

Title: Seeking After God
Date: 9/11/2022 (Proper 19, Year C)
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)
Readings: [Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28](#); [Psalm 14: 1](#) [Timothy 1:12-17](#); [Luke 15:1-10](#)
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/kdNBf9duWzs?t=1145>

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me. May the words I preach be judged faithful, and may my thoughts and deeds ever be in his service. (1 Timothy 1:12 ish)
Amen.

Usually, I begin my sermon with a few verses from the Psalm, or from one of the other readings assigned for today. This week it was hard to get past those first two readings!

In Jeremiah, God is speaking judgment against the people of Israel, and God might as well be speaking to us now.

Even though Jeremiah talks about God sending a wind so strong that it destroys instead of scatters,

the pollutants we've released into the air and waters
have already laid waste to the earth
and blocked the light from the heavens.

The fracking and drilling and mining we do

have caused the mountains to quake and the hills to move to and fro. Wars and conflicts and a limitless desire for cheap stuff and new stuff
have caused so much political unrest
and environmental and economic devastation

that humans are not the only ones
who've had to flee their homes and countries;
birds and other animals
have moved or become extinct.

Land once fruitful are now deserts,

vibrant cities are now a dim shadow of their glorious selves.

This is the world we lay before the Lord, before his fierce anger.

It is not the anger of the Lord

that has reversed the wonders of creation into a land of desolation. The Lord is angry that humans have caused this to happen, that humans have allowed this to happen.

According to Jeremiah, God thinks the problem is that

"[my] people are foolish, they do not know me;
they are stupid children, they have no understanding.

They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good" (Jer 4:22).

According to the Psalmist, "The Lord looks down from heaven upon us all, to see if there is any who is wise, if there is one who seeks after God.

Every one has proved faithless; all alike have turned bad;
there is none who does good; no, not one” (Ps 14:2-3)

Ouch. In the words of the great movie classic from the 1990s, Clueless,
“This was way harsh.”¹

These aren’t the verses we share with friends who are atheists or agnostic or spiritual but not religious. Maybe not even friends who didn’t show up this Sunday. As Donald McKim, Professor at Memphis Theological Seminary, points out, the Bible is not trying to prove the existence of God. In Genesis, God is there before the beginning. According to him,

“The Scriptures are concerned most
with those who want to shut themselves off from the reality of God
and live without regard to God’s will or ways.”²

Being righteous, being right with God, is not about perfection or purity.

In Proverbs and Wisdom literature, the wise seek after God,
because they fear God,
because they are in awe of God.

They are constantly trying to listen to God
so that they might follow God.

They try to hear God in prayer,
through study,
among people.

They rely on the grace of God and the love of God
as they open up themselves
to the reality of God and the reality of this world.

The foolish dismiss God.

They forget that they exist in relationship,
that everyone and everything is interconnected.

They forget that they aren’t the only ones impacted by their decisions;
they don’t stop to listen
to those who try to show them the full range
of the consequences of their choices.

Once they see those other outcomes,
they choose to deny them
or to double down on doing things their way
rather than turn in another direction.

They rely on themselves and their own skills
and their own knowledge of the world.

None of us are wise all the time,
and none of us are foolish all the time.

Following God is hard.

As Jesus made it clear in last week's readings,
there is always a cost.

When we seek comfort instead of God,
when we take things at surface value
instead of asking hard questions as Jesus did,
God may judge our thoughts, words and deeds to be faithless;
our thoughts, words, and deeds might take a bad turn.

But things don't have to stay like this.

With God's help, we can always choose to turn back to God.

With God's help, we can always choose to broaden and deepen
the ways in which we experience the world
and listen for the will of God.

Today, we remember all those who were killed on 9/11,
and we pray alongside those who love and mourn them.
The footprints of the Twin Towers are now pools that contain the largest manmade
waterfalls in North America. Carved into the walls surrounding these pools are the
names of those who were in the towers and on the planes. Those names are not listed in
alphabetical order
but in what the designers call a system of "meaningful adjacencies." They are
grouped according to relationships-
friends and colleagues, flight crews and first responder units.³

Those who are charged with designing the 9/11 Memorial and Museum had a hard job. I
recognize how complicated it is to tell the story of a day like this. AND I can't help but
wish

that they would have expanded
that system of "meaningful adjacencies"
to include those who were killed or injured
as a result of 9/11, both in the United States and abroad.

