

Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
Sunday, February 8, 2009
Rev. William L. Love

SEARCHING FOR JESUS

Isaiah 40:21-31
1 Corinthians 9:16-23
Mark 1:29-39

Some years ago, I was listening to public radio and heard that the last animal in the zoo in Sarajevo had died. As it is with zoos, the animals had been taken from their natural habitat where their instincts enable them to survive against their natural enemies in their environment and placed in an artificial environment where their instincts are superfluous. They are no longer threatened by natural dangers as in the wild, nor are they threatening. They have become a curiosity to the visitors at the zoo and wholly dependent upon their captors, who are now become their hosts.

The lions, tigers, eagles, and the rest died. No longer noble, they starved. Having held out as long as they could, they consumed their mates, devouring those closest to them. They only succeeded in postponing the inevitable. While the human beings around them fought and killed human beings, the animals starved.

The last animal to die was a bear. No longer fierce, his bearishness stripped from him, he too consumed his mate and, holding out the longest of all, starved to death.

The commentator said it would be easy to see the inhumanity of it all, but he feared that it was not inhumanity that caused it but humanity at its barest.

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The people who came to Jesus had come out of their desperate need: diseases they could not cure, demons they could not exorcise.

We get a glimpse of human need in all its desperation in Job. It had been, for Job, more than a bad day or an occasional case of the blues.

Have not human beings a hard service upon earth? he asks rhetorically. *I am allotted months of emptiness, and nights of misery are apportioned to me,* he said. *My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle and come to their end without hope. Remember that my life is a breath; my eye will never again see good.*

He had had a comfortable life. It would have been easy for him — as it is easy for us — to credit the good fortune to God's blessing, God's approval. And to leave it at that. To enjoy the comforts of that good life as a just reward.

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Piet Hein, a Scandinavian scientist, described the phenomenon this way:

*We haven't much imagination:
it even overstrains our powers
to see our neighbour's tribulation
as any real concern of ours.*

*We have too much imagination:
enough to credit, without fuss,
that all is well with all creation
whenever things are well with us.*

["Can You Imagine It?"]

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To enjoy the comforts of the good life as a just reward. And to measure ourselves by them.

We know that *we are worth more than what the world makes of us, [but] we keep giving eternal value to the things we own, the people we know, the plans we have, and the successes we "collect"*. [Nouwen, **Reaching Out**, 82]

It only takes a small disruption of our lives or a threat to our security to lay bare our illusions about our lives and our attachment to things and our dependence upon transient things for more than they can give.

And we can easily plunge into despair.

My days come to their end without hope, Job and we say. My eyes will never again see good.

And the despair of life — whatever its origin — is beyond our ability to provide remedy. Those who search for Jesus — including you and me — come out of a desperate human need.

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Jesus had gotten up early in the morning, before dawn, and had gone to a private place to pray. Simon and the others pursued him.

Thinking that it was good news, Simon blurted out: *Everyone is searching for you.*

And little wonder they searched for Jesus.

The day before — the Sabbath — Jesus had gone to Simon's house where his mother-in-law was sick. And Jesus healed her.

After sundown, when the Sabbath was over and people could get out and about, they brought to Jesus all who were sick or possessed with demons. And Jesus healed them.

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Everyone is searching for you, Simon said, fully expecting Jesus to go back to the city to receive the acclaim of the people.

Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there too, Jesus said, *for that is why I came out.*

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It seems a bit odd that Jesus would not return to those who were searching for him.

The crowds were seeking as well the one who could work miracles, who could do the spectacular.

I remember a story I read in college about a magician who amazed the crowd with a trick. The crowd came back for more. But they tired of the old trick. So the magician topped it. They tired of that one. So he did one more difficult than the one before — until his attempts to meet his need for popularity and the crowd's insatiable desire for something more spectacular led to this death. [Robert Coover, *Hat Trick*, **Pricksongs and Descants**]

Jesus would not be seduced by popularity or succumb to the crowd's desire for a miracle.

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Flannery O'Connor told of a similar crowd who had come to see a healing at the river. She wrote:

There were people standing on the near bank in a group, singing. Long tables were set up behind them and a few cars and trucks were parked in a road that came up by the river. ...

The preacher was standing about ten feet out in the stream where the water came up to his knees. He was a tall youth in khaki trousers that he had rolled up higher than the water. He had on a blue shirt and a red scarf around his neck but no hat and his light-colored hair was cut in sideburns that curved into the hollows of his cheeks. His face was all bone and red light

reflected from the river. He looked as if he might have been nineteen years old. He was singing in a high twangy voice, above the singing on the bank, and he kept his hands behind him and his head tilted back.

He ended the hymn on a high note and stood silent, looking down at the water and shifting his feet in it. Then he looked up at the people on the bank. They stood close together, waiting; their faces were solemn but expectant and every eye was on him. He shifted his feet again.

"Maybe I know why you come," he said in the twangy voice, "Maybe I don't.

"If you ain't come for Jesus, you ain't come for me. If you just come to see can you leave your pain in the river, you ain't come for Jesus. You can't leave your pain in the river," he said. "I never told nobody that." He stopped and looked down at his knees.

"I seen you cure a woman oncet!" a sudden high voice shouted from the hump of people. "Seen that woman git up and walk out straight where she had limped in!"

The preacher lifted one foot and then the other. He seemed almost but not quite to smile. "You might as well go home if that's what you come for," he said.

Then he lifted his head and arms and shouted, "Listen to what I got to say, you people! There ain't but one river and that's the River of Life, made out of Jesus' Blood. That's the river you have to lay your pain in, in the River of Faith, in the River of Life, in the River of Love, in the rich red river of Jesus' Blood, you people!"

