
Where's God?

A sermon by Canon George Maxwell
Lent 3 – Year B

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. Amen.

Have you ever played the game Where's Waldo? It's a game in which you are shown the image of this funny yet interesting character, wearing a red and white striped shirt and a funny hat, always in an interesting posture.

And it is so distinctive you think you would never forget it—until you turn the page and there's a scene of all kinds of interesting and different characters, usually positioned in some landscape that obscures who they are. And your job is to find Waldo.

The first time you do this it's interesting enough, but as you continue it gets harder and harder and harder—as you lose your touch with that distinctive figure and you struggle to find the difference between that memory and everything collected in this image.

I think of Where's Waldo when I hear this Gospel story this morning, this scene of the temple.

I mean, imagine what Jesus walked into. It is the celebration of the Passover of the Jews. It is a grand pilgrimage festival where people have come from miles around to make their sacrifices, to draw near to God in the temple, in the holy city Jerusalem.

And there must have been a bustle of activity as people brought sometimes their animals, sometimes their Roman coins, sometimes grain.

But whatever they brought, there was an exchange to be negotiated. The Roman coins for temple currency, the animals to be

inspected. If you didn't bring the right animals, there are more there for you to purchase. And all of this hubbub of activity must have had a deep and enriching excitement to it—an excitement that you could feel a real catharsis arising out of, an excitement that eliminated the differences we sometimes feel, releasing the emotions, allowing us to feel a sense of unity.

I imagine it's something like watching the runners on Peachtree come down to the Cathedral on the Fourth of July, when all of these shapes and sizes of people, all speaking different languages, some with skill and some...simply children of God, nevertheless are feeling part of the larger whole, nevertheless sensing everything that they need in that moment. It's cathartic.

And so when Jesus wanders into this scene, what does he see? What's his problem? What's bothering him?

I think it's not what he sees, but what he doesn't see. I think he doesn't see the image of God that he has come to know and love. I think he sees an image of God that is born out of the history of Israel. It is an image of God focused on purity and the individual's ability to gain that purity by doing the right things, offering the right sacrifices, being in the right place.

Now this, I think, is a faithful image. It is an image born, for example, of the exile in Babylon, where Israel had to determine how to explain this horrible consequence that had befallen them, how to explain the fact that they were uprooted from the land that God gave them, taken to a distant place and left there.

They could have abandoned their God, but they did not. Instead, they determined that it must have been their fault. They must have been sinful, wrong, impure. God is just; it must have been us. And they remained faithful to that God.

And that faithfulness is embodied in these sacrificial rituals. The prophets talk about these rituals in the temple as all of the sacrifices yield a great drainage system that dumps the remains into the valley, and they are described as a river of life. Ezekiel describes that running into the valley of everything that has happened at the temple as a river on the banks of which trees will grow that will never die, fruit will be there that can always be eaten, leaves are on the branches which provide healing.

This is, I think, a faithful interpretation. And yet, it has consequences.

This focus on purity leaves us focused in the middle, trying to make it pure by eliminating everything that seems impure. And that, I think, goes against the generosity of God.

We miss the margins, and in missing the margins, we often take dignity away from those on the margin.

This is the point, I think, of the disciples, remembering as they recall this event, that “the zeal for my father’s house consumed me.”

That’s a line from a Psalm. If you look back at Psalm 69, the line means something other than you might have guessed, for that is the voice of one on the margins, a voice of one perhaps deemed to be impure, who is experiencing the loss of community—a community being drawn away from him.

The Psalm starts with a cry: “Please save me, O God. The waters are coming up around my neck.”

And then gives us a sense of the injustice of what is happening: “The number of the hairs on my head are less than those who accuse me unjustly. Must I,” the voice says, “restore what I did not steal?”

And finally, “Save me, O God, do not let the pit close up over me.”

This is a voice of one on the margins, a voice of one deemed impure if you will and sensing the loss of the community necessary to sustain his life.

So this also is a prophetic tradition that Jesus stands firmly in—a prophetic a tradition that you can anchor in Hosea, for example, who called for knowledge of God and not burnt offerings.

Jesus is standing in another, different prophetic tradition, but one that speaks to the generosity of God. And it is at this moment, in this scene, that Jesus decides if you’ve got something like this to say, a concise philosophical argument is not your best move. Who’s going to even hear you over the din of cathartic excitement?

So he does what Jeremiah might have done—he decides to have a great and dramatic act. I think he got everybody’s attention.

He threw the money on the floor. He turned over the tables. He drove the animals out of the outer rings of the temple. I suspect everybody knew he was there.

And then, he spoke.

“It’s bigger than this,” he seemed to be saying. “You can tear all of this down and I can rebuild it in three days, because it is about God being in you and you experiencing God with each other—and not about purity alone.”

“God is bigger than this,” he seems to be saying, and in missing that expansive generosity, we run the risk of missing our community, of missing God’s presence on the margins, where the best view of what’s happening is always available.

There is an old rabbinic tale which I think helps understand this point, where the knowledge of God that Hosea is describing might really be.

In the tale, there's a small town in the mountains. And one day, a refugee, a runaway comes to this town seeking asylum. He is quickly granted the safety and security that he seeks. He is hidden by the villagers, and fed and cared for.

But over time the soldiers come. And when the soldiers come, they are not kind or nice in their requests. "Give us the runaway or else..."

As the villagers contemplate what they should do, they turn to their rabbi. They ask him, the source of wisdom, "What should we do?"

The rabbi goes into his study, pulls out his Torah, consults his scriptures, and comes to the conclusion that it is better for one person to die than for the whole village to be brought down. And so the next morning, the rabbi offers the runaway to the soldiers and the village rejoices, their salvation assured.

But the rabbi isn't feeling it.

He retires to his study, saddened by what he had to do, and the angel of the Lord appears.

"What have you done?" the angel inquires.

"I have done what I had to do," the rabbi responds. "It is better for one person to suffer than for all to be brought down."

The angel of the Lord says, "Do you know what you have done? You have given away the Messiah. You had the Messiah in your midst and you have given him away."

"But how was I to know," the rabbi said, "that this was the Messiah? How was I to know from the scriptures and wisdoms that I had inherited and studied and meditated upon?"

The angel responded, "If you had closed your Bible and left your study and gone to that boy just once and looked in his face, seen the light in his eyes, you would have known that he was the Messiah. If you had left all the rules and concerns for purity aside and looked in the face and eyes of this boy, you would have known that he was the Messiah."

This, I think, is the generous presence of God that Jesus wants us to see—not the God focused on purity and law-abiding rightness, but a God focused on transformation, on redemption, regardless of where you may stand. A God not focused on the middle, but a God focused on the margins, as well, so that our community expands.

For it is true that God loves us. But it is also true that God is love. And there's a difference.

It's not just that God loves us; it is that God is love.

So that when we confront another, regardless of the circumstances, we are confronting the Messiah. If we look into their face, if we see the light in their eyes and know what to look for, we will experience the Messiah.

It's not about purity. It's about transformation. It's not about being right. It's about belonging.

And that is the generous God that Jesus wants us to see. And that, I think, is what Jesus was talking about—looking in the face of another, seeing the light in their eyes, and knowing that you have confronted the Messiah.

Amen.