

Searching for the Face of God

Part Four of “The Path of the Disciple”

Throughout this summer worship series, we have hoped to stir some excitement about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. We’ve been honest about the difficulty but also considered some of the joys that come with following this path. This final part of the series is in some ways a pinnacle. The community that gathers for worship is reminded that we are indeed following a God who is at work in the world. We are seeking signs of God’s presence as we live and work in a hurting yet beautiful world around us. There is no more difficult but ultimately joyous exercise than that.

Whether you call them “God-sightings” or “glory moments,” being alert to the presence of God is a fundamental requirement for the disciple. Some might even argue that it is these discovery moments that keep us going on the pathway to discipleship. They are oases or rest stops along the way that refresh us and remind us that we are not alone and that we do have strength for the journey.

What this series has not done, however, was lay out a specific plan for your local church to design its own intentional discipleship system. We couldn’t. Each community must find the path that fits its context and uses the gifts of the people and the leadership of the local congregation. If you have a plan in place, then this summer has been a boost to keeping folks going in that process. If you don’t have such a plan and need help getting going, then here is a good place to start: <https://www.seeallthepeople.org>. There are tools and guidance here to help any congregation take seriously the call to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” You could also go to our main website: <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org> and type “developing a discipleship system” into the search function and find all kinds of articles to answer your questions and give you areas of focus as well as sample systems from other congregations to help you develop your own discipleship pathway.

Whether you are just beginning to chart your disciple-making path or you are well-versed in the ways to help church members become disciples, a vital reminder for all is that we are seeking the face of God in the world in which we live and work. At the same time, we begin to realize that for our neighbors and friends, we may become the face of God for them.

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost - Wrestling with Our Hunger

August 6, 2023

[Gen 32:22-31](#), [Ps 17:1-7, 15](#), [Matthew 14:13-21](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

Many years ago, there was a television commercial that began with the line, "What are you hungry for when you don't know what you're hungry for?" A powerful question to be sure. I think their answer was crackers. But the question itself seems deeper and more profound than that. Advertising often tries to take spiritual hungers and offer physical solutions because they have something to sell, but it leaves us unsatisfied in the end. So, what are we hungry for? That's the question we're wrestling with this week; pardon the pun.

So, what should our worship contain as we consider what we are hungry for? Confession? Well, certainly, confession is always appropriate for worship. But what are we confessing? Our hungers? That is part of being human; we are made to be hungry. The confession might center around how we respond to these hungers and which hungers we choose to try and meet. Remember, Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matt 5:6). So, maybe our confession ought to include the fact that we aren't hungry enough. Or that we let our hungers for righteousness and justice be satisfied with something less than justice for all. Or that we concentrate on physical hunger because that is always easier to meet than the deeper needs that people have, which might require more from us than we really want to give.

Worship is where we can announce that we are hungry for God. We come and call upon the Lord to meet us in worship, to fill us, and send us out into the world full of that presence and that hope. Worship this week can be a reminder that we are seeking the face of God when we gather but also when we scatter. Our hunger for God is not only met when we gather for worship but also when we are at work, when we are in fellowship, when we engage in conversations and build relationships, when we serve and love as we are sent to do. Let the benediction not be an end of our searching, but an invitation to carry the search for God's presence beyond the walls of the church.

PREACHING NOTES

I've always found Jacob's wrestling at Jabbok's Ford a sad story, and not just because of the limping thing. We'll get back to that in a moment. For now, we need to back up and remember what brought Jacob to this lonely riverbank wrestling match.

If you recall, Jacob ran away from home, urged on by his mother and encouraged by his father, because he had stolen the blessing that was rightly due to his brother, Esau. And Esau didn't take it well. To say the least. So, Jacob high-tailed it out of town. He headed off to some cousins in the swinging town of *Paddam-aram*.

Jacob did well there and now he is heading back with wives and concubines and children galore, but also livestock and servants and more wealth than anyone could shake a stick at. And least that is what Jacob hopes, since the last time he saw his brother - in the rearview mirror - he was shaking big sticks. So, he's come back to show that he is a bigger man than he was. He has done well, which must mean God is blessing him. And if God is blessing him, then surely Esau could too.

Our passage begins "The same night..." It was the same day as the setting aside of what is essentially a bribe for Esau. He is sending ahead a gift so overwhelming that no one could stay mad at the giver. Again - at least Jacob hopes.

So, he sends off the bribe - I mean the gift. And then he sends his wives and children on ahead so that he can sit and contemplate his fate all night long. And a man, says the story, a man wrestled with him all night long. Who is this man? It doesn't really say - clearly anyway. Oh, we look at the words this mysterious man says when he renamed Jacob "You have striven with God..." And we say it must have been God; Jacob wrestled with God. Others say that it was a representative of God, an angel who wrestled Jacob there on Jabbok's Ford.

