

February 4, 2018
The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

"EVERYONE IS SEARCHING"
by Mary Anne Biggs

Isaiah 40:21-31 ~ Mark 1:29-39

Where's Jesus? Where do you look for Jesus, and when? I once heard the story of an elderly man who was quite ill who said to his wife, "You know, Sarah, you've always been with me ... through the good and through the bad. Like the time I lost my job ... you were right there by my side. And the war came, and I enlisted ... you became a nurse so you could be with me. Then I was wounded, and you were there, Sarah, right by my side. Then the economy tanked, and we lost everything ... but you were there with me. When our son got into trouble and we didn't know what to do, once again you were right there by my side. And now, here I am, sick as a dog, and as always, you're right here beside me. You know, Sarah, you're bad luck!

Well, most of us look for Jesus mainly when we're having bad luck, in a crisis, at our wit's end, up against something we can't handle by ourselves. Problem is, Jesus can be hard to find when you need him. At least it can seem that way.

Our gospel story today bothers me in a few places. It is the sabbath. Jesus has just come from the synagogue where he astonished the townspeople by healing a man with an unclean spirit. He comes to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law is sick with a fever. I imagine her saying, "Oy vey! What a son-in-law. First, he quits his job. Now here I am on my death bed and he's bringing friends home for dinner!"

Jesus takes her hand, and the fever leaves her. It's a beautiful image. He takes her hand. There's a whole sermon, right there, on the healing power of touch. Where illness makes most of us pull away and take universal precautions, Jesus never hesitates to touch the sick ... and his touch is always healing. So is ours, I think, at least to some small degree. There are times when any touch is inappropriate. But the right touch at the right time ... a handshake, a hug, an arm around the shoulder, a pat on the back ... tells a person you care and that they are worth caring about. And that is unusually healing for someone who has been sidelined by illness or tragedy or shame.

Mark says, "*He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them*" (Mark 1:31). Now *that* bothers me. It's right there in the text and you can't help but wonder ... "Jesus heals this woman so she can serve them?" I could talk about how Jesus heals us so that we might serve others ... or that Jesus is showing the disciples that the healing work of the gospel begins at home ... but frankly I would feel better if the text weren't such a clear picture of women's subservient role in the culture of the time ... and still, to a great degree, in ours'.

When the evening comes and the Sabbath is over, the whole town comes knocking at the door. It's quite a scene ... men hobbling along on crutches, women carrying sick children, people coughing and wheezing ... and Jesus heals them all.

In the Gospel accounts, Jesus never comes across sick people without healing those who seek it. To be sure, there were other miracle workers and healers in Jesus' day. His opponents did not challenge his miracles per se ... they accused him of healing by the power of Beelzebub (Matt 12). But Jesus is unique in his mission and message ... and healing is part of both.

I like the next part, too. Jesus gets up early in the morning while it is still dark, and finds a solitary place to pray. His outward public ministry flows from his inward private communion with God. Throughout the clamor and chaos of his journey, Jesus remains remarkably centered in the presence of God. In this storied movement from the crowded confusion at Simon's door ... to the stillness of Jesus' prayer ... we ourselves are called to center in God's Spirit for our own ministry in the world. Too often we oppose service with spirituality ... and Christians focus upon one or the other. But they are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are mutually essential. Service to people in need will drive you to worship and prayer ... or burn you out. Worship and prayer will always lead you to service in God's name ... or you become self-serving and self-delusional. One of the strange tensions of the scripture is this simultaneous command to action and to waiting. *"Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength"* (Isa 40:31). If Jesus needed times of silent and prayerful waiting before God that he might be empowered for action ... then surely so do we.

While Jesus is out praying, a crowd has gathered again. Perhaps the disciples have been beating the bushes ... building on Jesus' fame from the day before. I can hear them strategizing now. "Who knows where this may go? We won't even have to leave home base. As word gets out, people will come from far and near. They will do whatever Jesus tells them. They will make him their King. Who knows? Maybe he will lead them even to throw out the Romans. Yeah. That's the ticket! They will start a new world order with Jesus at the top and we will be his right-hand advisors."

But where is Jesus at this golden moment of opportunity? They go looking for him, and finally discover his hiding place. "Jesus, where have you been?" Simon Peter chides. "What are you doing here? Everyone is searching for you." And Jesus looks up from his prayer, and says, "Boys, let's go. It's time to move on." He doesn't go back to the crowd. He doesn't maximize the opportunity. He doesn't heal the people who have come begging the day after. He doesn't do what Simon says.

When I read this story again in preparation for our worship today, Simon's comment leapt out at me ... as I think it is supposed to do. "Everyone is searching for you," Simon says ... meaning of course that Jesus should jump up and come running to meet them. "Everyone is searching for you." Is that true? Is everybody searching for Jesus?

