

Lent 5 Year B 2021
March 21, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

If you have ever spent much time around college students, stuffy professors, or anyone who styles them self as a philosophical academic, you'll eventually come across someone who calls them self a 'seeker'. Their idea is that the truth is out there. Seekers will usually profess that there is more to life than what we see. There are deep truths that can be discovered. This usually leads them to be very curious and accepting of new ideas, because each new idea could be the truth that they seek, or at least contain a piece of that truth.

I knew a seeker once, Will, who romantically thought of himself as a sailor on the sea of knowledge sailing toward the horizon of truth. And while that may seem a bit excessive to some, he had taken classes in various religions and philosophies, and he had visited all manner of churches, temples, synagogues, mosques, meeting places, and so on. He was always seeking, always questioning, but never finding. Sure, he cobbled together his own philosophy, his own version of truth, but it was clear to me that he hadn't yet found what he was looking for.

Will is in good company with the Greeks from today's gospel. We aren't told much about them. John only tells us that they are in Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. Perhaps they are Jews living outside Judea, but John doesn't mention as much. It's just as likely that they are pagans who are in Jerusalem simply to observe the practices related to the festival of the Passover. They could have been ancient seekers trying to learn about Judaism, then when they heard about this man named Jesus, they sought to find out about him, too. It sounds pretty standard for the seekers I've met. It's certainly something Will might do. And it's hard to blame Will and these Greeks for their seeking. I think the desire to seek and find truth is very human. But, what did the Greeks expect to find? What had these seekers been told about Jesus? Were they expecting to hear about grains of wheat? Had they anticipated being told that if they love their life they would lose it?

I don't think these teachings were what they were expecting from Jesus. In the middle of our gospel reading, Jesus has a small crisis of confidence and as he accepts and reaffirms his mission, a voice from heaven declares that the Almighty has glorified the Holy Name and will do so again. But how do those gathered, those seekers, respond? "It must be thunder," they say. The closest they get is guessing that an angel has spoken to them.

The voice of God declares the glory of the Holy Name for all to hear, and the Greeks assume it's thunder. It's possible that people aren't really that good at seeking. It isn't just the Greeks or seekers like Will who seem to be bad at seeking. Even to us today, the modern church, this passage out of the Gospel of John feels a bit jumbled. Nothing seems to follow from one verse to the next. But if anyone is supposed to understand this stuff it should be us, right? We're not seekers, we're the ones who have found. The problem is that even we don't always understand. At least we are in good company, along with Will, and the Greeks, because even the ancient people of God were bad at seeking.

We see this in our first reading today from the prophet Jeremiah. Now, Jeremiah was a prophet who was working just before the Babylonian Exile. The word that God gave to Jeremiah to deliver to the king was that of surrender and submission. Jeremiah prophesied that Judah would be destroyed, and that the king and rulers would be carried off into exile. His message wasn't very popular. But Jeremiah also wasn't the only prophet working at the time. There were

a good number of other prophets in Jeremiah's time that prophesied the opposite, Hananiah, for example, who prophesied prosperity, wealth, and good fortune for the Israelites.

You might find this hard to believe, but the seekers in Jeremiah's time, and the people of God, and the king of Judah all preferred the prophecies of Hananiah to those of Jeremiah. The people who were supposed to be searching for God, or who were supposed to know God, didn't recognize God's true word that was spoken to them when it came through Jeremiah. Humans are bad at seeking.

It seems like when anyone—whether it's the people of God or seekers looking for God—when anyone goes to try and find God, we are tempted to find something else instead. When we listen for the voice of God, all we hear is thunder. And when we seek the word of God, we choose false prophets. When we decide that we are going to set off seeking, setting sail on the sea of all knowledge heading for the horizon of truth, looking for God along the way, we already know what we find. We find ourselves, our own wants, and our own desires. We find the gods we want to find.

The people of God in Jeremiah's time went seeking for God and truth, and when a true prophet spoke God's word to them, they instead chose false prophets who told them exactly what they wanted to hear. The same is true in our gospel reading. The Greeks that desire to see Jesus hear the voice of God declare the glory of the holy name, and they assume it's thunder! Even Will, for as open minded as he was, for as polite as he was when it came to listening to other points of view or philosophies, Will would often simply ignore or disregard any part of any philosophy or religion that challenged him. Will would seek, sure, but for the years that I knew him, all of his seeking didn't seem to change him. It only ever made him more assured of himself. Rather than leading him to new revelations about truth and the nature of God and reality, he only ever seemed to find that his first instinct was right all along. As time went on, Will simply became more convinced of his own truth, more dismissive of new ideas (especially challenging ones), more certain that he was done seeking, more certain that he had found what he was looking for.

But in this way, Will isn't unique. The people in Jeremiah's time who were convinced they had found the true word of God did their best to get rid of Jeremiah. They threw him into a well, punched him in the face, and so on, because they had found the true prophets and Jeremiah was just trying to lead them astray.

So it is with us, and with all people. We go seeking for God, and when we're convinced we've found God, in power, wisdom, honor, wealth, and might, we begin to serve the god we've found. The problem is that the god we find is not God in Christ Jesus, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachael. The god we find is ourselves: our own desires and ideas about truth projected into heaven. But we're so convinced that we're such good seekers that we assume that the god we've found is the God we were looking for. So, then we start serving the gods that we've found, gods of power, wealth, status, and security, but ultimately serving ourselves. And so, it's unsurprising that the one true God in Jesus Christ offers us challenging words: if we want to live, we have to die. All the prophets, not just Jeremiah, offer us words of challenge. They show us that our lives are steeped in injustice and cruelty, and the one true God's desire is to resist that.

All of us humans, not just seekers like Will or the Greeks or the people of Jeremiah's time, are bad at seeking. Even on Good Friday, when Pontius Pilate asks, "What is truth?" he does so while Jesus the truth is staring him in the face. We're bad seekers because we search for

God in all the places where we want to be found: in power, prestige, wealth, honor, wisdom, and might.

But instead of being among the rich, powerful, and wealthy we find Jesus in the exact opposite place. We find Jesus on the cross: not a place of power, wealth, wisdom or strength, but of powerlessness, poverty, foolishness, and weakness. This is where God in Christ Jesus, our one true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel is to be found. We're bad at seeking, because our God is found in the last place anyone would ever think to look.

But the good news is that God doesn't expect us to seek and find God. If this were a game of hide and seek, we're not the seekers. We're the ones who are hiding. The entirety of the Bible is about all of the ways that our God seeks us! The story of God and God's people is one where God comes to us, to seek us out, over and over, to bring us healing, redemption and salvation. *This* is our God, not hidden away in secret truths waiting to be found, but *seeking* us, a wayward and disobedient people. The cross is not actually the place where God chooses to *hide*, it is the place where Christ is *lifted up*, so that everyone from every nation, Jew and Greek, hider and seeker may be found.

In one of my final conversations with Will before graduation, he asked me how I found Jesus. I told him I didn't, Jesus found me. There was no secret knowledge, or hidden way, but in my life as a Christian, as a part of Christian community, in worship and service, prayer and meditation I was found. It was the only advice I could give my friend.

From the cross, our God searches us out, again. Seeking us, to bring forgiveness, wholeness, salvation, and life everlasting, ready or not. Thanks be to God, Amen.