The story says, "a man. And the naming says, "You have striven with God and humans and have prevailed." *And with humans*. What if it wasn't God after all? Or what if this representative was someone Jacob knew, which is why he needed to get away before the sun came up? What if it was Esau who had come to help Jacob work through things? What if God sent Esau to his brother and let him bring a blessing?

Crazy, I know. But if you read on, you see that Esau is in a much better place than Jacob is, at least in terms of spirit and inner peace. So, maybe. But I don't really mean to contradict centuries of biblical interpretation.

I remember returning from serving as chaplain to a weeklong choir camp. I came back on a spiritual high but was physically worn out. I was blessed but exhausted. And my blessings came to me through the means of many brothers and sisters in the faith. But they cost something, time and energy and effort. No, I'm not talking about a transaction, about buying our blessings. I'm talking about the reality that blessings don't usually come to us when we are reclining at our ease. Instead, we sense blessings when we expend ourselves, when we pour ourselves out

in service, when we engage in some effort, and yeah, sometimes it feels like wrestling with the very ones we are trying to serve, the very ones who will bless us if we keep at it—if, like Jacob, we refuse to let go. Despite the pain, despite the struggle, despite the sapping of energy, we hold on for the blessing. And it will come. That's part of the promise and the hope. That's part of the joy and the peace.

Now, there doesn't seem to be any wrestling in the story of the feeding of the five thousand in Matthew's Gospel. And isn't it odd that we call it the feeding of the five thousand when the text clearly says there were "five thousand men, besides women and children"? Besides? Of course, it would be hard to count the total; the math would be beyond us without more information. Did most of the men come alone and only some women and children? Or was the crowd actually mostly women and children, and the men were the minority? In which case, it could have been the feeding of the fifteen thousand! But that's pure speculation, I suppose. At least we could have called it the feeding of the five thousand, plus. That way we could acknowledge that there were others there.

What we're wrestling with here are our presuppositions or our prejudices. That's never an easy exercise. Perhaps the more important wrestling happening in this story is the disciples wrestling with responsibility. Send them away so they can take care of their own hunger, they say (v.15). A proper response, it would seem to most of us. Give them space to deal with their own needs. In our individualistic culture, that is the way we have of honoring everyone's freedom.

Jesus has a different response. You might even say that he tells the disciples to not let go of the hungry ones until they have blessed you. Is that assuming too much? Or should it be that the hungry ones won't let go until they get the blessing that they want and need? Or a both/and kind of situation? Where is the blessing? How is the blessing shared? That's one of those abiding questions before us as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Another question is, "Will this cost us?" We can clearly see that it will. That is the disciples' fear. We don't have enough; we couldn't possibly meet this need. Jesus asks them and us to think again. We may limp before we have finished wrestling with this problem, but maybe the blessing is woven into the limping. Or maybe the limping becomes a sign of the blessing.

We can't help but hear chapter 25 of Matthew as we read this story. Like Jacob who believed he saw the face of God in his struggle, we are reminded that in meeting the needs of the hungry before us, we are also seeing that face. As we do it to those who some consider the least of these, the ones who can't pay you back, the ones who haven't earned their bread and fish but just receive it and, surprisingly, share it, we do it to him. The one we follow is right there before us. Roll up your sleeves, wrestling is about to begin again.

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost - What Are You Seeking?

August 13, 2023

[Gen 37:1-4, 12-28](#); [Matthew 14:22-33](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

A continuation from the week before. Last week, we asked, “What drives us from within? What are we hungry for? This week, we ask, “What is before us; what is the vision toward which we move?” Now, we ask not just what does God look like or how do we recognize God’s presence in the world, but what would the world look like when it is aware of that presence? What would we look like, what would our community look like if we really believed what we say about Jesus and about grace and salvation? How would it be reflected in our relationships, in our conversations, and in our lives day by day?

When we ask, “What are you seeking?” we are talking about kingdom living. We are talking about the community of faith representing the body of Christ. As we worship this week, we celebrate the signs of God’s presence among us. We lift up our acceptance, our hospitality, our fellowship, and our service to the wider community. We give God thanks that we can be and are a sign that God is at work in the world.

At the same time, we confess that there are times when we fall short of that ideal. We ask forgiveness for those we have not made welcome in our midst, for the brothers and sisters we have feared or ignored around us and even within us. What voices are silenced by how we conduct our worship and how we have arranged our learning and growing in faith? We ask God to open our eyes to our shortcomings and blind spots, even as we rejoice in the hope that lives within us.

