

‘HIDE AND SEEK’
Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Mark 10:17-31
Kate Stewart, Guest Preacher
October 15, 2006
Copyright © 2006

Have you ever felt disconnected from God? Wondered where God might be? Have you ever thought: If I could just talk to God, one on one, then I might understand why. Why isn't life fair, why I was born this way, why is there suffering – why, why, why? Yet instead of answers it feels like God is hiding, nowhere to be found.

This was exactly what Job was feeling. Just listen to the words from today's readings: "Oh that I knew where I might find God! I would find out what he would answer me, and consider what he would say. If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him." There are many different reasons why you or I might have trouble connecting with God. Maybe tragedy has hit, and we can't understand why God has allowed innocents to suffer. Maybe we have a big decision to make, and we are afraid of what God might say. Perhaps we have gotten so wrapped up in the intellectual arguments of religion and philosophy that we have disconnected from our heart and feelings. Or we have toiled for justice and peace for so long and are heart broken that the world, it seems, is still struggling with basic concepts. Whatever the reason, each of us, at one time or another, has faced or will face a time where God feels far away, even absent. And the catch phrase of my youth, "If God feels distant, guess who moved?", is a cheap answer, giving us no chance to explore the longing inside of us to just know the mind of God. So what do we do when it feels like God is playing hide and seek?

When I was in college I participated in a weekend Christian retreat. At one point in the retreat we all received letters from our friends and family. My father wrote me a letter that was short and to the point and that I have held on to for almost 20 years now. The letter went like this:

Dear Kate-

Keep Searching – Keep seeking,
Keep your mind open to all experiences
You may get to know yourself and your relationship to others. It takes a lot of trying,
There ain't no mathematical formula for life,
You'll do good, Love ya – Pop

Those simple lines have worked in a lot of different situations. Today they are our guide for what to do when God feels distant. First, "keep searching, keep seeking." My dog's name is Jake. He is a good dog. Monica and I will often take him to the dog park and let him walk along off leash. When we first started this, Jake would put his nose down and follow the preset path just knowing where it was that we were going. We didn't always want to take the same path when we were on walks, so we needed to get his attention. We could have put him back on the leash and simply led him to a new path; but,

instead, we taught him to watch where we were going. Rather than calling his name to get him to connect (and most likely having him run the other direction and thus learn to run from his name), Monica had me let him run out a bit and then told me to hide behind a tree. This might not work with all dogs, but with Jake the result was that after a time of keeping nose to the path he looked up and couldn't find me. He stopped and looked back for the security of his owner; when he couldn't see me he came running back to where I had been. And once his focus was on me instead of on "the path" we were able to go off in new directions. I'm not suggesting that we are dogs nor that God is our owner; but I am suggesting that we are in relationship with God and that in that relationship God wants us focused on Him, not the preset path. He trusts us with "free will" to go and do as we see fit. At times it might appear that God is missing – hiding – when all that is wanted is that we long for the security of God and seek after him; go back to where we last saw God and perhaps we will get to go in a whole new direction. Anthony Bloom in his book of devotions says "the fact that God can make Himself present or can leave us with the sense of His absence is part of this live and real relationship." So, "seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you."

But how do we keep seeking? Job spoke of going forward and back, to the right and to the left. When God seems to be hiding, the seeking is not usually done by physically moving. Seeking is asking the hard questions; it is crying out to God with our pain. Winston Churchill said, "If you are going through hell, keep going." Continuing to search means to continue to move. It keeps us from becoming complacent or stagnant. To keep seeking is to be able to stand up and say, "I don't know how to pray, help me to pray." It's realizing that crying out to God is prayer. It can include doubting what we think we know. William Sloane Coffin said in the book, *Letters to a young doubter*, "Doubts move you forward, not backward, just as long as you doubt out of love of the truth." Seeking means being willing to grow and to look in places where we might not have previously thought to look. This leads us right into the second line of my father's letter.

"Keep your mind open to all experiences." Perhaps we can't find God because we have a pre-conceived notion of how God will act and where God might be. We're stuck on that pre-defined path. We've closed our minds to the idea that God could be doing something new, or something that we don't understand. There might be another way. In the gospel reading today, the young person came to Jesus wanting to know what he had to do for "eternal life." It is safe to say that this young man came with an already formed idea of what that would take. He had kept the commandments since he was a boy. He was looking to Jesus to justify him. Instead, Jesus pushes him to go one step further to open up to a new experience. But it is not something the young man can comprehend and he goes away sad. Jesus asks us to give up our pre-conceived notions of how it all works and follow Him, wherever He may lead. Even if that takes us from the beaten path. Too often we try to put God in a box and expect certain actions and reactions as if God were controlled by our ideas and images. "We are shortsighted when we try to think of why God does things in relationship to us. That presupposes it's about us. Maybe it's about something bigger than that. Maybe we don't have all the information." The story of Job was a new way of thinking for the Israelites. It was the ancient tradition, passed down in Israel in both written and oral form, which accounted for human suffering with the theory that it is only the guilty who suffer. The arguments of Job's friends in the book of Job are the arguments of the Israelite people. One friend tells Job he must have sinned and another blames his family. Job knows he has done no

