

July 23, 2017

"Where Are You?"

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Genesis 2:7-9, 18, 21-25; 3:1-10

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"Where are you?" "Where are you?" This is the very first question God ever asked humankind. And to be perfectly honest, at first, I found the question to be somewhat unsettling. But then I thought about it and changed my mind. Let's look at the scripture. God asks this question of Adam and Eve. They had broken the only rule they had been given, and the consequences were tragic. Their sin caused them to become separated from God. The purity and perfection of humankind's relationship with God was destroyed. And so they hid from God in their shame. Hoping to hide what happened. But God went looking for them, calling out, "Where are you?" "Where are you?" And ultimately, they had to come out of hiding and face their Creator.

This summer we've been looking at some of the questions in the Bible that Jesus asked of various individuals, but I thought today we might even broaden our examination by looking at a question God asks. For I think this question, "Where are you?" is a relevant one for you and me. Where are you? Not concerning a particular sin, but concerning our relationship with God. Because ultimately, how we live our lives boils down to that relationship. So think a moment, "where are you" in your relationship to God? Now I'm sure we all have a variety of answers, like, "Well, I think I'm alright with God" or maybe, "God seems distant right now, and, in fact, I'd like to ask him the question, 'where are you?', or even "I believe in God, but I don't have what I'd call a relationship with God." Whatever your answer, my guess is, if we're honest with ourselves, then like Adam and Eve, there's a part of us that wants to hide from God.

Because, in truth, all of us have certain things that we struggle with about God, don't we? Maybe it is because of a sin – something that happened in the past, or a habit you can't break, an attitude you shouldn't have, priorities that are misplaced. Or maybe you question parts of the Bible and want an explanation. Like the virgin birth, the resurrection, the miracles of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, grace, the suffering here on earth, life after death and heaven and hell. And not only do we struggle with matters concerning our faith, but there are also those philosophical questions like, "What is the purpose of my life? "Am I doing what I'm supposed to be doing here on earth?" "Am I a good person?" Yes, there is much mystery surrounding God. So is it any wonder that many people find it easier to not even want to get involved in a relationship with God. I once heard someone describe our relationship with God as

similar to that of going on a blind date. The first question we have to ask is, "Do I even want to go on this date in the first place?" Then, "Suppose I really start to like this person?" Then, "Gee, this is nice, but am I ready for a relationship?" And finally, "Do I really want to make a commitment?" Well, we'll never know if the relationship will go anywhere unless we take the first step. That's why the question "where are you?" is so important. Are you willing to come out of hiding and take that first step.

Let's go back to the mystery surrounding God. A lot of people can't get past that, because conventional knowledge, secular wisdom, even science, all tell us that faith in a God we cannot see or understand, is irrational, unwise, even. But St. Paul tells us, "what the world calls wisdom is folly and foolishness to God." And it is indeed folly for us to think we could have the mind or understanding of God. So many people want to keep God small, manageable and predictable. But God cannot be confined to our human terms and concepts. In fact, God puts it right out there when he says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, and my ways are not your ways." To have a relationship with God means we must accept that we will not always know the how's or why's of life. In the Old Testament, there's the story of Job, and all the tragedies and hardships he suffered – the death of his children, the loss of his property, his body ravaged by disease, and more. And he came to God wanting to know why. Why? What's going on? Sound familiar? But God didn't answer Job's questions. Instead, God asks questions of Job. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Have you commanded the morning and caused the dawn to know its place? Can you lift up your voice to the clouds so that a flood of waters may cover you? Do you give the horse its might? Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars?" And God goes on and on with this kind of questioning, until Job realizes that the mystery and majesty of God is far greater than any earthly being can comprehend. And when, in humility, Job acknowledges God's greatness, God restores Job's fortunes and blessings manifold.

