

## Searching for Orioles and a Dove

Although I have set my preaching theme for these days between Easter and Pentecost as "Days of Wonder," the individual sermons are not predetermined. I'm not sure from week to week what I will be preaching or where the sermon starters are going to come from. Last week I was browsing through a "Birds and Blooms" outdoor decor magazine, and read about a bird-watcher trying to locate a Baltimore Oriole in his backyard Poplar tree. The man could hear the Oriole's call but he couldn't catch a glimpse of the bird. But then, one day, he was just sitting on his deck minding his own business, and the Oriole came and sat right front of him on the deck rail. He couldn't find the bird when he was looking for it, but when he wasn't looking, it surprised him by just showing up. The bird he became visible, but it was on the bird's discretion not his.

In these days of wonder between Easter and Pentecost, we are looking for encounters with the risen Christ. Certainly, we see evidence that He is near. To my way of thinking every newborn baby bird and every resurrected leaf and flower in springtime are testimonies that He has conquered death. As I held the babies in the Dedication Service this morning, and counted their tiny but perfectly formed fingers and toes, I saw further evidence of His ongoing work. Every time I enter into this sanctuary and watch you come in on Sunday morning and can hear and feel the Spirit rising among us, I know that Jesus is alive. When I see lives that have been changed and marriages that have been saved and bodies that have been healed through His love, I know He is near. Whenever I read His word and suddenly feel my heart stirred and my mind opened to understand some new facet of His truth and grace, I bear witness to His living presence.

Still, I want more of Him. I want to catch a clearer vision. I want to feel His touch. I want to be more certain of His leading. I'm ever hungry for a fresh encounter with the Holy Spirit. Interestingly enough, the Holy Spirit is pictured in Scripture as a bird, a dove, and is described as the wind. As such, He is good at hiding from our sight and then coming and making His presence felt when we least expect it. John 3:8 says, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

The resurrected Jesus appeared, disappeared, appeared,

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and disappeared to His disciples. The Holy Spirit comes and goes like the wind. God is dependable in His goodness and love but not to be put in a box. He likes to surprise us. He values a good game of hide and seek.

But then again, maybe it's not so much God hiding from us as us hiding from Him. The original story of hide and seek that we see in the Bible comes from Genesis 3:1-9. Here we are told how Eve was deceived by the serpent's lie and how she and Adam ate the forbidden fruit. Verses 7-9 tell us what happened next: "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"

Thinking back to the Easter story we discover that the followers of Jesus had difficulty seeing their risen Savior because their eyes were clouded over with tears of grief. The disciples had difficulty seeing Him because they were hiding behind closed doors of fear. Some had difficulty believing the reports of His resurrection because they were too caught up in discussing their own versions of what had happened to Him.

Here in the Genesis account, Adam and Eve, in their shame of being in the possession of stolen knowledge, try to hide their bodies behind fig leaves. In their fear of punishment, they try to hide themselves among the trees of the garden. Other stories come to mind. Jonah tried to run away to a distant land and hides from God in the hold of the ship he sailed in. Elijah tried to hide from his calling in a cave. After denying Jesus, Peter tried to hide from Him by returning to his former profession of fishing.

And in all of these stories, we find a common theme: People are trying to hide from God and God is seeking for them. They hide from God because they are ashamed of what they've done. They hide from God because they are afraid of punishment. They hide from God to escape His calling and plan for their lives. They hide from God because they are too self-absorbed to see Him. They hide from God because they refuse to give up their illusion of being able to control their own destinies. They hide from God because they fear the dangers of following Him.

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So, perhaps the most important questions I can ask of myself and of all of us this morning are these: What keeps us from seeing God's glory and hearing His voice more clearly in our lives? Is He hiding from us or are we hiding from Him? And, if perchance, we know we are hiding and are tired of hiding, what do we need to do to allow ourselves to be found? How can we position ourselves for an encounter with Jesus Christ this morning?

