

Sermon by the Rt. Rev'd John Stephens
Proper 5 Year B February 7, 2021

Episcopal Visit to All Saints', Ladner

Well so how are you managing? This pandemic carries on doesn't it? We continue to hunker down and most of us have had more than enough of it. Unless you are a hermit or one who loves social isolation or have had the vaccine, we are mostly in pandemic overload, a COVID excess, a coronavirus congestion. We have had enough. It has been about a year of social distancing, of masks, handwashing and less interaction with loved ones and friends. Not to mention living with the fear of contracting the illness, or a loved one doing the same. It has been a difficult time for all of us, filled with boredom, worry and loneliness. And to top it all off our churches cannot offer in person worship. The social distancing needed sadly includes restricting our ability to physically come together to worship the One who gives us life and feeds our souls. We can still worship God, God with us and God amongst us but we just cannot gather to do so. And so we are mostly doing this in front of our computers or televisions or even our phones.

Many churches, and I know that All Saints' is in this camp, but many churches have been surprised by the numbers of people watching their online

worship. Whether it be Zoom or recorded earlier or livestreamed, the number of people tuning in has been a very pleasant surprise. Many more than the usual gathered community. This has me intrigued.

Now I have not made a formal study of this but I have spoken to a number of people who have been watching online church services who would rarely come to an in person worship service. The reason they give to me for watching is that they are curious. Curious about what we do. Curious about our traditions. Curious about our faith. Curious about God. Curious about what we believe. Curious about how they might feed their own soul. Intriguing.

There was a phrase in the gospel passage for today that really caught my attention. Maybe you didn't notice it for it had no flashing lights surrounding it or much emphasis to draw your attention. It was something found in the mundane and ordinariness of the passage. Something that you could consider from several different angles.

The phrase was "Everyone is searching for you." Jesus has left the home early in the morning to seek a place of solitude and silence to offer prayer and meditation. His disciples did not know where to find him and a search party was formed. That's the background. But I just want to dwell on the words that drew my focus. Everyone is searching for you. For they are words that might mean

much to we people of faith. Everyone is searching for you. For if you believe, as I do, that all human beings are born with a feeling within us that we need to draw closer, draw nearer, to God. We have it within us this desire to search for God, to know God more intimately, to know the One who first breathed life into us. To know our purpose, meaning and depth of our soul. Everyone is searching for you.

Martin Buber writes this, see if it rings a bell or strikes a chord with you:
“There is something that can be found in one place. It is a great treasure, which may be called the fulfilment of existence. The place where this treasure can be found is the place on which one stands.

“Most of us achieve only at rare moments a clear realization of the fact that we have never tasted the fulfillment of existence, that our lives do not participate in true, fulfilled existence, that, as it were, it passes true existence by. We nevertheless feel the deficiency at every moment, and in some measure strive to find – somewhere—what we are seeking. Somewhere, in some province of the world or of the mind, except where we stand, where we have been set—but it is there and nowhere else that the treasure can be found. The environment which I feel to be the natural one, the situation which has been assigned to me as my fate, the things that happen to me day after day, the things that claim me day after day—these contain my essential task and such fulfillment of existence as is

open to me. It is said of a certain Talmudic master that the paths of Heaven were as bright to him as the streets of a person's native town. It is a greater thing if the streets of a person's native town are as bright to him or her as the paths of Heaven. For it is here, where we stand, that we should try to make shine the light of the hidden divine life."

We search, we seek, we desire to know God with us and amongst us. We saw that in Jesus Christ but we seek that connection within our own soul and spirit as well. Everyone is searching for you, the disciples said, little did they know that those words would echo in the universe and be heard even by us two thousand years later.

In the passage from the prophet known as Isaiah, we also heard words that point to this great human ache within us, the desire to be known by God and to know God near.

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

Has it not been told you from the beginning?

Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

It is God who sits above the circle of the earth,

and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;

who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,

and spreads them like a tent to live in;
who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

You see there is a discovery that can take place in a time like this. This pandemic time. There is a discovery that can happen despite being shut in our homes and kept away from those we love. There is a discovery that takes place as we start to look a little more deeply and critically at our lives and our purpose. A discovery that we want a greater depth and meaning. We want to live what it is that we claim as most important in the centre of our very selves. We want to claim connection to the one who breathed life into us from the beginning and has throughout. We want to understand how we are connected to the life and the way and the truth that Jesus brought and revealed and reminded. We want to claim that our Baptism invites us into closer relationship with God and with all people. We want to know that we are loved and known and cherished. We want to see that if we are beloved of God then the same is true of those around us, searching for the same connection to holiness and wonder.

What are you searching for?