His voice grew soft and musical. "All the rivers come from that one River and go back to it like it was the ocean sea and, if you believe, you can lay your pain in that River and get rid of it because that's the River that was made to carry sin. It's a River full of pain itself, pain itself, moving toward the Kingdom of Christ, to be washed away, slow, you people, slow as this here old red water river round my feet.

"Listen," he sang, "I read in Mark about an unclean man, I read in Luke about a blind man, I read in John about a dead man! Oh you people hear! The same blood that makes this River red, made that dead man leap! You people with trouble," he cried, "lay it in that River of Blood, lay it in that River of Pain, and watch it move away toward the Kingdom of Christ."

[Flannery O'Connor, *The River*, ***The Complete Stories***, 164-165]

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Jesus would not be diverted but would move on to preach in the next towns. He would move on to what would ultimately satisfy human need in all its desperation: for to meet human need requires more than a dazzling feat. Jesus moved on to the next towns until the town became Jerusalem. There he took human need and despair into himself on the cross.

That is the Jesus for whom we search. That is the Jesus who finds us.

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For us who have searched for and been found by Christ, for us who are healed and are healing, one question is: **How do we respond?**

The response of Simon's mother-in-law was service.

And Paul gives us some notion about how to offer our service.

Paul said: *To the Jews I became as a Jew..., to those outside the law I became as one outside the law. To the weak I became weak. I have become all things to all people.*

Taken at face value, one way of reading that passage makes Paul sound like a people-pleasing co-dependent practicing impression management in order to get approval or a con artist, a peddler hawking his wares.

But Paul also said to the Corinthians: *We are not, like so many, peddlers of God's Word.*
[2 Cor. 2:17]

Frederick Buechner talked about it this way: *Peddlers are people with packs on their backs full of things they want to sell, and the things they try to sell the hardest are the things they think will sell best. Peddlers are less concerned with what the world needs than with what the world wants or can be made to settle for. Peddlers are salespeople who are interested less in the quality of what they sell than in the success of their sale.* [Buechner, ***A Room Called Remember***, 47]

The movie ***The Big Kahuna*** takes place at the convention for those who buy and sell industrial lubricants. Two salesmen and one young man from R and D attend for their company. They are looking for the man, whose account can make their company's success for the year. The young man, who is also a born-again Christian, does meet him and later attends a private party with him. Instead of mentioning industrial lubricants, he asks a question to steer the conversation toward matters of faith and believes he has done the right thing.

Phil Cooper, one of the salesmen, says to him: *It doesn't matter whether you're selling Jesus or Buddha or civil rights or 'How to Make Money in Real Estate With No Money Down.' That doesn't make you a human being; it makes you a marketing rep. If you want to talk to somebody honestly, as a human being, ask him about his kids. Find out what his dreams are - just to find out, for no other reason. Because as soon as you lay your hands on a conversation to steer it, it's not a conversation anymore; it's a pitch. And you're not a human being; you're a marketing rep.*

In the ensuing conversation, the matter of character comes up, Phil Cooper tells him that, in his opinion, the young man doesn't have character, because he doesn't regret anything.

The young man asks, Are you saying I won't have character until I've done something I regret?

No, Phil Cooper says, *I'm saying you've already done plenty of things to regret, you just don't know what they are. It's when you discover them, when you see the folly in something you've done, and you wish that you had it do over, but you know you can't, because it's too late. So you pick that thing up, and carry it with you to remind you that life goes on, the world will spin without you, you really don't matter in the end. Then you will gain character, because honesty will reach out from inside and tattoo itself across your face.*

Peddlers of God's Word when it comes speaking of faith in a general way...tend...to speak of it whatever is easiest to speak and whatever...will go down most easily. ... If we get more personal about it, we speak of problems we've had.... We may tell stories about ourselves...but not, for the most part, our real stories, not stories about what lies beneath all our other problems, which is the problem of being human, the problem of trying to hold fast somehow to Christ when much of the time, both in ourselves and in our world, it is as if Christ had never existed. Because all peddlers of God's word have that in common...: they tell what costs them the least to tell and what will gain them the most; and to tell the story of who we really are, and of the battle...between belief and unbelief, between sin and grace that is waged within us all, costs plenty and may not gain us anything...but an uneasy silence and a fishy stare. [Buechner, ***A Room Called Remember***, 47-48]

What Paul calls us to do is to enter into the experience of those who are searching for life — to listen to them tell their story, to understand who they are and what they need. It costs plenty to do it. Because we will listen to their pain. And that may arouse in us the memory of our own pain — some of which may be so fresh that they still hurt — some of which we may be trying to keep secret, perhaps especially from ourselves.

To become as the weak to understand the weak is also, by the grace of God, to open up to God's Word for the weak — and perhaps to be able to speak an authentic word of God's saving

power. Perhaps to hear that saving word as a word spoken to us as well.

We are those who search for Jesus and our lives are filled with people who need to see such glimpses as we have seen of Christ.

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We — all of us — share the problem of being human and trying to hold fast somehow to Christ. We — all of us — share the capacity, through intent or neglect, to devour those closest to us and let our humanity starve *and* the capacity to be moved by the passing of animals in a zoo and the pain of those around us.

So we search and find a crucified and risen Savior. And maybe also a river (or something like it).

There is but one river and that's the River of Life. That's the River you can lay your pain in, and watch it move away toward the Kingdom of Christ.

It costs us plenty, though it cost Christ more. And it is tiring.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God [who] gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.