

The Searching God

Genesis 3.1-9; Luke 15.1-10

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At the Bristol Baptist College I had a fine colleague who was an Old Testament Specialist. Often I heard him argue that Genesis 1-11 should be read as a prologue to the whole story of Scripture. His case was that if we understand the themes, the perspective, introduced in the stories of these chapters then we would be well on our way to grasping the great message of God. It's a big claim. Mind you, the fact that he had written a book on Genesis 1-11 might have something to do with this enthusiasm!

But, for sure, he has a case. Just think about what we find in those chapters; creation and the themes of human dependence, relating and stewardship; the story of a serious disaster which suggests that it is not only better education we need but salvation, so serious is our condition; then, humankind is capable of murder and atrocious violence, even when we know it does not solve the problem; and, we share one humanity which is incredibly diverse by God's choice, although we attempt to control one another. These are some of the big themes to which we are introduced, all of them presently matters which concern responsible international citizens. If we follow the narrative we may begin to get an important message, the Bible's agenda.

I want us to focus on just one of the stories, to get our perspective right. We have discovered that, as is the case back home, so many bookshops here have shelf after shelf of books on spirituality. There are titles like "Our Search for God", or "The journey within", or "The long search". Given the kind of thing Christianity says about being human, that we are made for relationship with God, it's the kind of thing we would expect.

Such an approach is reflected in the Bible. "As the deer longs for the water brooks, so longs my soul for you, O God". "Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near". Searching for God seems a basic longing. But now let's think about the story in Genesis 3.

God's good creation seems to be falling apart. Adam and Eve have disobeyed and have run into hiding from God. They know they have done wrong and they are afraid. But now God comes strolling in the garden, taking the evening air, looking for Adam and Eve for their usual end of day chat. But God cannot find them. Where are they? God is not used to this hiding away business. The relationship with the couple is important to God. So God calls out, Adam where are you? Eve, where are you? Where are you?

You could say that the rest of the Bible narrative flows from this story. It is the story of the searching God. Not first our search for God but God's search for us.

There was this man on the run. He had committed murder and he knew he was not safe at home so he ran and ran. Now he is trying to make a new life in a foreign land as a shepherd, looking after his father-in-laws sheep on the edge of the desert region. No one knows he is there but he sees this bush that burns and is not consumed and he hears his name being called, Moses, Moses. God has found the chosen partner for the great exodus adventure of liberation.

There are many, many other such stories of the searching God, involving Elijah hiding in a cave, Samuel asleep in the Temple, Isaiah in a time of political uncertainty, Elizabeth and Mary heavily pregnant.

We have a major Bible theme on our hands. We talk of our search for God but even more fundamental than that is God's search for us. God is the searching God. That's the primary perspective, not our search but God's. Adam, where are you? Eve, where are you? Where are you?

At which point we might well ask, if this is true and God is the searching God then why is not God more obvious to us? Why does God seem so remote? And that's a huge question. Let me offer two reflections on it.

First, God may well choose not to be more obvious for our sake, in order not to overwhelm us. God seeks a relationship of trust, not one of self-imposition. Do you recall that text in the Psalms about God's word being a light to our feet, a light to our path? We are given just enough light to walk by. Too much light would blind us. Perhaps for our sake, for a genuine relationship of trust between us, God holds back and hides a little. The Bible suggests that.

Or it may be that God seems remote because we persist in hiding. We sense we have done wrong. We may even fear what a serious relationship with God might mean. What might it lead to if I come out into the open and say "Yes" to God? What might God ask me to do?

So we hide from God, in all sorts of ways. For example, by keeping ourselves busy. I had a friend who refused to take a break and go on holiday. He tried it once. He sat out on the beach in his deck chair. Bliss it was, until he found all those deep questions of life and commitment that he kept buried in busyness coming to the surface, important significant questions, about the sense and purpose of his life, questions about God. He vowed he would not put himself in that disturbing position again. So he hides in activity from the big questions. He hides from God.

Or we hide behind masks. This is one of the temptations of religion. We can idolize our religion, our way of doing things. It makes us feel good, even a little bit righteous. But, as the great Jewish teacher Martin Buber said, there is nothing like religion to mask the face of God. I have known people far more devoted to their church than to the claims of the living God in their neighbour. It is sometimes easier to serve the church than to serve God. We do it on our terms. Is it possible that we keep busy about our religious duties because they keep us from a serious engagement with God?

But God won't have it. The God whose story we tell in this place still searches for us, Where are you? Where are you? And in the Bible narrative, all this comes to high drama in Jesus, the deepest expression of God's search for us all.

You remember that in one of his stories Jesus told of a son who went off into a far country. Well, at least one theologian has picked up that phrase and speaks of God going into a far country in Jesus, not to waste his life, but to seek and save the lost. So we have stories of Jesus with all kinds of people, often outsiders, as he spends time with those on the margins.

He finds and calls Zacchaeus hiding up a tree. He does the socially and religiously unthinkable in chatting away to a Samaritan woman by a well. He told stories about the rule of God being like a woman searching for a lost coin until she finds it, or a good shepherd not being content with less than one hundred per cent of the flock. God is like this, Jesus seems to be saying.

And in Jesus, the divine search goes to the limits. Nothing in human life and experience is avoided or excluded. Nothing is left un-faced, even to the extent of the experience of god-foresaken-ness, of death and hell. Whatever we have faced, God in Jesus has known it too. This search for us costs God.

It does not come to an end in a grave, for among the many meanings of the resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit is that the divine search goes on. Where are you? Where are you?

So Peter, that somewhat pathetic failure who could not face the searching questions of a servant girl, finds the risen Christ looking for him at the lakeside and telling him he is entrusting a massive task to him.

Or Saul, blinded by his religious fervour, going down the road to Damascus to root out this Christ business once and for all, is struck from his horse and temporally blinded. "Who are you?" he asks. "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting", comes the response.

And so we could go on, with a list so long none of us could number it, of those found by the searching God, calling them into the divine life and purpose. In fact, do we not have our own stories? We can tell of times when it has been not just another service here but God met us in worship and we realized that surely the Lord is in this place even if we did not know it.

Or think about our moral experience. Philosophers rightly say we cannot lay an absolute demand upon ourselves. Yes, but many of us have known choices we have had to make, things we know we must do because they are right, absolutely right. So the searching God draws near in moral demand.

Or there was that vulnerable person who stumbled into our life. Somehow we knew we could not pass them by and be true to ourselves. Was that God, yet again, identifying with one of the needy ones? Or what about those heart stopping moments, when we could not speak at the end of the music, or when the glory of the dawn stopped us in our tracks, or when the face of child shone with wonder, and we knew that God was not far from any of us.

The truth is we live before the searching God. If we had paid closer attention we would have known this from the Bible story and perhaps read our own lives differently, even more wondrously. Perhaps that's what pilgrims carefully do.

Where are you? Where are you? asks the voice of endless love and blessing. And even when we get to the end of the story, to the great climax, what do we find but, behold I stand at the door and knock, if any one hears my voice I will come in.

Adam, where are you? Eve, where are you? You do know, don't you, it's your name God is calling? You do know, don't you, that God is here, searching in love for you, longing for your answer.