How do you cast the vision for what you can be as the body of Christ? Who will cast that vision? Maybe leading up to this week in worship, the team could canvas different populations of the church and ask who they are longing to be. Ask the children and the youth; ask the older adults and families. Ask the singles and the young people; ask the immigrants and the long-term residents. What is the picture that emerges as you seek to describe the church that you are becoming? We can lift up these dreams and visions and ask for God’s blessing and direction as we continue to seek the face of God in our midst.

PREACHING NOTES

My older brother, Hank, was, and still is for that matter, the strong, handsome, athletic one of the family. I hated him. No, just kidding. I never hated him. I was jealous of him. Tried to be like him. Wished I was him from time to time. But I never could be and have learned to live with that. Most of the time.

The truth is we got along pretty well, most of the time. He was a good guy and has become a good man, caring, committed, service minded, and an asset to his church and community. But there were moments, usually when I was twisting in his grip, fighting against his muscle and knowing there was no hope of escape unless I could somehow make him laugh; moments when his “gotcha” was unnerving, to say the least. Unnerving. Where did that word come from? It was frustrating, humiliating, painful, embarrassing, and a whole lot more. Any of you who had older siblings know what I mean. Momentary, to be sure, fleeting experiences, a bad taste in the mouth that you can wash away with a thousand better memories. Not the dominant motif of our relationship, by any means, but real. Real enough to make Joseph’s story that much more credible.

There are many dimensions of the Joseph story in the book of Genesis. But the one that leaped out at me this time was the family dynamic. One preacher once said, “Show me one well-adjusted family relationship in the Bible.” Jacob and his boys put the “fun” in “dysfunctional.” The way Joseph is introduced into the story makes you shake your head. Talk about getting off on the wrong foot!

The story of Joseph begins with him as a tattletale, and it gets worse from there. It ends with him being thrown into a pit, then sold or stolen (it gets a little vague in the telling) and carted off to Egypt. Now, that is an extreme fraternal “gotcha.” It is such a messy story that we are tempted to jump ahead to the end to see if there is a rainbow after this storm. There is, but that is cheating, it seems to me. It is cheating because some family stories don’t end well. Some family symphonies don’t resolve in the final chords. So, if we get to an “all’s well that ends well” kind of message, what about all the others?

To add to the problems, the God who has been amazingly present so far and will be again is absent in this story. There are no messages in the night, no calls to accountability, no wagging of divine fingers, or sending of glittering angels with flaming swords to sort it all out. There is just emptiness and a growing gap between brothers. So, what’s left in this story?

A search for peace? Verse 4 says that the brothers “could not speak peaceably” to Joseph. But then Jacob, winner of the clueless dad of the year, sends Joseph off to “see if it is well with your brothers” (37:14). Speaking peaceably and being well are both forms of the word, “shalom.” There was a constant search for peace, even when peace eluded them, even when peace was rejected.

We tend to think that God is where peace reigns. The end of this story tells us that this is true. But this part of the story of Joseph and his brothers tells us that God is in the search for peace, even when it isn't found, even when it seems far away. God is in the search, in the effort, in the longing for shalom. That's what Joseph means much later - years later - when he says to his brothers, "What you intended for harm, God intended for good" (Gen. 50:20). God was in the search, in the attempt to find the way to shalom. Even when it is not realized in this life, in these relationships, we continue to search. We continue to hope.

This means, I guess, that even in the midst of our struggles with brothers (or sisters, parents, or neighbors) and when we are feeling the sting of their "gotcha, "underneath it all, God has a "gotcha" too. Even in the struggle, God says, "I gotcha, never doubt my beloved child, never doubt."

That is a word that Peter desperately needed to hear as he sank into the waves. Ok, you've read this one before. You might even have your own sermons already worked out for this passage. I don't blame you. But before you go off in your own direction, I've got a couple of questions for you: "First, did Jesus want Peter to get out of the boat? And then was the reprimand about Peter's lack of faith really because he couldn't walk on water?"

Most of the time, I hear sermons - and may have even preached sermons - on this text with the tagline to keep your eyes upon Jesus. This is a familiar theme in the New Testament. Paul tells us to keep our eyes on the prize that is the upward call of Christ Jesus our Lord. The writer to the Hebrews tells us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Keeping your eyes on Jesus is a smart thing to do.

In our story for this week, it is when Peter looks at the wind and the waves that he begins to sink. It is when he takes hold of Jesus' hand that he rises above his struggles and finds his way back to safety. It doesn't take a lot of study to come to the conclusion that keeping focused on Jesus is a better way to walk - whether on dry land or on water. Certainly, we should keep our eyes upon Jesus.

