



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 3 – Proper 5 Year B

Where Are You?

[RCL]: Genesis 3:8-15; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35

It's a familiar scene: parents and grandparents lingering in conversation on the steps of the parish hall after coffee hour, as their children and grandchildren make the most of the beautiful early summer day. They scamper through the churchyard with cheerful squeals and, after a few moments of frolic, they decide to organize a game of hide and seek.

One little girl volunteers to be the “seeker,” and the other children scatter, searching out the perfect hiding place. The seeker begins her count: “Twenty... nineteen...eighteen...” One child scampers behind the bushes; another under the stairs... “thirteen...twelve...eleven...” Time is running short, and all the good hiding places have been snatched up! Quick! Behind the recycling bins! “Three...two...one...Ready or not, here I come!”

The seeker gleefully stomps around, looking under bushes and behind trees, calling out, “Where are you?”

The child's joyful and innocent question rings out across the churchyard, but it also rings in our ears, drawing our attention to today's reading from the third chapter of Genesis. The scene unfolding there is also familiar—and perhaps one of the most familiar scenes the world has ever known. Eden is the backdrop for the creation stories of both Christianity and Judaism, and although it is spoken of differently in the Qur'an, it nonetheless figures prominently in Islam.

By the time our reading begins in verse eight, the serpent (who by the way is never identified as Satan in Scripture) has already deceived Adam and Eve into disobeying God's command. Now they are engaged in a hide and seek game of their own—and the stakes are high.

As they hunker down in the garden like children attempting to hide their trespasses, God seeks after them, fully aware that something has gone very, very wrong.

We listen as God calls out to them, “Where are you?”

This is the first question that God asks in Scripture and, as is the case with every good story, it is asked not just of the characters on the page and in the scene, but of every single one of us.

At once, the question assumes an answer—we are not where we should be—and poses yet another question—where *should* we be?

The last one hundred years have been marked by the exponential growth and sophistication of technology. The world is undoubtedly more connected than ever, but it may also be more distracted than ever. Scientists have long warned about the dangers of getting distracted by technology. When left unchecked, it can distract us from everything from our ability to have meaningful face-to-face conversations, to keeping our eyes on the road and off our screens as we drive.

So it is with our lives of faith.

In his commentary on the Book of Genesis, Walter Brueggemann suggests that the serpent in the Garden of Eden is the world's first theologian because it is the serpent who convinces humankind to exchange obedience *to* God for theology *about* God.¹ If we think *about* God narrowly enough, we can distract ourselves into believing that we can think our way to salvation. Our knowledge becomes a means of self-preservation and protection, rather than a means of transmitting and communicating faith in the living God.

And yet, God cuts through our thick underbrush of words and ideas, persistently calling out to us, “Where are you?”

In the same way, when moments of tension invariably arise in our communities of faith, instead of turning to prayer and patient discernment, we get distracted by arguments and anxieties and self-interests, and so we take our ball and go home. We cut ourselves off from community and, in turn, we short-circuit the possibility of reconciliation.

God's voice calls out after us as we stomp away, “Where are you?”

In order for us to consider this question, we must discern deeply as to where we are in relation to where God is inviting us. Discernment, though, is tricky. Much has been written *about* discernment, but decidedly less attention is afforded to the actual *vocation* of discernment.

One place to start is to take account of all that distracts us from living lives of faithfulness. Distractions may look different for different folks, but their central characteristic is the same: they draw our attention away from focusing on the life-giving parts of our lives.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 47-48, 54-55.

We can become distracted from our relationships with friends and family, and even from our romantic partners. Work that once brought much joy to our lives can become occluded by the desire for position and power, influence and wealth. Even our days of rest and vacation can become muddled with concerns about what we might be missing at work or in the world. All these things distract us from the places in our lives that afford us peace and joy and love, and ultimately, they distract us from our life before God.

But we as individuals aren't the only ones who can become distracted; our churches and communities of faith can get distracted, too. One way that churches become distracted is by focusing on innovation rather than faithfulness. When churches focus on innovation, they define themselves by their programs and ministries, rather than by their witness to the God revealed in Jesus Christ. They focus on the building rather than the builder.

Another way that churches can become distracted is by focusing on entertainment rather than transformation. When churches focus on entertainment, it is almost as if they exist in a vacuum. Walk in the doors, and it is as if you've entered another dimension, completely cut off from the cares and concerns of the real world. Here, the sky is always blue, the water is always calm, and the boat is never rocked. Sermons are as soft and as sweet as cream puffs, offering more self-help than Gospel. When churches fall into the trap of offering individual members a custom-ordered faith—sanding off every jagged edge and smoothing out every rough place—they possess about as much transformative power as the society club at prayer.

The possibilities for getting distracted in our lives, and particularly our lives of faith, are many. But the Good News is that ours is a God who, no matter where we wander or try and hide, relentlessly pursues us, calling out after us, “Where are you?” and inviting us back to Godself.

May we listen intently enough to hear God's voice and discern deeply enough to answer God's call.

Amen.

The Rev. Marshall A. Jolly is Rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Morganton, North Carolina. He is the editor of ModernMetanoia.org—a lectionary-based preaching resource authored exclusively by Millennial clergy, lay leaders, and teachers. Marshall is also an amateur runner, a voracious reader, and a budding chef, all while completing a doctorate at Emory University's Candler School of Theology. Most important and life-giving of all, he's Elizabeth's husband.

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