

Lost and Found in Bethlehem

Luke 2:8-15

Dec. 15 2019 (10:30 service, after Pageant)

So, yes, today at 9:00 was the annual Christmas Pageant – just an hour ago, this little stage was packed with 13 shepherds, 8 angels, three kings, a whole host of various farm animals, and of course the holy family themselves.

With King Herod lurking in the background.

The manger and the cardboard star here are pretty self-explanatory, but you may be wondering about the sign over there, and if you can't see it, what it says is Bethlehem Tourist Information.

I'll explain.

A little back story first.

The way Marcia and I divvy up the work for the Christmas Pageant is this – she's in charge of all the hard work of registering the kids and sorting all the costumes and figuring out whether it's the first graders who will be the donkeys this year or the kindergarteners.

I get the *fun* job –

I'm in charge of the pageant script.

I used to purchase Pageant written by other churchy people out there, and teach those scripts to our kids,

but not long ago I realized that it was way, way more fun just to write them myself.

I mean, I don't buy my *sermons* online,

so why should I buy a pageant script online, right?

We're not talking Shakespeare here.

We need lines that a 9 year old can remember when they're standing up here in a scratchy robe with a crown balanced on their head.

And it needs to be fun – or rehearsals get really boring really quick.

The idea for this year's pageant came to me while driving back from a meeting in Bridgeport, using the Waze app to look for shortcuts, and realizing that I had no idea where I was.

And I started to think about three kings who had no idea where to find a baby Messiah,
doing their best to follow a star --
and angels who had to go find shepherds on some random hillside near Bethlehem,
and those same shepherds who then had to figure out which Inn in Bethlehem had a
baby in manger,
and none of these folks had Waze or Google maps.
But what if, I thought, what if there was a Bethlehem Tourist Information booth where
they could stop and ask for directions?

So that was our pageant this year.
At the Bethlehem Tourist Information kiosk, we had two helpful Bethlehemites,
Hezekiah and Obadiah.
And over the course of the play,
they gave directions to a lost shepherd who was trying to figure out where the other
shepherds were watching their flocks by night –
they also redirected a confused bunch of angels who were looking for those shepherds
–
they got three kings of orient re-oriented ...
and when the very arrogant King Herod showed up asking for a baby,
they told him they didn't like his attitude, and sent him packing.

I had a ton of fun writing this one,
playing around with this idea of everyone in the Christmas story being somewhat lost,
trying to find their way,
trying to find their way to that baby Savior.

And somewhere along the line, it struck me --
isn't this what we're all trying to do, really?
Here in this Advent season -- and really, all the time --
aren't we all trying to find our way to a baby in a manger?

Which is to say that at some basic level
we're all trying to find God, right?
We're all trying to journey closer to Jesus,
we're all looking for ways to get nearer to God,
we're all trying to find the path, trying to find it and stay on it.

My pageant might have been about lost shepherds seeking mangers
and the wise ones seeking a baby,
but aren't we all, really, the seekers?
All of us are searching for God,
all of us are on journeys of faith,
trying to get ourselves closer to the God of Love, the Christ of Hope.
In a way that no GPS is going to help with
we are all trying to find our way home –
to our heart's home – to God.

There was a bumper sticker that came out years ago,
and I just saw it again the other day –
“Wise Men still seek him,” it said,
and wise women, of course.

We are all, always, seeking.
Seeking the God who will set our minds at ease
and welcome us home ...
offer us the peace and hope we yearn for.
We're all looking for that.
In this Advent, and all times,
we are like all those people lined up at the Bethlehem Tourist Information booth --
trying to find the baby in the manger
who will give to us that same joy that the shepherds and wise ones discovered.
We are all the seekers. We are all on the journey to find God.
That's us.

And then, as I thought about all this, a very *different* idea struck me.
What if, I thought, **what if**, it's actually the other way around?

What if **we're** the ones being looked for?
What if it's not so much about **us** seeking **God**,
but about **God** seeking **us**?
About God finding **us**?

There's a poem I've always liked, called, simply, '*Traveler*,'
which imagines the thoughts of one of the Three Kings as he arrives at the manger.

And the King says this:

“Near and far ceased to exist.

Everything and everywhere was present;

present also in the sense of given,

gifted once, for all, for ever.

We had not come to him, but he to us.”

