

LOOKING FOR GOD

A sermon preached by the Reverend Dr. Anne Gavin Ritchie, Lent III 2018

Where are you looking for God?

In Jesus' day, his fellow Jews knew *exactly* where to look: *the Jerusalem temple*. The temple was the center of the Jewish universe. The faithful would make pilgrimages to Jerusalem for all the great festivals, particularly Passover.

This is where local people would bring their animals for sacrifice. If pilgrims came from distant countries, they traded their local coinage for money to buy doves, sheep and cattle at the temple site.

The Holy of Holies was the innermost chamber of the temple; a place forbidden to anyone but the High Priest, who himself could only enter once a year, on the day of atonement. It was considered *the* dwelling place of God.

A picture emerges of a God who is distant and inaccessible. A God who requires blood sacrifice.

There was a religious/social pecking order, too. The temple's very *architecture* made it obvious. First in order was the high priest; next, other temple priests; then faithful males; after them, faithful women; then interested gentiles.

The religious elite couldn't help but feel superior to common working people. Unlike their own good selves, common people weren't able to keep the 613 requirements of *torah*, the law.

Enter *Jesus* as today's gospel begins. Here we meet the *angry* Jesus. He overthrows the money-changers tables and drives the animals out of the temple precincts. He yells, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

But they are doing nothing technically wrong. These exchanges were scripturally *required* to make the temple system work. So Jesus' anger extends

much further than the buyers and sellers. Jesus is rejecting the entire temple *system* and its limiting view of God.

For Jesus, God is intimate, close by, never distant. For Jesus, God is desperately concerned for the poor, the oppressed, the sick, the despairing.

Jesus' God loves the *sinner* more than the saint. God can't be confined and doesn't need to be placated. God is active in the world and rejoices whenever people *in* the world act in justice, mercy and love.

That's why, when Jesus is challenged for a sign, he refers to *himself* as the temple of God: "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." God is located, not in the Holy of Holies, but in the person and presence of Jesus. Even *death* will not contain God's radical presence in Christ.

That message is clear in another of John's stories, this one of the Samaritan woman at the well. She worships God on a holy mountain, but observes that the Jews worship God at the temple. How does Jesus respond? He says,

"Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth."

What Jesus is saying and *living* is that God cannot be limited or controlled. We can't keep God in a box. Jesus represents the amazing *freedom* of God to act not only in the world, but within *us*. Jesus, the *embodiment* of God's love, shows up in surprising ways.

In her autobiography, "The Story of a Soul," St. Therese of Lisieux writes about one particular nun who got under her skin. She said that the woman was a constant irritation to her by everything she said and everything she did. Therese writes,

“As I did not want to give way to my natural dislike for her, I told myself that charity (love) should not only be a matter of feeling but should show itself in deeds. So I set myself to do for this sister just what I should have done for someone I loved most dearly.”

So every time she met this nun, she prayed for her. She did things for her day after day, and when she thought she might say something unpleasant about her, Therese just smiled.

“And after all this she asked me one day with a beaming face, ‘Sister Therese, will you please tell me what attracts you so much to me? You give me such a charming smile whenever we meet.’” Therese realized, “Ah! It was Jesus hidden in the depths of her soul who attracted me; Jesus, who makes the bitterest things sweet!”

Here’s a more contemporary example. A woman writes,

“My husband Andrew and I had a disagreement on Sunday before heading off to church. We sat next to each other in the pew, glowering, and I grimaced every time I thought of the upcoming exchange of the sign of peace. Worship went out the window as I wallowed in my annoyance. *Lord, I’m sorry, I prayed. I know it’s wrong, but I’m not going to snap out of this without help.*

“A moment later I thought the problem is that I cannot see Christ in my husband. Bingo! I turned to look at Andrew. Though he wasn’t looking particularly holy, I told myself ‘Christ lives in him. If I can’t see that, it’s not Andrew’s fault, it’s *mine.*’”

It seems seeing Jesus in others does not come naturally -- even for regular churchgoers! It takes making a *decision*; it takes *effort*. But something happens when we do.

All of a sudden, our insular world of self-concern breaks open. We feel a calm we never feel while we’re busy evaluating and judging other people. We discover that we are in the presence of Jesus.

Even harder is seeing Jesus in *ourselves*. I am convinced that our besetting sin is not that we think too *much* of ourselves, it's that we think too *little* of ourselves. "Me, *holy*?" "Me, God's beloved *child*?"

It seems too good to be true, but God's love *makes* it true. Jesus *lives* in us, calling us to follow him into the holiness that marks our truest selves.

So... where are you looking for God?

We might begin by *not* looking at temples built with stones. We might look instead into the temple of our own *hearts*.

That's where we'll always find Jesus. And that's where Jesus finds *us*.