

December 16, 2018
Third Sunday of Advent

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Advent – Advent-ure Three – Finding What We Are Looking For

Psalm 42- 1-6; 11

¹ As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.

² My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.

When shall I come and behold
the face of God?

³ My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
'Where is your God?'

⁴ These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,*
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.

⁵ Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help ⁶and my God.

¹¹ Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

THREE – Searching Seeking ~ When You Still Haven't Found What You're Looking For.

Isaiah 55:6-7

"Seek the LORD while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the LORD, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon."

John has no birth narrative, neither does Mark ... We have the poignant words of John's prologue that are read in advent and at Christmas ... Luke gives us the shepherds, Matthew the magi, these words from John's 1st chapter tell us of others who were looking, watching, waiting, seeking. We do not have a full description of who they are. They are two unnamed disciples of John.

John 1:35-42

35 The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' ³⁷The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.³⁸When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?'

Prayer for illumination

We seek your presence, O Lord, for in that is our joy, peace, and hope. As we come in praise and prayer make yourself known by the power of your Word and the fellowship of this company. Amen.

A Journey

The scriptures present a travelogue of pilgrimage with a host of persons engaged in their spiritual journey. Abraham and Sarah; Moses and the Hebrews in the wilderness; Jacob avoiding the anger of his brother and the memory of his past; Elijah escaping to the mountains; Jonah running from God. Jesus and his disciples traveling around Galilee.

It is safe to suggest that we are all on a journey - traveling from one unknown to another, on our way somewhere. We journey not out of any dissatisfaction, but out of a deep inward sense that God has more in store for us. The wise among us follow a star, that is to say, search for something greater than we ourselves.

I think this is why Matthew incorporates the wise men as a kind of stand-in for all of us. Their journey is a metaphor for ours. Their journey expresses the human yearnings, restlessness, deep desires and needs that reside in every human heart. Such a quest can only be quenched by something beyond ourselves, and only from heaven itself.

We're not exactly sure who these Magi were. They are enigmatic figures who appear on the desolate horizon of desert wastes. We do know they searched the heavens for some sign of promise and hope. We do know they were "seekers" in their own respect. They sought something more than what they had already experienced in life. John's gospel personifies seekers in another way –

Advent should best be understood as a journey. Through liturgy, hymnody, narrative, advent calendars, each passing day brings us a different perspective on the meaning of Christ's birth. Through it we move from the time of deep dark watchful waiting and hopefulness to the incarnate word becoming flesh in the birth of a babe. We find ourselves in a time of holy longing, when we admit that we still haven't quite found what we're looking for. Maybe you feel that way sometimes – a longing, a yearning for something more, the recognition that something is missing, that this world isn't quite right. Experiencing that sense of longing is not a sign of weak faith, or that you are off the spiritual path, or that you have some sort of deficit discipleship, quite the contrary. It's a sign of a deeper spiritual vitality. Longing,

looking, can be an expression of our faith. It is a deep, devout faith that causes us to look at this world and to long for something different.

The Irish rock band U2 has been making music since the mid-70s. Their lead vocalist is a man named Paul Hewson, better known by his nickname, Bono. His friends gave him that nickname when he was a teenager. Bono is short for 'bonovox,' which is Latin for 'good voice.' Bono is an international superstar, famous not only for his music, but also for his humanitarian work all over the world. He is a one-man world relief organization, has given tens of millions of dollars to help others, and is constantly pestering other celebrities to do the same. Few people have done more than Bono to alleviate poverty, disease, and illiteracy in the world. Bono and all the members of U2 are Christian. Faith, mysticism, spiritual questing is woven into their music. Its hard to say if Bono is a prophet disguised as a rocker or a rocker disguised as a prophet. Regardless, his music is profound. There is one song in particular that gives expression to a human seeking. It is titled "I still haven't found what I'm looking for."

If you stripped away the bass line, the guitar and the drums, it'd sound something like this:

*I have climbed the highest mountain
I have run through the fields only to be with you
Only to be with you
I have run, I have crawled
I have scaled these city walls only to be with you
But I still haven't found what I'm looking for*

*I believe in kingdom come
Then all the colors will bleed into one
Yes, I'm still running
You broke the bonds and you loosed the chains
Carried the cross of my shame – you know I believe it
But I still haven't found what I'm looking for*

It's been almost 31 years since U2 released their hit single, "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For." But for many, it remains the emblematic spiritual cry of our time.

We keep seeking, because we keep longing. The words of that song, "I still haven't found what I'm looking for" ring true. It's the cry of the human heart. I've found a lot of things, but I still haven't found what I'm looking for.

Getting Further and Further away from the Truck

I am not a hunter, but I hear a lot of hunting stories. Now that the firearm season is over, I'll pass this one on for the sake of illustrating our advent meditation today. Two hunters who were out for the first time and bagged a big buck with gigantic antlers. Retrieving their harvest proved to be a challenge. They kept dragging the animal back to their truck by the feet and the antlers kept getting stuck in the bramble and the briars and they were having a terrible time. They came upon two other hunters who suggested that if they dragged the buck by the antlers, it would prove to be a lot easier. So they tried that, and sure enough it was loads simpler. After about an hour of trudging one remarked to the other: "You know this is a lot easier, but there's only one problem." "What's the problem?" the other man said. "We keep getting farther and farther away from the truck."

We spend our lives looking, searching, seeking, hoping that we'll find what it's really all about. We do it through work, achievement, success and athletic victories. We try to find it

in diets and cosmetics. We devour millions of books each year hoping, underneath the multitude of words, we'll find the answer. Or we keep hoping that a new place, another child, a new preacher, a new house or car will somehow lead us – one and all to quench this great longing for peace for which we incessantly thirst. When left to our own devices, we *get farther and farther away from the truck.*

We are more connected than ever and also more lonely. We accomplish more, but with less satisfaction. We live more rapidly, but fewer experiences endure. We feel lost in a world teeming with facts and alone in a world teeming with people. And we still haven't found what we're looking for....

One of the early church leaders, St. Augustine, said "Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee." He knew what he was talking about. Before following Jesus, he had gone on a desperate search for meaning and fulfillment, trying to find something, anything, to fill the void he sensed in his life. Food, drink, and women, what one writer has called his lust for "excessive pleasures." False religions. Philosophy. Things and activities to distract his mind and heart. By some people's standards, he lived an amazing life. But he felt empty. In desperation he gave his life to Christ, and ten years later, as he was writing what would become one of the most influential and original works in all of literature, his "Confessions,"

You have made me for yourself, O Lord, and my heart is restless until I rest in you.

–St. Augustine (354-430)

In her book "A New Kind of Normal," Carol Kent offers this encouragement to the restless heart.

"When despair tries to take me under...I choose life. When I wonder what God could possibly be thinking...I choose trust. When I desperately want relief from unrelenting reality...I choose perseverance. When I feel oppressed by my disappointment and sorrow...I choose gratitude. When I want to keep my feelings to myself...I choose vulnerability. When nothing goes according to my plan...I choose relinquishment. When I want to point the finger...I choose forgiveness. When I want to give up...I choose purposeful action."¹

Conclusion

One cannot come to the manger without sitting at this table or standing under the cross. Everything you are looking for is revealed through Him who was born and walked among us; suffered unspeakably; laid down His life; and triumphed over the grave in order that our restless hearts may find redemption, renewal and eternal respite in him.

Closing Prayer

Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

¹ Carol Kent, *A New Kind of Normal: Hope Filled Choices When Life Turns Upside Down* (Thomas Nelson, 2007). All chapters.