

Genesis 3:1-14

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?' The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die."' But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?' He said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.' He said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?' The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.' Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent tricked me, and I ate.' The Lord God said to the serpent, 'Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life.'

“If God Searched for Us, Would God Find Us?”

(The thoughts of Abraham Heschel)

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I hope that you have enjoyed the last sermons and sermons we do from time to time here on various theologians. It's just to say that there are different ways of looking at and thinking about God, and it is our conviction that theology, and thinking theologically, is one of the most important things we do at the church. Timothy Keller, in a book entitled *The Reason for God*, introduces the topic by writing, "There is no irrefutable proof that God exists, but many people have found strong clues for this reality. There are divine fingerprints, and they can be found in many places. The fact that we have the sense of the holy at all, where did that come from? The underlying ethic that reminds us to do the right thing when doing the right thing sometimes is against our own self-interest, but it is for the good of the whole and the betterment of some higher ethic. Where does that come from, if not from God? The idea that there is something being asked of us, and that our lives are on broader horizons than we even know. How do we now that, if not from God? The idea that this life is not all there is to life, and that what we begin on earth will be fulfilled beyond this time and space. What is the source of the sense of the eternal, if not God?"

Divine fingerprints, and they hold us and remind us about the God we worship, that there is a God. Many strong clues for this reality, in many places, fingerprints. There is God, but what do we believe about God, and what kind of God do we believe exists? I think it varies, and it varies from person to person, but it also varies at different times in our lives, and I am convinced that one of the things that marks and changes the way in which we look at God depends upon whether we're living in bad times or good times. The answer depends on a number of things, but it comes down basically to this. In difficult days we search for God. In great days, we find God searching for us. In difficult days, we search for God, and this is very personal. In hard times we search for God because we need God. It's been interesting in the lives of my family members, my sister and brother-in-law, my wife's brother and sister-in-law, and my stepfather. They all live in different places and they are all United Methodists, and as of this past July they all got new preachers for their churches. And I've been given a running commentary on how the new preachers are doing.

Kathy's family is the happiest. The new Hinsdale preacher is doing well, things are much improved in Illinois. My sister's church is such a frightening congregation – I've seen them – their new preacher took one look at their church directory and had a heart attack. He is supposed to survive this health issue. It remains to be seen if he survives the people at First Church, Fairmont, West Virginia. My stepfather, Clyde, is 92 years old. He was a church organist, and he's seen his share of preachers on opening day. The minister they had for ten years stood six-foot-two, he was an excellent orator, I heard him many times, he never used notes, and he wandered around the chancel area, and he preached from the heart. The new preacher is four-foot-eleven, he doesn't use notes, and he wanders around the chancel area and he preaches from memory. And I asked Clyde how the first Sunday went, and he said, "Well, our new preacher stood up in front of the congregation, and he just began talking and walking around, and he's so short, well, the people were craning their necks, he's so short we couldn't find him." And I said, "But Clyde, how was the sermon, what about the content of the sermon?" He said, "Well, I really don't know about that. The service went on for about an hour and a half. There was this long introduction from the district superintendent, and there was lots of music, kind of an installation thing going on, and all we could think about was how our food was getting cold and how the Presbyterians were going to beat us out to the best restaurants in town."

In times of trouble, we look for our preachers, but when it really gets serious, we look for God in the hard times, because God is personal. We need God. We look for God because we need God in the tough times. William Bausch is a priest, and he's also a well-known writer, he's written many books, and in one of his books he tells about a church member of his. The year was 1979. In Aspen, Colorado, a twin-engine plane crashed. Stephanie May lost her husband John, she lost her son David, she lost her daughter Carla, and her son-in-law Richard. Stephanie kept a diary for the next two months, and she shared it with Father Bausch, and gave him permission to share it. He put it in one of his books. She writes, "My burden is heavy, but I don't walk alone. My pain is unrelenting, but I thank God and think of God every minute. I pray that my life will be used for God's glory. I pray that I might be able to carry my burden with Christian dignity. And I pray

that out of my devastation, God's kingdom will become apparent to someone who's lost or in pain. I must climb to a different place. I must search for a different life. I cannot replace or compare my loss, I am not strong, I am not brave, but I am a Christian with a burden to carry and a message to share, and I have been severely tested, but my faith has survived. I have walked in hell. Now I walk with God in peace. John and Edward and David and Carla and Richard, they're all in God's hands. I'm in God's arms. God's love surrounds me." And then Stephanie wrote, "The rose will bloom again." We search for God in the hard times, and our search is very personal.

