

“Hide and Seek”
March 27, 2022

Genesis 3:1-14
Luke 15:1-10

Pharisees have gotten a bad rap in the last two thousand years. In their day they were devout, religious people. They were pillars of the community.

In Luke’s Gospel, we hear of some of the disagreements that some Pharisees had with Jesus. We also read about their sympathies with him and even of times when they warned him of threats and danger.

And the Gospel lesson that we heard this morning makes it clear that some Pharisees had a pretty good idea of who Jesus was—and who his followers *are* to this day.

“This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

That pretty much says it all.

We are sinners.

Now sin is one of those old religious words that a lot of people don’t like to hear anymore. We might have our problems, but we don’t like to think that “sin” is among them.

The twentieth century theological giant, Paul Tillich, gave us some help with this. Tillich recognized, as we do today, that “there are few words more strange to most of us than ‘sin...’”

Tillich suggested we can think of sin as separation—not so that we would substitute one word for the other but because separation was a useful “clue” to understanding sin. We are separated from God, from each other, and even from the best in ourselves. This estrangement is a basic fact of our existence. We know ourselves to be “estranged from something to which we really belong, and with which we *should* be united.”ⁱ

Tillich, of course, also recognized that “there is a mysterious fact about the great words of our religious tradition: they cannot be replaced...There are no substitutes for words like ‘sin’...”

Indeed, this word is helpful because the word *sin* “has a sharpness which accusingly points to the element of personal responsibility.”ⁱⁱ

We choose the very separation that we bemoan.

The Pharisees are right: we who are welcomed by Jesus and seek to follow him are sinners.

But that’s not the whole story.

Along with all humankind, we are sinners who are sought out by God.

The long history of humankind and God is a story of hide-and-seek.

The book of Genesis tells of the human inclination to hide from a strikingly human God.

Look at the Holy One, the Creator, walking in the garden in the cool of the evening. At first this seems to be a childlike, if not naïve, picture of God. We might even wonder if God's arrival was announced by "Ready or not, here I come."

Yet this simple picture presents a profound understanding of how God chooses to enter into the life of the world and relate to the creatures. The Creator is not distant and removed. The Creator is intimately involved with creation. The Gardener cares for the garden and for everything and everyone in it.

It has been another day in Paradise. But something is not right.

In all of creation, the crown of creation is missing. The man and the woman are nowhere to be seen. Like children whose summertime baseball game has resulted in a broken window, they have run and hidden.

Then we hear what Genesis presents as God's first words spoken to the human race: "Where are you?"

What astonishing words! The All-knowing One asks a question. The Creator seeks the creature. It is the cry of the abandoned, the pleading of the lonely. It is the question of one who desires the presence of another.

"Where are you?"

When God asks a question, we do well to listen and consider it. "Where are you?" suggests a God who is not only puzzled but also loving, respecting us even in our fear and insecurity.

Knowing our sin, sensing our shame, for which nakedness is a symbol, we would hide from God. "But where," the Psalmist asks of God, "Where shall I flee from your presence?" Still the One who created us for life does not push, does not rip away the pathetic leaves of self-righteousness with which we try to cover ourselves.

In the cool of the day, in the gathering darkness, the God who lovingly seeks intimacy with us simply calls: "Where are you?"

When we hide—and we are very good at hiding—God seeks.

Jesus, too, tells of a seeking God.

He invites us to imagine a typical house in first century Palestine. A dirt floor, a small door, no windows. A woman with a small savings or dowry cannot find one of her ten coins. Each of those coins represents about a day's wage, so even ten of them don't amount to very much money. Still, to her this lost coin is of great value.

This woman brings a lamp into the dark room. She sweeps the floor, and searches diligently. When that one coin is found it is time to celebrate. She calls her friends and neighbors, saying, "Rejoice with me!"

Like that woman, God seeks and will not give up. Like her, God also finds pleasure when the search is over, when what is lost is found.

The searching of God is good news. Because God seeks, we are reminded that each life is of great value. If you are ready to give up on yourself, if it seems as though others have given up on you, remember that God has not given up—and God will not give up.

Elie Wiesel recounted the Hasidic tale of Rabbi Barukh's grandson, Yehiel, who came running into his study in tears.

"Yehiel, Yehiel, why are you crying?"

"My friend cheats!" he said. "It's unfair; he left me all by myself, that's why I am crying."

"Would you like to tell me about it?"

"Certainly, Grandfather. We played hide-and-seek, and it was my turn to hide and his turn to look for me. He gave up; he stopped looking. And that's unfair."

Rabbi Barukh began to caress Yehiel's face, and tears welled up in his eyes. "God too, Yehiel," he whispered softly. "God too is unhappy; God is hiding and we are not looking. Do you understand, Yehiel? God is hiding and we are not even searching for God."ⁱⁱⁱ

So, what about us? Are we still looking? Or have we, like Yehiel's friend, called off the search for God?

Let's be honest. Sometimes that search is difficult.

No doubt you can recall times when God seemed very good at hiding and very silent as well. Maybe that is your experience today. The world can be cruel and seemingly devoid of compassion. We acknowledge with pain and puzzlement those points in our lives when we seek and do not find, when we listen but do not hear.

It's easy to be discouraged.

Some have just given up the search—called off the game and gone home.

Lent is one of those times when we are reminded that there are several different places to begin, to restart, or to continue our search for God.

We might look in the well-known places. We can search for God in prayer and meditation, in worship.

The life of the spirit does not thrive on just one hour on Sunday morning—although this hour is certainly one of the most important of the week. Nor do we, by praying only occasionally discover the depths of our spirits and the God who waits to be found.

Venkayya, the first Dalit convert in the Church of South India prayed every day for three years: "O Great God, who are you? Where are you? Show yourself to me." This prayer speaks the same words to God that God spoke in Eden: "Where are you?"

This is a beautiful prayer. It is the prayer of a seeker who is willing to take time in the search. This kind of prayer does not promise instant success. It teaches us, instead, what one hymn calls "the patience of unanswered prayer."

We might turn once more to seek God in the world—to face the hunger and loneliness, the cruelty and violence, the hatred and poverty that surrounds us—in this city, this nation, this

planet—and cry out “Where are you?” And in crying out, perhaps we will discover that it is the crucified God who is present in the suffering of the world. And somehow, seeking that God might lead us to renew our efforts to make the world hurt a little less, to bring healing to the broken places, to seek as well the restoration of our own broken lives.

If we ask at work, at home, even here at church, “Where are you, God?” the answers will surprise us.

Searching for God calls us out beyond ourselves. For us as individuals and as a gathered congregation the search will involve us with great joy and great sorrow.

Trust the love that calls to you: “Where are you?”

Continue to ask of God: “Where are you?”

Remember the promise of Jesus, “Those who seek shall find.” Remember it with hope.

May we yet find the living God whom we seek.

May God continue to look for us in all our hiding.

And may there be great rejoicing when what is lost is found.

ⁱ Paul Tillich, “You Are Accepted,” in *The Shaking of the Foundations*

ⁱⁱ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, pg. 45-46.

ⁱⁱⁱ Elie Wiesel, *Somewhere a Master*, 1982. Quoted in *An Advent Sourcebook*.