

The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
First Sunday in Lent – March 10, 2019
Deuteronomy 26:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13

I'm sure everyone here has played the game of hide-and-seek. Children seem to be universally drawn to hide-and-seek, although I was always a bit suspicious of the game. It seems like it would be great fun: one person is selected to close her eyes and count to some number while everyone else runs and hides. At the appointed time, the seeker then goes about trying to find the hiders.

I don't know about you, but I almost always found the game stressful as a child. As a hider, I worried that either I would be found too quickly or not at all. Really, it was the "not at all" possibility that was the most upsetting. What if no one found me? What if the game ended and everyone left, having forgotten about me? What if I was left alone in this dark place? Someone always did seem to find me, much to my relief. Although, I must admit that from time to time, I would make some noise to give myself away.

I usually preferred to be a seeker, but even then I was worried about not being able to find anyone or that hiders would startle me as I wandered alone in unfamiliar places. Who knows what I might find in the dark or behind the closed door? And it was the quiet of the seeking that made me uneasy – moving quietly through a house that I knew to be filled with hidden children should never be that silent.

While this is a child's game, adults play this game, too – although the stakes are often a bit higher. We claim to be seeking our bliss. Seeking our perfect mate or our one and true vocation. Seeking the best meal, the best deal, the one right path to perfection that has, as yet, eluded us. We are seeking the house, car, wardrobe, and haircut that will define us and tell us that our lives are meaningful.

We are seeking happiness, fulfillment, and satisfaction. We seek and seek - rushing about, expending so much energy searching. The irony, of course, is that what we truly seek – identity, purpose, and meaning – can only be found right where we are. But the distraction of our seeking seems to blind our awareness.

We seek God and a connection to something greater than ourselves in all sorts of places. People are seeking God in yoga, esoteric spiritual practices, drugs, music, and art. People are seeking God in the wildness of nature, as well as within the safety of carefully constructed lives. We are seeking deep within themselves, as well as in far-flung places in every corner of the planet.

Throughout our scripture, we are promised that if we seek God, we will find God. But I think this kind of seeking is different than that of this self-absorbed seeking for meaning that we usually engage in, because God doesn't really need to be *sought* for God already *is*. God is already in our midst; God is already here, and here, and here. God isn't one thing or another...God *is*. Like a very young child who plays hide and seek with his father and after the father opens his eyes and says 'ready or not, here I come', he finds his young son standing right beside him, smiling. Like this young son, God wants to be found and the seeker need not to go anywhere to find him. Maybe if we stopped seeking so hard, we would realize that.

Several years ago, I heard the Rev. Philip Jackson of Trinity Wall Street preach. In his sermon, he used the philosopher Charles Taylor's imagery to frame the three arenas we may inhabit in our moral and ethical development. We are first brought into the corral, where we are safely contained. In the corral, the abiding concern is "what should I do?" The focus is on acting in right ways in order to be a good person. While it is safe in the corral, it is also crowded – there are lots of distractions and focus is on each other. We spend much of our time jockeying for position and negotiating how we will be in relation to each other.

Moving out from the corral, we find ourselves in the fields. There is more space in the fields, more room to breathe. In the fields, it is less bounded and that can be discomfoting. In the fields, the question is not "what should I do?" but "who should I be?" This is a bit more like the mid-life crisis of "is this all there is? Is this really who I am to be?" In the fields we ask deep self-identity questions, but the focus should turn from mere self-absorption to focus instead on what is my goal; who am I called to be? What should be my best and highest expression of self? The concern here is more about human flourishing rather than rules of duty.

But beyond the fields lies another land... the forest. The forest is a wild place, full of possibility and risk. It is exciting in the forest but also dangerous, because it is uncharted and easy to lose one's way. It is often hard to find ones' place, for perspective can easily be lost. The trees can hide the sun and stars; it is easy to unknowingly walk in circles. We want a map, but we can't only rely on the ones we are given for they are often misguided and can lead us into danger. But it is in the forest where the greatest potential may be found. The forest is teeming with life and possibility. In the forest the abiding question is now "what commands my greatest love?" What is the one thing that is the real focus, the real purpose, of life – the real and true ground of my being?

This land is also known as the desert, of course. In the desert, all the usual signposts are gone. The rules of the corral don't really work here. The seeking of the best self of the fields is necessary preparation for the desert but will not be enough to carry you through. In the desert, no one emerges unchanged and the way that one is able to traverse it is by brushing away rules and goals and holding on to what lies beneath, behind, and before all of this: God's love.

A few minutes ago, we heard these words: *A wandering Aramean was my ancestor.* This is the truth of who we are – that, we are who we are because those before us journeyed the desert. And they now beckon us to follow. In our lesson from Deuteronomy, we heard this (and I paraphrase):

When you come before the altar of the Lord your God, you shall confess: A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien... When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us... we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction.... The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm... And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

This is our story. This has always been our story. Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and his twelve sons, Moses and the liberated Israelites, the exiles in Babylon: time and again our ancestors wandered the desert. And, of course, Jesus journeyed the deepest into the desert.

It is a dangerous place – a place with a very real threat of death, as well as the place where God may be encountered most openly. A burning bush, a pillar of cloud, a high-desert mountain top theophany...it is in the desert where God speaks most clearly. The desert strips away the distractions and noise of the corral. The desert doesn't give room for the pursuit of self-improvement. The desert lays all this bare, and in our wandering we find the truth. The truth that God is there and has been there all the time. No more seeking is necessary. What commands our greatest love? The God who is our Creator, Lover, and Sustainer. The God of our salvation is the God that will be revealed to be present, should we have the courage to enter the desert.

No longer afforded the luxury of distraction and self-delusion, in the desert we find that all that remains is God. The claim in the book of revelations that God is the Alpha and the Omega makes sense here – God is, was, and will always be. We now understand what it means when God gives his name to Moses as “I AM that I am” – and we understand that we *are* because God *is*.

And now, in this moment, we enter the season of Lent. Lent is a desert time. It is a time to not only enter the desert with Jesus but to remain there – to wander – for the next 40 days. Like for Jesus, it may be a time of hunger and discomfort – it may even be a time of temptations and testing. But also like Jesus, we will not be alone – God will be with us. Filled with the Holy Spirit, we will be accompanied and sustained. *A wandering Aramean was my ancestor*. In the desert, we *will* wander. But we will not need to seek, for God is always with us.

Amen.