

**“Found”**

In the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

Fred tucked a copy of his will beneath his pillow. He rose quietly from the bed and tiptoed out the door. He slid behind the wheel of his car and pulled away from the curb. At the edge of town he drove the car onto the railroad tracks, put it in park and cut the engine. And then he settled in and waited. It was a little past 8:30 . The train came through at 9, every night. You could set your watch by it.

And while he waited, he asked question after question. Why did his son Harry drown in a lake years ago? Why did he throw himself into his work and make something of himself, only to lose his other son John and son-in-law Robert in another drowning accident? Why was life so unfair? Why did grief hurt so much? “Why, God?” he cried one more time, and still there was no answer.

“The word of the Lord was rare in those days,” and often still. In vain, we search for vision.

In vain, we seek promises that are eternal. Eternal and real, felt in the here of our blood and the now of our time. The lamp of the Lord has not gone out, but still sometimes it seems very, very dim. And we pray with Fred the most universal of human prayers, “Why, God?”

A child is abused and her parents’ hearts and souls fill with so much anger there is no place for it to go. Why, God?

A man works for 30 years, and then his carefully saved retirement fund is lost in a corporate bankruptcy. Why God?

A woman watches as the man she loves is eaten up by a job that demands too much and offers too little. She watches, as he grows more sullen and less joyful. She watches as he, quite unintentionally, draws further and further away from her. And there seems to be nothing she can do. In fact, whatever she does often seems to make things worse. And the love for him that she has, that she has nourished, that she feels with a passion – that love eats her up. Why God?

Relationships fail. Injustice happens. Death strikes. The neighbours whisper. The colleagues at work fall silent when you walk into the room. Your child slams the door to his room. Another calls you from school, her voice anguished.

In so many lives, in so many empty barns and idle factories, in so many emergency rooms, in so many communities, in so many war-torn nations, we desperately yearn for a word from the Lord. But, somehow the answer is not found.

In today’s first reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel, we hear this sentence that, in some ways confuses us: “The word of the Lord was rare in those days, visions were not widespread.” We do not know why it was rare. We can only guess.

There was no faithfulness in the land, perhaps. The sin of the people was great, perhaps. Perhaps, but not for sure. We do not know. Nor do we always know why the Lord is silent in our own lives. Sometimes it is helpful to guess, but other times not. What we really want are answers to our questions. But the silence mocks us.

Oh, the preachers preach. They give it their best. And sometimes we hear. But there are many preachers, and they disagree. There are many interpretations and some of them frighten. Possibility confuses certainty. New voices shake the foundations. New chords jar the soul and jolt the mind. The lamp of the Lord has not gone out, but its light sputters and stammers. There are words, but the noise clatters and we hold our hands to our ears.

Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

Fred sat there in his car, on that track, for an hour. He waited and waited on that train you could set your watch by. And then he got nervous. He worried that someone would see the car sitting on the tracks. So a half-hour past the train's regular time, he pulled the car off the tracks. Moments later the train sped by.

But Fred has not changed his mind. Another train came every night at ten, less that a half hour away. So this time, he sat on the tracks. And he waited. And he waited. And he waited.

And he must have asked, why did his days go so suddenly, so needlessly, so painfully. There was no miracle for them, no reprieve from heaven. Why, God?

Finally, he gave up. He stood up and walked to his car, and the train came speeding by. Was it a word from the Lord? To tell the truth, Fred didn't know what it was. The night was still dark, the questions still fermented in his soul. Life still hurt.

We hear in our first reading for today, and in our gospel reading, that Samuel was confused. Nathaniel was skeptical. Eli was untrustworthy. But God was faithful. God was persistent. And God was there in the dim light of the temple. And God was there in the city of Andrew and Peter. God was there beneath the fig tree when Nathaniel thought no one was looking.

Philip and Andrew and Nathaniel and so many others were – and are – looking for God. But before our days as yet existed. God was searching for us. And God found us.

Samuel did not yet know the Lord, but the Lord found Samuel. And the Lord continued to appear to Samuel. To a people living in dark times, “the Lord revealed himself.” God was not found. God came.

And they waited in Judea. They waited in Galilee and Bethsaida. They waited for the one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote. And they had waited for a long time.

And so I wonder. Was Jesus' smile a bit like Mona Lisa's, when he greeted Nathaniel? Was he waiting to pull a surprise, waiting to enjoy the amazement on Nathaniel's face when he gave him the news: “You were looking for me, but I found you already. I know when you sat down and when you rise up. I saw you, beneath the fig tree.”

I saw you, on the way to the emergency room. I saw you, before the word reached out about what happened to your daughter. I saw you, the very first night your husband worked late and came home angry. I saw you, and I know how you felt, and I was silent because I too, was weeping.

I saw you, and I called to you, and the grief was too great and you could not hear. So I called to you again, and again, and again. And I found you.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for us. But not for God. It is the everyday business of God. It is God, turning to us. Looking for us.

Fred went home. Fred cried himself to sleep on that pillow, the copy of his will still beneath it. The next morning he got up and went to town. And a man approached him, a man he knew. "Fred," he said, "I heard about your son, and I'm sorry."

Fred was amazed. He wondered why the man cared. But when he lifted his own eyes, he saw that there were tears in the eyes of the other man.

A block away, he met another man. Before that man could get the words of condolences out of his mouth, he reached out for Fred and hugged him, tight. And as Fred tells it: "That day, every single person I ran across had something kind to say about my son, or some words of comfort for me. Everyone."

My friends, God has turned to us. That's what God does. And when we hear, worlds change. And when we see, heaven opens up and angels ascend. God still speaks, and visions still appear, to hearts open wide to wonder.

Not too long ago, Shelly Mecum chartered buses for the 168 students of Our Lady Roman Catholic Church School, on the poor side of the island of Oahu in Hawaii. I read about this in the inspirational magazine called "Guidepost." Shelly Mecum's and her students, aged 5 to 13, lined up to get on the bus, each of them equipped with an inexpensive camera. They were going exploring, and their job was to find God. And when they found God, they put the pictures in a book. "God's Photo Album," they called it.

John found a lonely path leading up a hill – and it looked like a road of hope to him.

Jennifer found God on the bus, "because God led us to where we could find him."

Bryan found God in a cemetery, because those people were with God.

Janeen found God in her friend Crystal, who was writing down where she had seen God.

On and on they went, looking for God. And in hundreds of places, they found God waiting for them.

But I liked little Carolyn's picture best. A small girl sits on a concrete step, knees tucked together, looking to her left. There is no one there. But Carolyn wrote the caption, "I see God waiting for someone to talk too."

My brothers and sisters in Christ. If my sermon seems all over the map, this morning, maybe that's just as well and with intent. Because God is all over the map, all over this world, looking for us. We may not always find God. But God will find us. Come and see. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.