Now, maybe I am trying to justify my own cowardice, but I wonder whether Jesus is really asking us to walk on water. I know, I know. We are told in many places that we can do mighty works in Jesus' name. I know too that we shouldn't shy away from difficult tasks because we are given the power of the Spirit. I know that there are labors that the Lord needs doing, and his plan is that we are the doers. I know that there are many unexplainable things that I have encountered, and others have encountered, for which the only proper response is to give praise to God.

Jesus sends them away. In the story, he is trying to have some time alone to pray and rest in the presence of the Father. He got interrupted by the crowd earlier and ended up having to cater a meal no one was planning for (except maybe him). So, now he sends them off so that he can stay back for a little while. Of course, there was nothing said about how he was going to catch up to them later. The trains didn't run that late and the airport was closed due to fog. It could

be argued that Galilee was a pretty busy lake, and Jesus had already commandeered one boat, who's to say he couldn't do it again?

But there is a layer beyond the immediate story. This is the tale of the church that has been sent on ahead without the physical presence of Christ. This was the environment in which Matthew was writing the Gospel—a church adrift on the sea of persecution, and the storms were rising. If not persecution, then perhaps confusion, or apathy, or antagonism. But here we are drifting, wondering if we can make it to the other side on our own.

Then we see a ghost. Or something. That's all we get, isn't it? A ghost. A vision. A hope and dream that we dare not place too much trust in. We are, after all, left to our own devices. Aren't we? We've got to make this thing work on our own. We've got to solve all the problems ourselves. Don't we? We've got to conquer the enemy all by ourselves now, don't we?

Of course not. In the story beyond the story, Matthew's readers knew that the sea represented all that opposed God. In the ancient world, the sea was the source of death and pain. When sailors set out for deep-sea work, their families would perform rituals that were essentially funerals, because they didn't expect them to come back. And if and when they did come back, the reception was as though they had returned from the dead. The sea was the absence of God—at least in popular belief. The biblical witness is that God is the God of the sea and the dry land.

Jesus reaffirms that He is lord of all. He is the one who can calm the storm; he is the one who is present even when it feels like he is absent. When the disciples see him from their beleaguered boat, they can't really believe it is him. "It is a ghost," they cry in fear. It is something else to trouble us. It is no real help to us in this desperate situation. But Jesus says, "No it is really me." Actually, what he says is, "I Am" —just like the voice from the burning bush, just like the force that freed a nation from despair. "I Am", he says. "Trust me," he says. "I am with you even when you don't think so."

Peter isn't sure. He needs proof. He needs to step on the waves, to conquer his fears on his own. He needs to see that which oppresses him beneath his feet. So, with a sigh, Jesus says, "All right. Come on." And Peter does it, for a moment. Then he fails and asks for help. "You of little faith, why did you doubt" (14:31), Jesus says to him. But was it because he couldn't walk on water or because he got out of the boat?

I believe that the great work of faith that Jesus asks of all of us is to trust in his presence, even when, or perhaps, especially when, we can't feel it. When there is no external reason to believe that Christ is with us, that's when we need all the faith within us to get in the boat and sail. Sure, I'd like to walk on water sometimes. But in the end, I'd rather get in the boat with Jesus and ride out the storm all the way to the other side.

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – Is It Fair?

August 20, 2023

[Gen 45:1-15](#); [Ps 133](#); [Matthew 15: \(10-20\) 21-28](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

Perhaps there should be quotation marks around our title for this week. “Is it fair?” Or a pouty face emoji—something to indicate that this title is not aspirational, but descriptive. This is not who we should be, but it is often who we are. We claim to want fairness, or at least we want fairness in a way that benefits us. Fairness in our favor, we might say. Deep down, however, the truth is that we don’t really want fairness; we want mercy. At least that is what we want from God. At the same time, we want to deal fairly and be dealt with fairly as we live and work in the world. So, our theme can be aspirational in terms of how we relate to those around us – as long as we don’t get too whiny!

How do we deal fairly with our neighbors? What ministries can we celebrate or launch as a sign that we are engaged in relationships of fairness? Do we acknowledge our privilege over those who have less in terms of access, goods and services, and in terms of treatment by those in authority? This need not be a source of shame, but rather an opportunity to use what we have to be fair, to be gracious and merciful like the God we follow, in our dealings with the wider community. Where are those opportunities? What stories can we tell that inspire us to do good in the world? What testimonies can we share that open our eyes to the possibilities and realities of how the world works?

