

“Searching for God Today”
May 30, 2021

Isaiah 40:27-31
Acts 17:22-28

Paul speaks to the Athenians about all people—even about us: “They would search for God and perhaps grope for God and find God—though indeed God is not far from each one of us.”

A small, really, inconsequential event this past week led me to think about where we have been, where we are, and where we are going as we live through this pandemic and search for God.

Christina had ordered some office supplies and sent me an email letting me know that they would be delivered in the afternoon and that she would be over to put them away. As it was a rainy afternoon, I checked around the expected delivery and found the items by the outside office door—safe and dry. I brought them inside, noting that they were the usual items—envelopes and such—as well as a half-gallon jug of hand sanitizer.

When Christina was here later in the day, I said that it looked as though we would be set for some time with all that hand sanitizer. I added that a year ago you could hardly find the stuff. Now—it’s everywhere!

“And,” Christina said, “It was even on sale!”

Times change.

The end of the academic year. Graduation. Memorial Day weekend. Such times gently invite us to look back, to consider where we’ve been, in the hope that we might gain a better view of the road we are on—and perhaps even more, might get a better view of the destination toward which we are moving.

Looking back on the past year is not necessarily easy.

When the cast of Saturday Night Live did that during the cold open a week ago, some of the members almost broke out in tears. Reports the next day call the segment “poignant”—not a word usually associated with SNL.

The difficulties, the challenges, and the sorrows of the fifteen months of this pandemic have been many. The isolation that we have known has made all of this even harder—so we need to be kind and gentle to ourselves as we think of this time.

As difficult as it is to say, we have known death. The reports of great numbers have filled the news. On a more real and personal level, members are still grieving over the deaths of family and friends—for grief is a long process; we don’t “get over it” after a few months—or a few years. Each person’s grief timetable is unique and needs to be honored. Yes, some of the losses—even deaths of members of our congregation—have been due to Covid. Others have died from different causes. All deaths in the past year have been made more difficult by the separation required by the pandemic. Many have been cut off from one another just when they felt great need to be close. Many have not been able to gather to give thanks for the lives that were lost.

We have known uncertainty. These have been months of not being sure about what we can and cannot do, what we should and should not do. The initial advice of “Don’t bother wearing a mask” became “Wear a mask” and now we hear from some “No one can tell you to wear a mask.” The initial advice of “Wipe down your groceries and all surfaces”—complete with YouTube videos—became “Don’t bother wiping down items.” All that we did and all that we didn’t do, all of the advice that changed were reflections of the uncertainty of these days. There was so much that we didn’t know. It is as though all of life was condensed into fifteen months: learning, changing, learning more, and changing again. If, as I’ve said along with others, the opposite of faith is certainty, then we have been living in a time of faith—a time when trust has been necessary and often difficult to muster.

And while so much of life has seemed to be on hold, so much has continued unabated. A year after George Floyd’s murder, incidents of police violence continue across our nation. I read the news and ask: “Have we learned nothing?” As we saw again this past week, the scourge of gun violence continues to destroy workplaces and neighborhoods and families. In spite of the purported reckoning of past year, racial inequality continues in its permanent place in our national life. Economic inequality also continues to show itself as recent reports tell us that the pandemic has resulted in more billionaires. And international conflicts and climate change have not gone away.

The difficulties, the challenges, and the sorrows of these months have been many.

But as we look back, as we look around, let us also remember the good that we have known in these days as well as the good that we have done.

Two babies were born to couples in our congregation this past year. The old Congregational baptism service speaks of “the hope and happiness that come into our lives through the presence of a child”—I love those words. We haven’t been able to celebrate with the parents as we might usually, we haven’t been able to see and coo over the babies, delighting in the hope and happiness that they bring. But these births are signs of that God is not far off from each one of us, reminders that even in times of fear and uncertainty, life in all its wonder and beauty goes on.

In the midst of this pandemic, separated in many ways, we have also found each other in new ways. While we were caught unaware and many of us lacked technical expertise, we turned to those with such gifts to quickly get these online worship services up and running. We have reached people in places and in ways we never imagined before. And, yes, we are working now so that when we return to in-person worship, we will be able to live stream our worship services on Sunday morning and post them online afterwards. We learned to Zoom so that we could study scripture together and share our lives and our joys and our sorrows.

We have continued to seek racial justice in our community through conversation and action. We have provided financial support for people who did not receive government checks. We have continued to help provide food and shelter for so many. Once again in these days when people have been excluded and condemned and marginalized, we have responded to our calling to do what we can and say what we can to make the accepting and welcoming love of God evident once more. We speak and act, not on our own but as part of something far greater, more powerful, and filled with love and compassion for the whole creation.

This is to say that as a congregation we have continued to follow in the ways of Jesus Christ, especially as new ways have been made known to us in these days.

In our following, perhaps we are gaining a deeper sense that in God we live and move and have our being.

Somewhat like those ancient Athenians we recognize that, really, God is unknown and beyond our understanding and describing. And so, our paths are marked by those things that at one point seemed holy, seemed sacred, and no longer do. As we change, our understanding of God changes as well.

We listen as Paul speaks with humility and with love about the search for God that engages each one of us, the search that is at the heart of all of us.

Paul's good news is rooted in the goodness of creation and the God who made the world and everything in it. This unknown God is the Ground of All Being. We are all the children of this loving God who provides rain and fruitful seasons, filling our bodies with food and our hearts with joy. Everyone—*everyone*—is included in the love of God. Everyone—*everyone*—is accepted by God and a recipient of that love.

In such faith, we are able to look at and accept the harsh realities of our lives. Life doesn't always go as we would want it to go. If we didn't know this before, we know it now. We are broken people and we live in the broken places of this world.

We have found refreshment and renewal at times, but these have not been easy days.

And we recognize that these challenging days are not over yet, even as many of us breathe an unmasked sigh of relief.

This pandemic has changed us as individuals and as a congregation.

I said that last Sunday—and my guess is that you'll be hearing that from me quite often in the coming months. I'll be saying that—and I'll be asking you how you have changed, how *we* have changed because it's important for all of us to know about this.

What are the good changes that you want to keep?

What are those things that make you think: "I don't like this—I need to change yet again."

What new ways are calling to us as a congregation—new commitments, new programs, new goals?

Let us then, as Paul says we all do, continue together to search for God and perhaps find God—for God is not far from each one of us.