

“The Search for God”

a sermon by

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Text: “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God” (Psalm 42: 1).

In late 2003 President Bush said, in response to a reporter’s question, that he believed Muslims and Christians worshipped the same God. In the months that have followed that remark there has been a firestorm of debate over the President’s remarks.

Now, I don’t know if Muslims and Christians worship the same God. I do know that Muslims, Christians, and Jews share a lot in common. All three religions are monotheistic--they believe in one God. All three religions look to Abraham as the father of their faith. Jews and Christians share the same Old Testament. The Koran speaks of Jesus as a great prophet.

But I am also keenly aware that these three religions have profound differences. The major difference centers in the person of Christ. For Christians our faith is defined in God's revelation in Jesus Christ. In Christ we believe we see the fullness of God revealed. For Jews Jesus is not the Christ. Islam is even more pronounced in this regard. For Muslims the final revelation of God is God's giving of the Koran to the prophet Mohammed. For Muslims it is blasphemous to speak of God as having a son or to speak of the Trinity.

As I have watched the debate unfold around the President's words, I am also keenly aware of how deeply the search for God functions as a fundamental reality of our culture. At no time in my ministry have I witnessed the kind of hungering for God that is characteristic today. It is not only manifest in the struggle that we have to understand religions other than our own. It is found in the many and sometimes bizarre ways that religion is manifesting itself today: the incredible popularity of Dan Brown's book, *The Da Vinci Code*; The enormous interest in Mel Gibson's film, "The Passion of Christ;" and more recently the interest in the so called "Lost Gospels" that are chronicled in books such as Elaine Pagel's *Beyond Belief*.

I.

In Psalm 42 (and 43) we encounter an intense search for the living God. The Psalm begins with the metaphor of a deer in search of water and compares that search to the search for God. The Psalm is the lament of an individual. It is one of those intense Psalms in which the individual lays out his claim for God's presence. He is overwhelmed by the forces of darkness and evil. He longs to return to the temple in Jerusalem; he sees his enemies surrounding him. Each part of the Psalm ends with the expression, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God." It raises for the believer one of the most important questions: How do we find the living God?

II.

For one thing, we need to take a hard look at the God we worship. So often when we think of God, the great metaphors of our faith come rushing to us. God is our king and father, our rock, our fortress, and high tower, our shepherd and our savior. He is a God who loves us with an unconditional love. He is the father of the "prodigal son" who rushes out to welcome a wayward child. He is the God of the "Good Samaritan," filled with compassion even to those who were normally believed to be outside the faith of Israel. But there is another side of God that is greater, sterner, and more austere than our sentimental, popular Christianity often suggests.

The Apostle Paul, in writing to the church at Galatia, put it like this: "Be not deceived; God is not mocked. For whatever a man soweth, that shall he reap" (Galatians 6:7). On that point God is inexorable. He plays no favorites. He has no softness. Age after age the law-abiding conditions in this universe wait, offering the blessing or the curse, and the curse falls remorselessly or the blessing arrives as the conditions are fulfilled. Jesus once likened God to an austere man. That is putting it mildly.

Jonathan Edwards, one of the great ministers of the 18th Century, once preached a sermon, entitled “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” in which he painted such a vivid picture of God’s justice and wrath that people literally fainted and fell down all through the church.

We don’t speak of God in that way anymore. The notion of the “Wrath of God” seems too archaic, too filled with ill temper and vindictiveness. But behind that phrase is something very powerful. The penalties of God’s broken laws fall with great austerity on men and on nations. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his *Letter From a Birmingham Jail* once spoke of the universe as having an arc that inevitably swings to justice. That is what the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote that the, “Wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and the unrighteousness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth” (Romans 1:18).

One of the characteristic emphases of Presbyterian or Reformed theology is the emphasis on the Majesty and Praise of God. The God with whom we deal is not just our “pal” or our “friend.” He is the Lord God who comes with might, “who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, the one before whom the “nations are as nothing,” and “are accounted by him as less than nothing” (Isaiah 40:12, 17).

The religion that is practiced in our self-absorbed, self-centered lives is very different than the faith that is taught in the New Testament.

This is illustrated in the life of John Calvin, the great Reformer of the 16th Century. One day in August of 1536 Calvin stopped to spend the night in an inn in Geneva, Switzerland, on his way to Strasburg where he hoped to find a home. But God had other plans for him.

That evening, William Farel, the great Reformer of Geneva paid Calvin a visit. He urged Calvin to stay in Geneva and help in the development of the Protestant movement in Geneva. Calvin declined. He believed that he was much more suited for the life of a scholar. But Farel did not let Calvin off the hook. As Calvin later wrote, “Then Farel, finding he gained nothing by entreaties, besought God to curse my retirement and the tranquility of my studies if I should withdraw and refuse to give assistance when the necessity was so urgent. By this imprecation I was so struck with terror that I desisted from the journey I had undertaken.”

So, if we are searching for the God of the Psalmist, the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ, let us remind ourselves that this is majestic God who not only bestows his unconditional love upon us, but demands that we serve him with all our “hearts, strength, and might.”

III.

Then, too, if we are searching for the living God, we would do well to remind ourselves that the God of the Old and New Testament is not just a God of comfort, he is a God of power as well.

Now do not mistake me. I believe that the God whom we know in Jesus Christ is one who gives us great comfort. As the great prophet Isaiah put it, “He gives power to the faint, and

strength to the powerless” (Isaiah 40:29). And as the Psalmist puts it, “he heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds”(Psalm 147:3).

The pastoral ministry of the church is to proclaim by word and action that grace of God that not only forgives our sins but also gives us the power of new life.

There is, however, a great distinction between two very different kinds of religions. Some religions are designed to make life easier; others are chiefly concerned to make life stronger.

There is today a religion of comfort that one hears often. It is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace.” For Bonhoeffer “cheap grace” was the preaching of forgiveness without repentance, baptism without discipline. It is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, and grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

But there is a deeper kind of faith and experience that is found by those whose chief concern is not an easier life but a stronger life. There is a witness of individuals in the Old and New Testament who found this kind of strength: Moses, associating himself with an oppressed people in Egypt; Isaiah, the great prophet of the exile, preaching hope and comfort to those who had no hope; Jeremiah, proclaiming God’s judgment, but God’s love as well; Jesus, hanging on a cross, calling God’s forgiveness even upon those who had placed him there.

Recently, I came upon a biography of a well-known Presbyterian by the name of James Woodrow. He was the uncle of Woodrow Wilson, one of the most distinguished Presidents of the United States. James Woodrow served as the President of South Carolina College from 1891 –1897. In 1856 he had received the Doctor of Philosophy degree in science from Heidelberg University, Germany. While teaching at what was later to become Columbia Theological Seminary, he introduced the subject of “evolution,” which led to a very bitter quarrel in the church. After four years of debate the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church ruled that the church had no right to give an opinion on a scientific matter, and that the freedom of discussion was right and proper.

Those who knew James Woodrow knew him as a man of faith who valued the life of the mind and the openness of the church to truth. Throughout the controversies in which he was engaged he did not lose his faith. Rather, he found strength in the power of the living God who was a God of grace and truth.

That is not a religion of comfort. It is a religion of power. Out of that power came Christ, human enough to cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”-- but not ending there--ending with faith, confidence, and power: “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.”