When I was a young Christian, I believed everybody was searching for Jesus ... whether he or she realized it or not. Surely everybody is searching for something, right? Who is satisfied with what they have? Everybody is searching for happiness and fulfillment. They look for it in relationships, romance, or parenthood, or through acquisition, in the quest for status or power or wealth. They look for it in a bottle or with a pill. But they will not find what they are searching for in any of those things ... good or bad. Only Jesus can give those things meaning or show us they are meaningless. Only Jesus can fill that God-shaped vacuum in the human heart. As Augustine prayed, *"You have made us for Yourself, and we do not rest until we rest in You."* And the Bible says that God is searching for us, too. From the story of Eden where the rebellious Adam and Eve hide themselves and the heartbroken God comes searching in the

garden calling, "Where are you? Where are you? Where are you?" (Gen 3:9) ... the Bible is the story of God reaching out to humanity for reconciliation and relationship. That's why Jesus came ... to call us back to God. So, I thought my role as a Christian was to help people understand what they were really searching for in life was Jesus ... and to introduce them to him. And I still believe that, except.

If God is searching for us and we are searching for God ... then why is it so hard for us to find one another? I'm not so sure that everyone is searching for Jesus after all. I don't think most people want to connect with God ... on God's terms. Oh sure, we want what Jesus can do for us ... so we turn to him in a time of trouble and want him to heal us ... we turn to him in a time of challenge and want him to help us ... we turn to him in a time of opportunity and want him to make us successful. But Jesus won't play our game of "Simon Says." Or to use Tillich's phrase, God refuses to be our "Cosmic Bellhop," jumping to fulfill our every request.

But I also resonate with Simon's predicament in this story. Throughout my ministry, I have stood by the bedside of the sick and dying ... I have listened to the stories of people struggling with relationships and personal problems ... and I have prayed to Jesus ... in some cases again and again and again ... for their healing and deliverance. But Jesus won't play "Mary Anne says" either. Jesus doesn't do whatever I ask ... whenever I ask it ... even when it seems obvious to me that it is the right thing for him to do.

Why doesn't Jesus do what Simon asks? Earlier, Mark tells us "*Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'*" (Mark 1:14-15). His mission is to call people to a radical turnaround ... a reorientation of their lives to the grace of God. His physical miracles are in service to a greater gospel of eternal life in the presence of God. Turns out throughout the gospels Jesus often has to resist the agendas people want to put on him. People want to be healed of illness ... but they don't want the deeper healing Jesus offers which would mean a different way of being in the world ... even a different social order. They want him to feed their bellies ... but they don't want him to fill their souls. But Jesus isn't interested in salving their wounds without healing their hearts. Sometimes we are more afraid of the cure than we are of the disease.

The reason people became disenchanted with Jesus in the end is precisely because he wasn't interested in saving the Free world, organizing an evangelical campaign or founding a new religion. All Jesus wanted to do was preach the Good News. The Good News, of course, required that people change themselves before they try to change the world or other people ... and after a while, that 'good news' began to sound like "bad news" to a whole lot of people.

On other occasions, Jesus refuses to do what he wants the disciples *themselves* to do. Maybe Simon is trying to pass the buck to Jesus here because he is terrified of dealing with the demons in the lives of the people around him. Sometimes, when people are waiting for God ... when people are searching for Jesus because they need help ... Jesus wants to send us to embody his love. Jesus wants us to take their hand and lift them up. Jesus wants us to go to them with the message of good news. Jesus wants us to offer the spiritual healing that surpasses even the healing of the body. Who do you know that is searching for Jesus? Who do you know that is waiting for God? Could it be they are waiting for God in you?

The Bible says that Christ is always with us, in good times and bad. But he won't always do things our way. I am not happy about that, though. My life would be easier and my faith would be easier if Jesus would just do what I ask him to do when I ask him to do it. It doesn't work that way, of course, because, hey, he's Jesus, and I'm just me. Still, I trust him.

Where's Jesus? Where do you look for Jesus, and when? You've seen the series of children's books called "Where's Waldo?" This funny character in a striped hat is inserted into busy fantastic scenes of human chaos and celebration. You have to look hard, look close to find him. It isn't easy. Sometimes it takes a long time, but he's always there somewhere. Following Jesus is like "Where's Waldo." Jesus seldom comes to us in glorious epiphanies, dramatic and sweet. Instead, we find him now and then between the pages of our ordinary lives ... or glimpse him here or there moving among the crowd. You have to look hard, look close to find him. It isn't easy. Sometimes it takes a long time, but he's always there somewhere. Sometimes you will only find him in the secret place of prayer. And he keeps moving on. You turn the page of another day ... you have to search again to find him. And then, when you find him, you try to follow his way instead of forcing him to follow yours.

When do you look for Jesus? The answer should be *always*. Then let us go out and continue our journey. Let us search everywhere to find him, to see what's he doing, to follow where he is going ... because this is the adventure to which he calls us ... this is the journey that leads to spiritual healing and everlasting life.

May we pray?

Jesus, our Savior, we long for you. We need you. Do not be far from our searching. Help us when we lose our way to stop and find you in silent, prayerful waiting. Then give us the faith and the courage to follow your way instead of trying to bend you to our own. And as we seek after you, let us also be your healing touch and your loving word of good news to a lost and suffering world. Amen.