I think maybe the first movement toward positive change in our lives is most always a holy discontent with where we are. The Israelites were willing to leave Egypt for the Promised Land because they were tired of being treated as slaves in Egypt. The early disciples left their fishing boats to follow Jesus because He offered them the chance to become something more--fishers of men. The crippled man by the pool of Bethesda was tired of being an invalid for 38 years. Saul of Tarsus was tired of persecuting the Church of God. When God is calling us to find Him and to join Him in reaching others for the kingdom, He will cause us to become dissatisfied with our current situation. He will cause us to desire something more. If you are looking for an encounter with Christ or for a fresh encounter with Him today, then pay attention to your feelings of discontent. Don't ignore such feelings. Don't try to hide from them or put them off. It's a good bet that God is calling to you; He's calling you to come to Him, calling you to find a new purpose in serving Him. He's calling you out of your present dead end existence into something new and full of life. **When the waters of our lives are troubled, it may be that God is stirring the pond.**

It seems to me that the first movement toward finding God and/or letting God find us is to pay attention to the holy discontent He places in our hearts. A second way of positioning ourselves with an encounter with Jesus Christ is to believe and embrace the good news that He speaks to us as found in the Bible. In our Scripture reading this morning from I Corinthians 15:1-3, we read Paul's words, "Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. . ." In Galatians 1:3-4, Paul says, "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age,

according to the will of our God and Father."

This is an essential word for those of us who may be hiding from God because of guilt, shame, and deep feelings of unworthiness. Hear this clearly: Christ died for your sins; Jesus Christ gave Himself for your sins. Please understand: It doesn't matter what evil you know you've done or how you believe you have failed; this is the reason Jesus came and this is the reason Jesus died on that cross. He came and gave His life to bring you out of hiding and to break down the wall of separation between you and His love for you. John 3:17 says, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

I think I've told you before about our scaredy cat Alfie. The only thing we can figure is that he was traumatized as a kitten before we got him. We think this must be the case because he is so easily sent into hiding. If we look at him wrong or approach him too abruptly, he runs away and hides. If someone new comes to the door he runs away and hides. When it's time for his monthly flea and tick protection to be applied, he runs away and hides. For whatever reason, Alfie has a hard time trusting people. Sometimes he hurts himself by trying to get away from us or puts himself in discomfort by staying outside in the cold under the garage all night because he can't bring himself to trust us. And all the time, all we want to do is feed him, protect him from harm, pet him, and love him. If he could just bring himself to relax in our presence, he could save himself a world of aggravation. If we could bring ourselves to accept God's love we would save ourselves a world of aggravation.

**God does not seek to shame or punish us. He comes to forgive, to cleanse, and save us. He comes to give us abundant and everlasting life. Thanks be to God!**

To position ourselves for an encounter or for a fresh encounter with the Lord, we need to pay attention to our holy discontent and we need to believe and embrace the good news given us in Jesus Christ. A third thing we need to do to position ourselves to experience an ongoing encounter with Jesus, is to live our lives in Him and join with Him in His ongoing mission to the world. Paul says in I Corinthians 15:9 & 10, "For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not

without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them--yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me."

The very moment we receive the gift of Christ into our lives, we are called to show and tell of His grace and love to others. In Luke 19:10 Jesus says, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." Then in Luke 24:46-49, the resurrected Christ says to His followers: "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

What I would have us see here is that the companionship of the Holy Spirit is for the purpose, not only to comfort, teach, and guide us in our personal lives; but, He is also given to empower us in reaching out to others. The grace that God breathes into us is not to be a stagnant pond but a living fountain or stream, welling up within us and flowing from us into all the world. Jesus told His disciples in Matthew 28 to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. At the same time He also said, "and surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

The message is very clear. If we want to know the living presence of Christ in our lives on a continual basis, there is only one way to activate that: we need to commit ourselves to His mission of seeking and saving lost people. The Spirit will flow into our lives and overflow only as we give the good news of Christ to others. We are not meant to bottle Him up like a genie in a lamp. We are meant to share Him. **To stifle the word is to grieve the Spirit. To let the Spirit flow through us is to gain more.**

Beloved, is there a stirring and a hunger in your life this morning? If so, turn your heart to Jesus Christ and believe He has died for your sins and receive His forgiveness. Make a commitment to share the Good News and His love with others every day. Be continually filled with the Holy Spirit.

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Genesis 3:1-9; I Corinthians 15:1-11

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