

Searching for the Living God

sermon digest

June 22, 2014

Acts 17:16-28

carolyn dipboye

Do you remember being chided in your youth to shun doubt? Well-meaning, loving people, who gave us some of the most important gifts of our lives, told us that faith was about always believing and never doubting. Interestingly enough, however, that is not the faith of the Bible. Injunctions to “seek the Lord” reverberate throughout scripture as if, somehow, it’s not just a one time, over-and-done-with sort of thing, but an ongoing, lifelong quest. The people of Israel enter into covenant with the living God at Sinai and move into the promised land in full assurance that the living God goes with them. But hear one psalmist exulting, “my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God” (84:2), while another cries in anguish, “O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (63:1). And in the passage with which we opened this morning’s service: “Come,” my heart says, “seek God’s face!” Your face, Lord, do I seek” (27:7).

If we become frustrated with our own sense of restlessness, our own inability to finally nail down our understanding of God, we should recognize that we are at least in good company. Heroes and heroines of the faith are depicted throughout scripture railing out at God’s seeming absence and frustrating over the surprising turns responsiveness to God’s leading seem to place upon them. And if we are honest, as we look into the biographies of the great stalwarts of faith throughout history, what we most likely encounter there is not the sweet bliss of unruffled believing, but more likely, serious and sometimes prolonged and often repeated “dark nights of the soul.” Faithfulness to God, seeking and knowing God is not about sweet comfort and continuing peace, as we so often paint it. It is rather an ongoing call to risk and growth.

In her book *Quest for the Living God*, Elizabeth Johnson, Distinguished Professor of Theology at Fordham University and a member of the order of the Sisters of St. Joseph, recalls the words of medieval map-makers seeking to depict limits in contemporary knowledge of the known world. Over the vast empty space at the borders of their maps they often penned the ominous words: “Here be dragons.” In a very real sense, that is exactly how we can approach God. We can settle for what is familiar and comfortable and not trouble our little minds with what we do not know. Or we can risk a lifelong journey, not for the purpose of puffing up our self-importance or performing a self-serving intellectual exercise, but in order to discover and experience the mystery that lies beyond what we already know. We journey “through dragon territory to new places” and in the process discover a richness of faith we otherwise could never have known.

We do not, we cannot totally comprehend God. The very nature of God, the immensity of God is such that the living God, in contrast to our limited understanding of God, is incomprehensible, unfathomable, limitless, ineffable, beyond description. “If you have understood,” Augustine of Hippo said some 1700 years ago, “it is not God” [*Sermon*, 117.5]. Walking along the Mediterranean seashore one day, contemplating the mystery of the Trinity, Augustine observed a small child making repeated trips to the water’s edge, filling a small bucket, carrying it to a small hole in the sand and emptying it. “What are you doing?” Augustine asked the little boy. “Trying to put the sea into my hole,” the little boy responded. “You can’t do that; it won’t fit,” the knowledgeable adult assured him. The child, who turned out to be an angelic messenger, responded, “Neither can you put the mystery of the Trinity into your mind; it won’t fit.” [*Quest for the Living God*, 17].

True, we can reduce God to a comfortable formula and stop our journeying there. Doing so, however, means that we devote our lives to an idol of words, not to the living God who ever comes to us from the future in surprising new ways. If we are satiated, if we are convinced that we know all that we need to know or experience, we have not encountered the living God, for as God-seekers of every age have testified,

the human spirit cannot rest in any one encounter but, intrigued by the glimpse already gained, continues to hunger for more. People keep on journeying through beauty and joy, through duty and commitment, through agonizing silence and pain, toward greater meaning and deeper union with the ineffable God, to their last breath” [*Quest for the Living God*, 13].

“God is sought,” Augustine assured us, “in order to be found more sweetly, and found in order to be sought more eagerly” [De Trinitate 15.2]. What we experience of God whets our appetites for more. What we know of God awakens us to the realization of how much we do not know. We may glimpse God; we may

experience God at crucial moments in our lives; and that moment in time beckons us into the future with the wide incentive and permission to learn and experience more.

The God whom we seek is, in turn, a God who seeks us. Scripture is honest about the human incapacity to finally fathom the totality of who God is; but it does not stop there as if all we can do is descend into the depths of cynicism and despair. The experience of faithful people depicted in the Bible, much on the order of those who seek to be faithful today, incorporates a profound word of hope. The God whom we seek can and will be found. “When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord” (Jeremiah 29:13). “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you” (Matthew 7:7). Far from an exercise in futility, searching for God with our whole hearts, from the center of our very being, opens us to God’s presence in the world and in our lives.

More than a one-sided proposition where we spend our lives seeking God, faith affirms that God seeks us. Far from being a god isolated in remote splendor, God is the shepherd who seeks out the lost sheep of Israel (Ezekiel 34). Likened in the parables of Jesus to a woman tirelessly searching for a lost coin, a shepherd persistently going after his lost sheep and a loving father joyfully embracing his returning son (Luke 15), God does not wait for us to get it all right, but meets and welcomes us even as we are on our way.

True, “the incomprehensibility of God runs like a deep river through every affirmation” we make about God (*Quest*, 22), but a strong confession remains at the center of each and everything we say. Rather than remaining aloof, God engages the world in merciful love, and there in the mystery of that love draws near to every one of us. We do not search for God in vain, but in our search encounter a God who is as close to us as God is beyond us. Near the end of the 19th century, English poet Francis Thompson, put it into words. A tragic figure, derailed soon after graduation from college by cocaine addiction, Thompson lived as a street vagrant for years before being rescued by a couple who admired his poetry and published his first book poems. He lived to write three books of poetry and essays, before dying of tuberculosis at the age of 49. “The Hound of Heaven,” his 182 line poem, confesses his own flight:

I fled Him down the nights and down the days

I fled Him down the arches of the years

I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways

Of my own mind, and in the midst of tears

I hid from him, and under running laughter.

But still, despite his flight, he was aware of

Those strong feet that followed, followed after

But with unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace,

Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,

They beat, and a Voice beat . . .

Like the God portrayed in Hosea’s insistent love and pursuit of the erring Gomer, Thompson’s God followed in persistent love despite Thompson’s persistent flight.

And that, you see, is why, to use the words of the psalmist with whom we began, our hearts sing to the living God. More than a mandatory mouthing of orthodoxy, more than a preoccupation with crossing all the “t’s” and dotting all the dots, as if somehow we thereby manage to get a hold on God, our search for the living God leads us beyond what we know now or will know tomorrow. God, you see, does come to us from the past, for what we and the faithful who have gone before us have come to know. But God also comes to us from the future, opening us to the wideness of a world we have not previously recognized and immensity of a love that will not let us go. Thanks be to God!