At the same time, as we worship, we give thanks and praise to God who has gone beyond fair in offering salvation and grace to all of us sinners and gave us a way where there was no way. God loves us even when we haven’t been all that loveable. Let our praises be sung and spoken with grateful hearts as we acknowledge the gifts of the Spirit and the blessing that service brings.

Let our worship be a reminder that we often see the face of God within us. Worship can be a time of encouragement as we celebrate how we have moved closer to the kingdom in how we live with one another, how we praise and rejoice in one another, and how we challenge and then support one another. When we are truly seeking the face of God, we go beyond fair and move into grace manifested in love in all our relationships.

PREACHING NOTES

Last week, we left Joseph in a pit. Well, not exactly. He was in a pit and then he was dragged out and sold into slavery and was on a camel train to Egypt— runaway train. At least, it felt so to him. He was not in control; he was pulled along by forces bigger than he was. And where did he end up? In a good job that he lost, in prison for years, then tossed before Pharaoh and asked to produce, like a performing monkey on a leash.

But it turned out well. He was given authority and power, and he used it wisely. And now he is second in command over all of Egypt. And his brothers show up, hat in hand, needing a handout, needing a government subsidy. They were the ones who threw him in a pit because they didn't have the will to kill him as they wanted to. Now they are on Joseph's doorstep, inches away from despair and destruction. And he kicks them to the curb.

Doesn't he? Wouldn't you? This is your chance to get back at all those who hurt you. Your chance to strike back against the runaway train that you were thrown on in that weak moment, in that dark time. Now you've got the power, how are you going to use it?

Well, read the text. That's how Joseph chose to use the power. And we notice there's a lot of kissing in this scene! And weeping. Not really what you'd expect in a confrontation of long-held grudges and chips on the shoulders. In fact, if we are honest, it sounds a little crazy. This forgiveness thing sounds wonderful in the abstract, but almost offensive in reality. Don't you think they deserved a little more punishment than they got? Don't you think they should pay for their crimes? How can they get off so easily and we all feel ok with that? Is that fair?

That's the problem with this runaway train we are on: it makes what is sane sound crazy and what is crazy sound sane. Wouldn't getting off the train make more sense? Wouldn't living by different rules and trusting in a different driver make more sense?

See, that's what happened to Joseph. He switched trains. From the outside, it looked like the same one. Things are out of control; stuff happens to him; he pays for mistakes that weren't his. But from the inside, it all looked different. He was trusting in something different, something bigger than himself and his circumstances. He began to ask a different set of questions. Instead of, "Why me?" or "Why is this happening to me?" he began to ask, "What does God require of me now?" No matter the depth of the now, no matter the hurt in the now, no matter the injustice of the now, he still could ask, "What does God require of me now?" And then based on the answers he discovered, he followed.

He trusted that the train wasn't a runaway after all, that it had a destination that he couldn't always see, or understand, or even like all that much. But he went along for the ride. He trusted the driver. Some of our greatest frustrations come not from the circumstances we are in, but from the belief that God should have worked them out in a different way. "If only," we say and think and pray; "if only."

The Canaanite woman was also on a runaway train or at least living in a world that isn't fair, to ground the metaphor somewhat. It was a world in which she had little power and scant ability to control outcomes. She was overlooked and marginalized. So, she became used to having to be persistent and loud to get anything, to be heard and seen. She, no doubt, had been the subject of abuse long before the incident that Matthew records, so she shrugged off the name-calling and leaned into the image provided. "Even the dogs," she said. She was willing to exist on crumbs because it meant that she and her child would eat and live a little bit longer.

We can argue whether this was a test on Jesus' part, whether he was "just kidding," as some commentators suggest, or was softening his words by calling her a cute little puppy, or even that Jesus was just having a bad day. We can speculate on what was going on in Jesus's mind when he spoke those words to her, but I am not sure what we will accomplish in so doing.

And does anyone find it ironic that Matthew puts this story right after that whole conversation about words and what comes out of the mouth revealing what's in the heart? Read the parenthetical part of the assigned gospel text for this week (Matthew 15:10-20). Are the lectionary preparers just messing with us, or is there something to learn here? I certainly would rather preach on verses 10 through 20 on their own than try and lay them alongside this event.

Is it our job to defend Jesus from his own actions or his own words? Or are we to learn something from this encounter about how we speak of others or how we respond to words that hurt? Jesus commends this woman's faith, in the end. Elsewhere, he applauds persistence, and perhaps that is what he sees in her, the faith that won't let her give up even when pressed down by those in power. Her faith grows out of both a desperate need and the willingness to challenge authority. The runaway train that threatens to sweep her away is not, in the end, more powerful than her strength of will. Is it fair? Of course not. But she and we come to ask not for fairness, but for mercy.