We had not come to him, but he to us.

Which is to say: we are not the seekers but the sought;

not the finders, but the found.

It's God who's looking for us.

Jesus used to talk that way all the time about God.

When the baby Jesus of Bethlehem

became the *teacher* Jesus of Galilee,

he loved telling folks about a God who never stops looking for us,

about the God who seeks us out in love, tenacious love.

He had a whole bunch of stories he told to make his point,
parables.

For instance:

there was a woman once, Jesus said, a woman who had ten coins.

She lost one of them

but she still had nine, so what was the big deal, really?

But she kept looking until she found the one that was missing,

and she was so happy she threw a party.

And then there was a shepherd, Jesus said,

a shepherd who had 100 sheep.

He lost one.

He still had ninety-nine, so why get upset, right?

But that shepherd kept looking and looking and looking

until he found the one, the one sheep that needed to come home.

What Jesus was saying was that we're the ones that God goes out looking for.

We're the ones that God is determined to find.

Ours is a God who doesn't stop looking until *everyone* is found.

We may be the ones seeking, we may be the ones yearning,
but in the end, we discover that it is we who have been found.

Down in New Orleans,
there's a remarkable woman, a nun named Sister Helen Prejean.
If the name sounds vaguely familiar,
it's because she's the nun whose work was made famous in the movie *Dead Man Walking*.

She has given her life to ministering to inmates on death row,
entering into their lives and staying with them until their last moments.
Sister Prejean, who is now 80 and still doing this work, was once asked in an interview
where she found God,
how she could find God in this hard and seemingly hopeless ministry that she'd chosen.
And I've always remembered what she said to the interviewer.
She said this. She said, with great conviction:
"You get **found** by God more than you find God."

And then she said: "God's not like some project you take on:
*hmmm, let me go find God. Go to door A. God's not there.
Okay, I'll try door B.*"

"No," she said, "You get found by God.

You get taken over by God.

You know you are in the presence of God.

God is a life force, a **love** force that's strong and unrelenting and full of compassion.

You get **found** by God."

She's right. Sister Helen Prejean, she was right.

God's not out there hiding, waiting to be found.

God's doing the finding.

We are found by a persistent, seeking, loving, yearning God.

God is always, constantly and compassionately,
looking for us.

One sheep hiding behind a bush.

One sheep wandering far off.

God is the one who does the finding.

This fall, David's weekly bible study has been focusing on the Psalms, that ancient Old Testament book of songs and hymns of faith.

And this past week they looked at what is my most favorite of the Psalms, Psalm 139.

Psalm 139 says just what Jesus came and said many years later,

just what Sister Prejean said, too:

that it is God who searches after *us*,

that we are the ones who are found by God.

Psalm 139 goes like this:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

You know when I sit down and when I rise up ...

Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I take the wings of the morning

and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

even there your hand shall lead me,

and your right hand shall hold me fast.

I love that.

I love knowing that there is nowhere we can take ourselves to that we can't be found by the God who cherishes us.

I love knowing that even when we wander away,

even when we wonder and worry and doubt and despair,

we are still sought after, and found, by the persistent God who just won't ever leave us alone.

Where can I go from your spirit? asks the psalm, or where can I flee from your presence?

Nowhere. We are always sought. We are always found.

So here's the good news, the Advent good news.

A relationship with God

doesn't actually depend on **us** having to find **God**,

having to follow the right star, be led by angels to the right manger.

A relationship with God

doesn't happen because we decide to seek,

doesn't come about because we successfully opened door B and discovered God there.

A relationship with God comes when we let ourselves **be found**.

When we stop running, or hiding,

when we stop seeking and questing --
that is, when we cease trying to do it by ourselves
and trying to be in charge.

We find God when we just *let* ourselves be found.

For Helen Prejean, the nun ministering on death row,
allowing herself to be found is what gives her, daily, the strength to live with hope in a
place of hopelessness.

Allowing herself to be swept up in God's love and power and compassion,
is what enables her to be *herself* the presence of power and compassion.

For each of us,

searching and seeking
and needing and longing
and lonely and hiding –

for each of us, it is in allowing ourselves to be found by that same persistent loving God
that lets us know that we are safe and cherished and needed.

Wise people still seek him?

Sure.

But wisdom, true wisdom -- is in letting yourself *be found*.

Amen.