wrong but still is afflicted. God was doing something different, something they didn't understand. He was forging a new path, a new way of seeing the world. So if God seems to be hiding, think outside the box: seek Him in new ways; open your mind to new possibilities.

If you keep seeking and you are willing to be open to new ways that God might be present, "you may get to know yourself and your relationship with others. It takes a lot of trying." Okay, back to Job. Here was a good God-fearing man; a man who was "upright and blameless." And through the first chapters of the book of Job we see his business, his livelihood destroyed, his family destroyed, and his health taken from him. As I said earlier, in the Israelite tradition this type of destruction would only happen to a guilty man. So, after having suffered all this injustice, Job is visited by "friends" who urge him to admit his wrong doing or the wrong doing of his household. His wife even urges him to curse God and die. Tell me this isn't a crucible for learning who your friends really are and who you really are. When the easy answers aren't supplied by God, we are forced to look inside ourselves and see the person we really are. Some people will choose to not be true to themselves – they will "curse God and die" – choosing to believe that God will forever be absent. These are the people where the path is more important than the connection with God. Others will dig in and find their true strength; they will hang to their integrity as Job did and get to know themselves more. It is during those times when we feel alone or on our own that we truly get to know ourselves and our relationships. Many people today cannot stand to be alone, cannot stand silence. The TV is on, or the radio; the cell phone gets picked up and used to call some friend or acquaintance. Sometimes when it feels like God is distant, it is so that we can sit with ourselves and get to know who we are and how we connect with others; it is a time for us to be truly honest with ourselves, about our relationships, including the one we have with God.

Finally, there ain't no mathematical formula for life. I've seen today theology that speaks of prosperity for the children of God. Often today we hear that God loves us and wants us to be successful, and we start believing in God as Santa Claus or a Pez dispenser. What we want will be handed to us if we simply follow the formula: follow "THE PATH." But the story of Job flies in the face of that theology. Job followed the formula, he was good and upright, and he suffered great losses. The rich man in the gospel followed the formula, he had followed the commandments since he was a boy and he walked away sad, for God asked more of them both. Job gets to the reality of our faith. Is our faith based on a magical God who saves us from accidents and cures us of cancer? Or is it based on a deeper, sincere, unanswerable mystery that there is something more in life? There are many today who want set answers, who want a formula, an "if then else clause," a set path that they can keep their nose down and follow. But this is cheap faith, faith that is used as a substitute for responsibility and thinking. Rather than the faith that William Sloane Coffin said that "should help make good thinking possible." I still remember a movie we watched in high school youth group. It was about some young people who played Dungeons and Dragons and who started living out their characters in real life. The problem with that was that their characters did things that were not acceptable in real life and headed the kids down a destructive path. At the end of the movie we were asked what we had learned. One answer was, "Don't play Dungeons and Dragons." That's the quick surface answer. But the answer that sticks with me is: it's important to remember to think for yourself. Don't let anyone or anything think for you. Asking for the answers, for a set formula, is asking for everything to be black and white and for someone else to do the thinking for you. There are times when the seeming absence of God is so we can stop and think about where we are

and where we are in relationship to God. It lets us work out the problems. And in working them out we can be the agents of God to others.

I still have times when I can't seem to find God, when I don't get it, when I question my faith – God should just be reasonable. The deeper I dig, the more questions arise. The more I think I am following God, the more I wonder what that means. I'd love to tell you I have all the answers, but I'd be lying. All I can tell you is something my Dad once wrote to me: keep seeking, keep searching – keep crying out to God – for prosperity theology won't cut it – life isn't fair – pain, suffering, grief will happen. When you find yourself going through hell, keep going. Keep your mind open to all possibilities – God may be working in a way you don't expect – don't box God in to preset ideas. Take the time to look within and to look around at yourself and your relationships – do they build up? Or tear down. Choose to believe; not because belief gives you all the answers but because by choosing you can continue to search, grow, and dig in deeper.

God may seem absent at times, but often that absence is simply there that we might, like Jake the dog, stop, lookup, get off the beaten path, seek God in new ways and learn to reconnect with God in a deeper and more meaningful way. Amen.