioned last week, the many deaths we have in this life, especially those that fall into the category of an epiphany, can lead to a new birth, to new life. In calling us to embark upon “the Search,” Eliot reminds us that

*The journey,
Not the destination matters.*

And, whether this search is an outer or an inner search, Eliot says,

*We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive
where we began and to know the place for the first time.*

I believe T. S. Eliot is suggesting that that which we seek is already present to us, is present within us, is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. How could it be otherwise if, as the mystics tell us, there is only God? How could it be otherwise if, like Jesus, we are incarnations of God's creative spirit?

As the bumper sticker reminds us, the wise still seek him. Jesus tells us, seek and you will find. Seek that God who is not far from any one of us. Remember that the One you seek may already be here. But beware, for, as the wise man suggests, when you find the One whom you seek, when you experience the spiritual death and rebirth to which you are called, you will never be the same again.

*We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.*

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later in the week.