

July 3, 2022 Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Genesis 12:1-4, John 1:43-51

"Finding God: On the Journey"

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When I go to a restaurant I like to have a plan. There is no walking in and being surprised by what is on the menu, making some dinner choice on the spur of the moment. Before arriving at the restaurant I will have perused the menu online, debated salads, and weighed entrée options. My wife, Marta, is mildly bemused by all of this. Like a normal person, she is happy to walk into a restaurant, read the menu, and make a choice on the spot. I like to have a plan. If I go on a vacation I like to know where I am staying each night, where I will be eating, what sites I will be seeing.

These texts from Genesis and John this morning are a nightmare to me. In the passage from Genesis, Abram, soon to be Abraham, is called upon by God to leave behind his country, his kindred, and his father's house. In return he is promised blessings beyond his imagination. But Abram is given no set of directions as to where he is headed, no description of the land he is being offered. To receive the blessing, he has to just go, just leave behind all he knows for whatever may be to come.

In the passage from John, Jesus finds Philip and beckons to him, "Follow me." And then Philip finds Nathanael and tells him that the Messiah has been found and he is from Nazareth. When Nathanael doubts that the Messiah could be from a backwater like Nazareth, Philip does not try to defend his claim in any way.

He offers no qualifications, no tangible evidence, no proof whatsoever. He solely says, "Come and see."

If I were Abram or Nathanael I am not so sure I would be so quick to accept the invitation. I would like a little preview of what is to come. Before I pack my bags how about a map of this vague Promised Land of which you speak? Can I get a copy of this Jesus of Nazareth's curricula vitae before I agree to come and meet him? But, alas, with these two offers, no previews were forthcoming.

The reality is if you want to receive the blessings; if you want to learn who Jesus is; you have to start the journey before you know where the journey will take you. This is the first in a sermon series of "Finding God (or how God finds us)." And this is an apt starting point for the conversation of the ways in which God can be revealed to us.

It has been said that any time we walk out our front door we should realize that we will never return the same. Heraclitus said, "You never step in the same river twice." Nothing stays the same, including ourselves. We never truly know what awaits us as we make a variety of journeys in our lives. The old Yiddish proverb still speaks truth, "We plan. God laughs." As this is true in all aspects of our live, it is particularly true in our journey of faith.

We do not make the first step toward God because our questions have been answered and our outcomes are assured. We take the first hesitant step because we have an inkling of a thought or a whisper of a hope that there just might be something or someone greater than us out there in the universe. Perhaps we do it because we know we are in need of something in our lives and nothing else has quite filled this void. Perhaps

we do it because we have just enough curiosity to wonder. Perhaps we lean over a bit too far trying to capture a peek of something and we can only regain our balance by taking a step. Perhaps some event or person gives us a gentle push from behind and we have no choice but to step forward. Whatever it is for each of us, there is some tipping point that nudges us from standing in place to a forward motion in search of the divine.

And this motion gets us to pick up a Bible, or mumble a prayer, or even show up for worship on a Sunday in July of all things! None of this means we have figured out all of who Jesus is or understand exactly what God means for our lives. But we have taken a step closer to finding out. However if we merely stand in this very spot and become self-satisfied that we have read our Bible, or prayed, or shown up for worship, we may have received a single grainy snap shot of who the divine may be but we have not found God.

As the title of a book by Rabbi David Cooper states, *God is a Verb*. God is not an object to be grasped. Rather God is a force to be followed. Whether we have taken a single tentative step on a journey toward God or have walked for mile upon mile in search of God there is no final destination in this life where we can stop moving and have some fulsome understanding of the divine.

There is an old Hasidic tale that describes this phenomenon. As is the case in many of these stories, the very wise Rabbi, the Baal Shem Tov, figures prominently.

"More than anything, the Baal Shem Tov was known for his compassion and lovingkindness. One day one of his disciples approached him and dared to ask a question that had been troubling him. He dared to ask because it was a question that

anyone other than the Baal Shem might have construed as sacrilegious. But the Baal Shem understood the question arose as much from faith as from doubt.

"'Forgive me, Rebbe,' the disciple said, 'but there is something that has been bothering me. I know we are taught that God is always near, closer to us than our own shadows. But I must confess to you that there are times when the Infinite One seems to be infinitely far. Can you help me with this?'

"The Baal Shem thought for a moment and then replied, 'Have you ever watched a father teach his child how to walk? For a while he will hold the toddler by the hand and walk by his side, guiding and encouraging him every step of the way. But there comes a time when the father will let go, so that the little fellow may try to walk on his own toward him. It may be frightening at first, but soon they give each other a loving embrace, and then the father moves back again. Each time the child steps toward his father by himself he learns to walk a little better.' (Patterson, pp. 300-301)

Throughout this sermon I have spoken of us taking that first step toward God. But of course the first and each and every subsequent step we take toward the divine does not begin with us. It is God indeed inviting us forward. It is God nudging us. Encouraging us to wonder. Enticing us to lean over and be pulled ahead. And wherever we are on this journey, from someone reading the Bible for the first time or someone who has spent a lifetime studying scripture and worshipping God, the invitations continue. And the choice is ours whether to follow or not.

When Nathanael decides to follow Jesus he sees him turn water into wine. He could have stopped following there and he

would have had a story about a man who performed a party trick. Nathanael could have stopped following Jesus after he healed the royal official's young son and he would have known Jesus was a healer. But Nathanael followed Jesus all the way to the cross and beyond and he truly learned the meaning of those words that so blithely burst forth from him, "You are the Son of God!"

When Abram is invited to receive his great blessing he is called to leave behind all that he knows for what he is yet to know. God does not invite us to what we already know. God invites us to what is beyond what we understand in this moment. The theologian Thomas Moore says it like this, "God...cannot find a way through the sieve of our certainties." Only by acknowledging that we have much to learn are we open to receiving more of whom God is into our midst.

By the very unlimited nature of who God is, God is always to be found beyond the boundaries of what we know. So how do we continue on this journey? First we acknowledge that the risk is worth the reward. Abram and his wife Sarai gave up nearly everything they had because they recognized the vast scope of what was being offered to them. The potential for blessing was too great to squander it by sitting still. By taking the risk to leave behind our certainties, we have much to be gained.

We also need to be reminded that although we may be stepping into the unknown, it is not unknown to God. God knows every step of the journey each of us is on. And God knows us better than we know ourselves. When Nathanael accepts the invitation to "Come and see" he is greeted by Jesus, who already knows who he is.

Knowing of the blessings God can bestow upon us; trusting in the deep ways we are known by God; let us encourage each

other to continue to accept invitations to step into what is yet to be known.

Come and see this Jesus of Nazareth. Come and see the one who turns water into wine. Come and see the one who heals. Come and see the one whose love defeats even death. Come and see. Let the journey continue.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Cooper, David, *God is a Verb*, Riverhead Books, New York. 1997.

Patterson, David, *Greatest Jewish Stories*, Jonathan David Publishers, New York, 2001.