Norris Burkes is one of my favorite local writers. He had an article in the paper just yesterday. He wrote about his early years of ministry. (Reverend Kershaw turned 29 last week. He's insufferable about how old he's getting. Give me a break.) Norris Burkes talks about the first sermon he preached. "I mastered Billy Graham's enunciation and Paul Harvey's dramatic pause, but where was Norris? Even worse, there was no room for God, and I discovered it was only when I found my own voice, that God could come alive in the experiences I shared in sermons. The God I worship is the God I know, and it's the way I know God. The God who speaks to me comes to me in a unique way, and for some it's voices, for some it's signs, for some it's moments of truth in the night. Each of us, it's the same God. Each of us, however, in a different way." Our God is personal, but our God is not private. We search for God in the dark days, and we find God when we know personally that God is present to all people. "God is not," Heschel said, "God is not something to be sought in the darkness with the light of reason. God is the light. And when God said, 'Let there be light,' it was not a reading lamp, it was the sun and the stars, and it was for me but it was also for you."

Some of you perhaps remember having read or maybe recently read J. B. Phillips's book, *Your God is Too Small*. He says too many of us have too limited an idea of God. In other words, he's saying God is personal, but not private. Last Sunday I think (except maybe for today) I had the worst children's sermon in the history of this church. I know it was as bad as it gets for me, and I only go back five years. For those who weren't here, I got the biggest industrial vacuum cleaner we have in the church, the church owns it, and I put a shirt on it and a cap on it and a sign on it that said "God." There's where I made my mistake. It looked like a robot, or an idol, it was a robot with the word "God" on it, and I threw coffee grounds right there all over the carpet. There was a congregational unison gasp. I think some parents were afraid their children might try that at home. And then I put the vacuum cleaner in the middle of the dirty carpet and told God to clean it up. The children told me to turn it on, and I did, and it just sat there running. And the children said, "You've got to push it." And that's where the whole thing fell apart, because I couldn't get the thing bent. You know how you bend the vacuum cleaner, I couldn't find Larry Neill found it for me, and the congregation left the sanctuary thinking I didn't know how to run a vacuum cleaner. And there's been no end to the conversation that's pursued with Kathy. So knock it off. And I don't know what the children thought. Sometimes when they leave for their classes, our teachers have to work to reverse what goes on in the children's sermon. But my God was too small. God is personal but not private. In the hard times we search for God.

Abraham Heschel reminds us of another fingerprint the divine fingerprint in many places in the good times. In the good times, God is in search of us. I think that's an amazing idea. Heschel had an amazing thought, I believe. He saw it first in the creation story, Adam and Eve, when they had eaten the forbidden fruit and knew they were naked, they hid from God, and they heard the sound of God walking in the cool of the day, and God called out to them. And God calls out to us, and God says, "Where are you? Where are you?" God is in search of us. It's in the Bible, it's in the Biblical narrative of God, the whole Biblical narrative is God in search of us. It's in Adam and Eve, it's in Ruth and Noah, it's in Sarah and Abraham, it's God's supreme desire to be in relationship with the created order. But you see the problem with this is, God is not at home in the world that God created. God is in search for us because God so loved the world that God gave his only begotten son, we as Christians, believe, for us. But God is not at home here, and that is why God searches. God wants to be invited on this earth, through us.

William Young's book *The Shack* has a story line that I'm not going to get into, but there's one part of the story. Jesus appears to a man named Mack. "Those who love me," Jesus says, "come from every system that exist. They're Buddhists and they're Mormons and they're Baptists and they're Muslims and they're Democrats and they're Republicans and there are many who do not vote, and many who are not part of a Sunday morning religious institution. I have followers who were murderers and some who were self-righteous. I have bankers and bookies and Americans and Iraqis and Jews and Palestinians, and I have no desire to make them Christian, but I do want to join them in their transformation into sons and daughters of my Papa, Abba, my God, into my brothers and sisters," Jesus said, "into my beloved." And Mack said to Jesus, "Does this mean all roads lead to you?" And Jesus said in the novel, "Not at all. Many roads don't lead anywhere. But what it does mean is, I will travel any road to find you." God will travel any road to find us.

Within the past two weeks I've had the opportunity, as others on our staff, to visit by phone with Colleen McRoberts who was our Director of Music. She now lives in Iowa. She and Shawn are doing well. Shawn is a Youth Pastor and Colleen is a church organist. She was a wonderful choir director and a superb pianist. My take on it is when she played the piano, it's like she had mittens. But she must be much improved. I was thinking about the day she was baptized, while she was working with us as the Director of Music. She wanted to be dunked in the water in the Poudre River, and it took three and a half ministers to do it. I recall finding a wide spot in the river, I remember how cold the water was, I remember just below us on the river was a man with a fly-fishing rod, fishing for trout. I recall how we lifted her into the water and how each of the three ministers and then her to-be-husband, who was an almost-minister, that's where I get the half, we announced the Trinity, in the name of the Creator God, in the name of the Redeemer Jesus, in the name of the Sustainer, the Holy Spirit, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we put her under. Three times we put her under, three times we brought her up. And then out of the corner of my eye downstream I noticed the guy with the fishing rod packing up and getting into his truck and stepping on the gas pedal and the truck lurching back onto the highway toward town. I figured, he was so struck by the awesome God that he witnessed upstream, that he recalled something God needed him to do. Maybe it was a good deed to

a neighbor, in the area where he lived. Perhaps it was an enemy he needed to go forgive, so that they could start over or something. Perhaps a new way to look at the same old things. An awesome God activates, inspires. God inspires us. The awesome God inspires action beyond the awe. The passion of God. In our case promoted by the passion of Jesus. God in search of us. God calling us out, saying to us, "Where are you?"

