

In Search of God

A Sermon preached by Rev. Maggie Wallin
At First Congregational Church Gaylord
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I suspect that each person here in the sanctuary or watching the service on livestream today has at least one story concerning their own search for God – their own experience of that search from beginning to resolution or perhaps lack thereof. I am fairly certain that this is true because I believe that we are designed, with an innate desire, a longing for something beyond our knowledge, beyond our understanding, and at the edge of our experience. Some might call it the “God shaped hole.” This is a phrase that has been used to describe that part of us that naturally is unsatisfied with all the things that we seek to fill it with, whether that might be gold or other riches, or food, drink, power, work, drugs, sensuous experiences, etc. Attempts to satisfy this craving, this yearning, for the divine using **non** divine substitutes forms the basis of many addictions. But that is a topic for another day.

For today, let us take a moment or two to remember a time when we felt a strong desire to experience the divine, when we perhaps sorely needed a sense of the divine, a sense of God’s continuing love and care for us as God’s children, a sense that somehow we still have connection, are still part of God’s family and within God’s ambit of care. The initial desire – a yearning – often springs from dramatic, dire, or at least surprising circumstances, times when we find ourselves at the end of what we know to do to salve our emotions, or to deal with the various pieces of what is happening – when there is so much going on that we are on overload, or we are so depleted that we find ourselves in the depths of despair. When we desperately need to make some sense of the craziness that sometimes invades our lives. Big events like a tornado, or a fire, a violent act, or life-threatening illness, among other things can trigger this need.

Yet, there are sometimes quieter stirrings for the search, a niggling feeling that we are missing out on the best of what life has to offer. Whether by large startling event or small persistent urgings, we begin to search for something that is missing, even if we don’t yet really know what that something is. So, take a

moment now and think about what may have instigated or precipitated your times of search, what sparked the need, or spurred you on to search for God.

Then, consider and remember how and where or how you went searching. What methods did you use? Meditation, prayer, physical relocation, perhaps music. And then, what did you find? What was your experience? Did you find God where you expected? Did you get the experience you expected or desired? Did Matthew's words in Chapter 7:7 become real for you? You know, the assurance that goes something like this:

"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.

Did your experience resolve/fill the need?

Now, while I have you off thinking about your own journeys, and in acknowledgement that I have had about 24hours longer to think about these things than you have, I would like to share some of one of my searching times before opening it up for others who may be willing to share theirs.

In August of 1987, my mother at age 68, sought medical assistance due to her somewhat sudden, but noticeably increasing, inability to use words correctly. She was a word person – Readers Digest fan of expanding her word power, a daily devotee of the crosswords, she suddenly was unable to reliably come up with correct words to express her thought. She was diagnosed with a stage 4 glioblastoma, astrocytoma in her brain. This diagnosis meant that her language center, where the original or central piece of tumor was, formed the base for all these finger-like projections that were reaching to all the other parts of her brain. The cancer was inoperable. We did not know then that we would have a total of 7 months before her condition would end her life.

In the testing phase of the diagnosis process, she was told to stop certain of her medications. This precipitated a crisis that took her from Sparrow Hospital in Lansing to University of Michigan Hospital in Ann Arbor, where she joined the patients of the brain tumor research program. At that time, I was I was working full time for the Court of Appeals in downtown Lansing. I was the only child in town, making daily trips to Ann Arbor with my father to be present and assuring of our care and love. It was **exhausting**. But I was a believer. I knew I needed something. I am not sure I even knew what it was I needed, but for a lot of reasons, I was nearly at the end of myself, so I determined to seek out God.

As it happened, my office was less than 3 blocks away from my church in downtown Lansing. There was, I knew, a little chapel there that was open all the time for prayer. So that is where I went on my lunch hour. I went to the chapel, seeking God, sort of showing up and hoping to experience something – an uplift, a filling with energy, a warmth, -- anything that would help me through this long term crisis and help me continue to believe that God still loved me, that God would help see me through this hard time, would direct me in my actions and thoughts so that I could be a force for good and a witness of faith and a source of care for my other family members. So, I arrived at the chapel, and I entered it, finding it cool inside and very dark. There were no lights on, and I did not know where the switch to turn them on would be. No cell phone to light my way in those days. So I just sat in the dark – showing up for God and waiting

I was disappointed to not find God where I thought God should be. There was stillness and quiet, but the chapel felt empty and cold to me. I went back to work after a half hour or so, perplexed more than anything else by the experience. Then, that day's trip to Ann Arbor taught me a profound lesson. That we do not – and cannot control or even predict with any accuracy the place, way, or manner in which God will show up. BUT God is always present, always loving, always working for good. You see, when we arrived at my mother's room, there were nurses, and the

chaplain, and other folk in that room. They seemed to form a loving cocoon around us as they told us what was happening and what the likely outcome would be, and helped us to make decisions for my mother that she could not make for herself, although we all knew what she would want.

In that encounter, I saw God at work in that group of people there to support us, there to care for my mother, but also her family. In that experience, one that continues to affect me in profound ways, I have learned that seeking God is not always a matter of going to the church, or to the chapel and expecting God to show up. In fact, seeking is far too active a word for sometimes, when the only activity on the needful person's part is to be open to the seeing. Openness to seeing **is** a way to seek. Don't misunderstand me, attending and participating in a church can be a good thing, some might even say not a bad start. I mean sometimes God shows up at church in powerful ways. But what I want to impart to you is that seeking God **ALSO** includes the readiness to see God at work in the world – often through God's people, sometimes even through people who are unacquainted with God, yet are clearly inspired by the divine, as they perform their tasks with love and care, despite perhaps their lack of awareness of God at work in and through them.

So with this newer profound (for me) understanding, I began to really see God at work in and through the entire process of this illness and death. The people of the church continuously supported us through that difficult period. As I have seen so often here, folks brought food, visits, comfort, prayers, love. We were well cared for. My mother was well cared for, and in some significant ways was healed of old wounds. It was a terrible but miraculous time, a time of opening our eyes to see God just about wherever we looked. It was amazing.

I am reminded of the TV series Joan of Arcadia – a show in which God shows up in many forms: a child, a black janitor, a bus driver, etc. It was always interesting to see the different forms the writers imagined for God. Divine words could come from the mouth of some surprising

characters! And that has been my experience in life. When I have needed it, divine help shows up. Sometimes I am quicker than others to recognize the source of that help. Sometimes, I could swear that the words coming out of unexpected people in what I might think to be unlikely places, speak to my need and begin to heal my wounds. It is a miracle ever time it happens.

So that is one of my stories of seeking/finding God. As I said in the beginning, I am sure each person has an experience. Perhaps a unique one, perhaps one shared by others. No two people are exactly alike and no one knows **that** better than the God who created us, knitted us together in our mothers' womb. Is there anyone who would like to share?

So, now I am wondering whether there is anyone who would like to share their own story of seeking God. Where do you go for inspiration? Where did or do you expect to find God? What has been your experience?

Give thanks for any who share their experience.

Give thanks to God for God's presence, God's ability and willingness and desire to work through others so that we might know divine love. Ask for support for sharing that love with others. Amen.