I'm thinking of Muslims and those mistaken as Muslim,
those who developed cancer and other diseases
as a result of their work at Ground Zero,
the soldiers and contractors and workers
sent to places such as Iraq and Afghanistan,
and the locals who lived there,
just trying to live their lives.

The casualties of that day
have expanded **so far beyond**
those whose names are inscribed
around the footprints of the Twin Towers.

When we broaden and deepen our experience of this anniversary,
we recognize that they too are part of the story of 9/11

and that it is important to extend our prayers to include them,
whether we are praying with our words
or our hands and feet.

Today, we also remember Queen Elizabeth II. She has been the queen for more than 70 years, making her the longest reigning monarch in British history. I am not what you would call an Anglophile, except for watching Doctor Who and drinking tea, and that's something the British imported from India and China.

But I **have** been watching the Royal Family
as they've tried to figure out
how to adapt their age-old structures and attitudes
for modern times.
More and more they are asked to define their purpose
and make a case for their existence.
This is a challenge that mainline Protestant denominations,
including the Episcopal Church, are familiar with.
Queen Elizabeth has been queen for so long
that it's been hard to question
the relevance of the monarchy
and the legacy of the British Empire
without running up against the affection
and appreciation for her.

When we broaden and deepen our experience of her life and death,
perhaps we can find a way to respect legacies and traditions
while asking questions.
Perhaps the best way to honor those legacies and traditions
isn't by putting people on a pedestal,
but to learn from the things they have done
and the things they have left undone.
Again, none of us are wise all the time,
and none of us are foolish all the time,
not even the queen, not even our founding fathers,
not even beloved teachers and grandparents and priests.

Lastly, when we broaden and deepen our experience
of the parables in today's gospels,
we might start to ask some questions.
Sometimes the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin
are used to encourage us to repent.
But can a sheep or a coin really repent?
Sometimes these parables are used to put down Pharisees and scribes,
or their modern equivalents,
people who are gatekeeping,
who are a little too secure
in their belief that they are right with God.

These parables are supposed to encourage them to rejoice when sinners show up instead of grumbling about letting them in.

I wonder if the man with the sheep and the woman with the coin are not God but those who have encountered Jesus.

When they recognized they were incomplete,
when they recognized that something was missing from their lives,
they went seeking after God.

When they found Jesus,
when they found belonging,
when they found a community that helped them feel whole,
they rejoiced.

They were so happy they wanted to tell all their friends and neighbors.

When I found God again, or rather,
when I actively looked for God again
after many years of turning away from God,
I instinctively wanted to talk to other people
about the Scripture and the prayers and the sermons
I was hearing.

I knew I couldn't do this alone;

I didn't want to do this alone.

In seeking after God, God led me to church, to the body of Christ.

I always tell people that

that congregation⁴

loved me into the priest that I am,

that God redeemed all my broken pieces

and made me whole

in a way I couldn't have every asked for or imagined.

To be clear, I still have my foolish moments,

the moments I forget to rely on the grace of God

and the moments I forget to ask for help.

But things are so different than before I turned back to God,

and God had waiting just right there, so very patiently.

After COVID, churches average about 2/3 their previous average Sunday attendance.

Some people have moved away, some people are immunocompromised so they are watching from home, some people we're not sure what happened with them. At the same time, others are seeking new church homes now that things are opening up, or as they are contemplating life changes.

In a time like this, I wonder how we can share our joy of belonging with our friends and neighbors.

I wonder how we can be honest about our moments of wisdom and foolishness. After all, none of us are wise all the time, and none of us are foolish all the time.

What stories can **we tell**
about the difference it makes
when we broaden and deepen
the ways in which we experience the world
and listen for the will of God?

¹ <https://media.giphy.com/media/pvVoKlAvN5Akg/giphy.gif>

² McKim, D. K. (2010). [Theological Perspective](#). In D. L. Bartlett & B. B. Taylor (Eds.), *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C* (Vol. 4, p. 58). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

³ <https://www.911memorial.org/visit/memorial/about-memorial>

⁴ <https://gracecathedral.org/>