Oliver Wendell Holmes said it – "God has tried again and again to speak to me, but I wouldn't listen." Leonard Bernstein was thinking of the music of Beethoven and he was thinking of God in search of us. He said, "Beethoven turned out pieces of breathtaking rightness." Rightness, that's the word. You got the feeling that whatever note succeeds the last note was the only right note, the only note that could rightly happen at that instant. "It is the stuff of heaven," Bernstein said. "It is the power that makes you feel, at the finish, something is right in the world. There's something that checks throughout. Something that follows its own law consistently, something we can trust. Something that will never let us down, that searches for us in the music of Beethoven, that touches our lives, and when it does, we're never the same." God searches for us on a clear crisp day in August when things are as they should be, and there is a time in worship to savor the moment, and then we act. We believe in an awesome God, but our God is too big, William Sloane Coffin said, our God is too big if all we do in relation to this God is be awed by God. And the philosopher Heschel said it, "The God of the prophets is all-concerned and merciful, not aloof from creation. God is not a hypothesis but an immediate insight, self-evident as light." God is searching for us. God is in need of us. God is not at home in the world that God has created and our God is too big unless our awesome God activates.

I get to see God's fingerprint every Sunday morning in the four worship services when I preach all four of them like I do today. People dressed up for worship. It's a little warm here in the sanctuary, I'm going to fix that. Sitting here in the sanctuary, listening and responding, God is too big unless we are activated by the awesome God, and on Sunday morning I see activation. You think I'm preaching to you. You don't know how much your message comes back to the preacher and the choir. They know.

Monday afternoon the doorbell rang and a man stood outside our door wearing shorts, a t-shirt, a baseball hat, and a Home Depot apron. He was a politician. He was running for office, and I stepped outside the door and took his literature and said, "This must be very humbling." He said "You wouldn't believe what a privilege it is to go from house to house, door to door, and see how people live, and to meet people and hear from them." And I recognized something in him. He was responding, I think, to the God in search of us. He was activated, and he looked at me. That particular part of Monday is my day off, and I had been mowing the grass and was in work clothes, and he said, "Do I know you? You look familiar." And I said, "Yeah, I'm your minister." And he said "I didn't recognize you in your work clothes." He's here every Sunday, and I need to wear my work clothes more often, because that's when we see the fingerprint of God. Saturday afternoon at 2:30 here at the church, cleaning up the garage sale, all through the garage sale that went on, I don't know how much they made, I don't much care. Church members at work, hard work, Louise Metzner in charge reminding me of Patton at the

Battle of the Bulge, barking orders, a beautiful sight, so tired, so dedicated, people in work clothes picking up couches, hauling them to the trucks. God is too big unless the awesome God is an activating God who will invite us into the world to a place where God is not at home so that we can make God at home. Church members, friends of the church, neighbors, all came by, children, youth.

If we hear the song of a bird signing a melody, it's God asking us for some harmony here. Or if we catch a glimpse of the greatness on the volleyball court or the diving board or the parallel bars as we've seen it, it's God pointing us to some excellence that we have to perform in the anonymous run of our days as they dwindle. Maury Albertson got a call from Sargent Shriver in 1961 at two o'clock in the morning, and he knew it was something special, when he had been invited to the White House. President Kennedy told him about a plan to take college graduates and have them work in underdeveloped countries to build bridges of peace. I think that call came from God who is in search of us and the result was the Peace Corps. Maury Albertson has been honored this past week, he celebrated his 90th birthday last night, he's a member of the church, and he'll tell you what it's about. "You want to know what it's about?" he'll say. "It all boils down to the Sermon on the Mount." The Sermon on the Mount. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall inherit the Kingdom of God. Or as Kathleen Kennedy Townsend said, "The best definition I've found for a disciple is that a disciple is a troublemaker working for peace." And Ted Roberts said, "You can't be a beacon if your light don't shine." And I would add, "It isn't worship of God if all we do is get sunburned standing in the radiance of God's glory." God isn't as much interested in our church clothes as God is interested in how we look in our work clothes. The awesome God has to be activating of God's people. Our God is personal, not private. Our God is awesome, but activating. Our God is not too small, not too big, but just right.