Where are you? It's a tough question. Even the famous preacher William Sloane Coffin, was once like many of us, questioning and doubting. Until one day he got to thinking about that simple yet profound prayer Jesus taught us to pray, the Lord's Prayer. Let me read to you what Sloane writes. "When Jesus says, "Our Father who art in heaven," I listen. Even during my doubting days in college I listened, and carefully. Because Jesus knew not only more about God than I did, that is obvious. But he also knew more about the world. He could talk convincingly to me about a loving father in heaven because he took seriously (the children here on earth who were hurting and needed mercy and forgiveness and compassion). He could talk to me convincingly about living in peace in the hands of God's love because

he knew the world lived constantly in the grip of (fear and) hatred. He could talk to me of light and joy and exultation, because I knew that he himself knew darkness and sorrow and death. That's why Jesus became my Lord and Savior. And that's why I think it's right to say that the authority of the Lord's Prayer stems from the reliability of the source." The source – the Living God himself, Jesus Christ.

Now maybe it's parts of the Bible you struggle with – the Word of God! It's just too hard to find meaning in a book that's thousands of years old from a time we didn't live in. But as the late Rev. Peter Gomes said, "We can pick up this Bible and read all its stories, and in truth, it does go beyond our human comprehension and practical reasoning. It is meant to! (It is full of symbolism, allegory and metaphors.) But what we are to take from the Bible are those precepts and examples that will direct our hearts and minds to become more like the heart and mind of God. (Things like the Ten Commandments – do not kill, do not steal, do not covet what someone else has. The Psalms – "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord and stand in his holy place? Those with clean hands and pure hearts." Things that Jesus taught us about love, compassion, and forgiveness. Like "Love your neighbor as you love yourself.") And that's what we need to understand and take from it. Yes, we might wish to be colleagues with Jesus, and be masters of the knowledge of God, but we are not. And, the fact of the matter is that the more often we are reminded of that, the better.¹

Where are you? You know, back in an earlier time, before the Internet and our modern age of technology, I think it was easier to be in a relationship with God. We would take more delight in a majestic sunset than in downloading and binge watching the latest TV series from Netflix. A walk along the ocean filled our senses more than the cacophony of noise and drivel from our phones, texts and tweets. The simple pleasures of life, made us realize our blessings were truly gifts from God, whereas nowadays, our craving for the things of this world consumes those precious moments. Today it's all about having more, having the best, looking the best, keeping up with the latest trends. We listen to the temptation of the serpent called "culture," and like Adam and Eve, we become separated from God. Consequently, we become stressed, anxious, depressed, questioning life. Oh, we try to put up a good front, but we're really hiding our true selves.

There's a true story that speaks to this. A man went to see a doctor because he was suffering from depression. The doctor examined him and found his physical condition was in good shape, but he was

¹ Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living, Peter Gomes

an emotional wreck. So the doctor said to the man, "I have a suggestion. There's a wonderful circus in town with a marvelous clown, the famous Grimaldi. Everyone who sees him laughs, their worries disappear, and they go away feeling happy. Why don't you do the same thing. You'll feel better, I guarantee it!" The patient replied, "Doctor, that won't help... I am Grimaldi".² A lot of us are like Grimaldi. We hide behind a facade. We hide because maybe we don't feel worthy. Maybe we lack self-esteem. We hide behind a mask, and project an image of ourselves that's not real. We put on a smiling face when we are sad. We try to look confident when we are afraid. We act as if we have it all together when it's all falling apart. We're unhappy with who we are, because we've let the world overwhelm us. Where are you? We don't know where we are because we don't even know who we are anymore.

And so, come out from hiding. Come out from behind whatever it is that is separating you from God. And build on your relationship with God. Make that commitment, because God will help you know exactly who you are and Whose you are. You see, the question "Where are you?" is really a heart cry from God. God, wanting to be with you. Wanting to hold you up when times are tough. Wanting to give you direction when the road isn't clear. Wanting to give you peace when your world seems to be falling apart. Wanting to be your God and see you through, no matter your doubts or fears or worries. Yes, God searches for his children, and longs to be with them. "Where are you, my precious son, my precious daughter?" Will you come out and meet your Creator?

Because believe me, if you do, it will be the best date you've ever been on! Amen.

² Questions God Asks Us, Trevor Hudson