

**Sermon: Proper 18, Year B. September 9, 2018**  
**Church of the Ascension, Chicago**  
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When we think about the way our spiritual and religious life develops, we tend toward the idea that the primarily spiritual activity is our own searching for God. We think that it is up to us to be in a relationship with God - we need to pray more, to read the scriptures more, to attend Mass more. We need to be a better person, as ways to deepen our relationship with God. We tend to think that the initiative is primarily ours.

This point of view is neither the witness of scripture, nor it is central to the catholic and protestant tradition. The Scriptures and the tradition presents our primary activity as response, not initiative.

At the center of the Christian faith, is the belief that it is God who takes the primary initiative, who is continually searching for us.

The very first question that God asks humankind in the bible, occurs right after Adam has bitten into the proverbial apple, and he and Eve are in hiding in shame. The question that God asks in the serenity of the Garden is “where are you?” God is continually asking that question of us throughout our entire lives.

The human and divine drama depicted in the Bible is actually a story of our fleeing from God and God’s pursuit of us.

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 mist of tears  
I hid from Him, . . .

So goes the poem *The Hound of Heaven*, by Francis Thompson. As the hound follows the hare, so does God follow the fleeing soul. And though in brokenness we often try to hide from God, divine grace continually seeks us out.

The heart of the Christian Gospel is God’s overcoming that separation, that brokenness, of God’s deep desire to heal the sad alienation experienced by humankind. The alienation symbolically represented in the story of Adam and Eve.

The proverbial apple, the forbidden fruit, is but an empty idol. Yet we reach for it, out of our fear for the future, and place our trust in the things that do not endure. The apple rots, and so do all the earthly sustenance it represents. Our continual choice of the apple leads us down a path where we find ourselves destitute, alone, cast out, without resources, and far from home.

But that is not the end of the story. As St. Luke so potently puts it in his parable of the prodigal son, we humans have the capacity to “come to ourselves”, that is, to self-reflect, in the midst of our alienation, to get up and begin the journey home.

As we begin that journey, we encounter a God, who not only has instilled in us, this capacity for self-reflection and longing for God, but who has never ceased comding the horizon for us, searching for us, and who greets us upon our return with open arms and without recrimination.

God’s way of searching for us and of welcoming us is manifested in the advent of Jesus. The coming of Jesus is God’s way not only of providing us with a companion on the treacherous journey home, but of providing us someone who has already made that journey before us, and thus knows the way, and who also provides us with the means to make the journey in the first place. We encounter in Christ, a God who takes the journey with us.

The point of our earthly pilgrimage is to arrive safely home, to return and celebrate in God’s remarkable undoing of Adam’s fall, to participate in the fulfilment of our deepest desire, the great re-union of God and humankind.

There is more of course, than just arriving home. The journey itself changes us. Through God’s healing grace we grow from strength to strength into the likeness of Christ, we learn who we truly are as children of God, and we learn that in Christ, we are in one another’s keeping. We learn that loving God and finding our fulfilment in God, is also about finding our fulfilment in the care of one another.

This is the short story of our redemption. We saw it represented symbolically and sacramentally in the baptism of Aimee Nevarez last Sunday.

One of the ways the healing message of our home coming story is often imparted to us in the Scriptures is in the miracles of Jesus. Time and time again we find Jesus going about healing the sick and even raising the dead. In the Gospel of Mark alone there are twenty-two miracles – like the one in today’s Gospel reading, the healing of the deaf and mute. (Mark 7:31–37).

As we reflect on the miracles, we will need to remember that the sickness that is healed there, is a sickness that returns. Even Lazarus, born anew from the dead, must die again, as we all must. There is no miracle proclaimed in the Gospels that in itself is the core of the good news proclaimed there.

I am not for a moment suggesting the miracles did not happen. I am suggesting however, that whatever happened in the miracles, the truth contained in the miracle is beyond the miracle itself.

The miracles are signs, pointing to something beyond themselves, to the transformation that is possible in Christ. Indeed, these gospel miracles all point to the one miracle, the all-important miracle, the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is there, in that particular action of God, that particular way of God’s seeking us out, that the core miracle is found.

It is so easy for us to misunderstand the miracles, as the disciples in Mark did. We can easily miss the forest for the trees. It is for this reason that Jesus pleads for everyone present not to broadcast the miracle.

The power of Jesus is not as a wonder worker, but as a worker of the healing of the nations. The miracle of Jesus is not the healing of a particular human, but the healing of the whole of humankind.

As N.T. Wright, the former Bishop of Durham puts it:

*"Healing, then, and perhaps healing now (though we don't always realize it), can never be simply a matter of correcting a few faults in the machine called the human body. It always was and is, and perhaps supremely so in Jesus' actions, a sign of God's love breaking in to the painful and death-laden present world. It was and is a pointer to the great Healing that will occur when the secret is out, when Jesus is finally revealed to the whole world, and our present stammering praise is turned into full-hearted song."*

As we attempt to understand the miracles in this way, what can we take away from the miracle in this morning's Gospel?

We might consider that the Gospel challenges us to hear and to speak, what needs to be heard and what needs to be said.

We too can be deaf – deaf to the initiative of God, of many voices of God calling us homeward. The healing of our own deafness might mean really listening deeply to ourselves and to one another, and hear the desire for wholeness, the yearning for intimacy in our own inner circle, and the need for peace in the world.

We might also begin to hear God seeking us, calling out to us, through a vision of the world, that suggests there are things and people more precious than our own concerns.

We can hear the word of God but not put it into practice, not proclaim it, not give voice to it; We can receive the Eucharist but not really be nourished by it in ways that energizes us to reach out to one another. We can take this time here and now to ask God to open our ears and loosen our tongues so that we can hear his life-giving words and speak openly the good news in Christ in a world so desperate for healing.