

*Everyone is Searching for You*

Mark 1: 29-39

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Maybe you remember how once, when Jesus was 12 years old, his parents accidentally left him behind on a family trip to Jerusalem. They got halfway home and realized their precocious child wasn't with them, so they frantically retrace their steps all the way back to the temple where they'd attended worship and eventually find him nerding out with the priests and scribes. The story fits in the tradition of tales that present the boy Jesus as a devilish rascal sometimes tormenting his elders. It also foreshadows how religious authorities have more to learn from Jesus than they at first suspect. The boy they find so amazing, amusing, and delightful they will treat differently as an adult. Anyway, the lost parents who find him come rushing in, furious and relieved. "We have been searching for you," says Jesus's mother, in a voice that surely most anyone with a mother could recognize.

There's a similar story in Mark's gospel, only the gospel of Mark doesn't have time for childish antics so in this version Jesus is an adult. It's the very beginning of his ministry, but what stands out in this case is that Jesus has earned his stripes before anyone goes searching for him. He's called his first disciples, astounded a crowd in Capernaum with his interpretation of the scrolls, and - with the confident tug of a good dentist - extracted the demon from a man with an unclean spirit. From there he made a house call to the mother of Simon, whose fever broke within hours of whatever medicine he administered. By this point word has spread beyond the crowd that first heard his teaching in Capernaum and Mark says the whole town was gathered at his door to put forward others in need and watch him work. Early the next morning Jesus escaped to a quiet and solitary place to pray. The crowds eager for more of yesterday's performance is waiting back at Simon's house while Simon and the others are looking for their lost star. They soon find his quiet place. "Everyone is searching for you," Simon says.

Here are two examples of Jesus stories on the same theme. I won't bother to look for the same idea in Matthew and John. Suffice it to say that at least half of the gospels with some version of an anxious search for Jesus. Must I mention also the abundant imagery of shepherds and lost sheep? Or old women and lost coins? Or fathers and prodigal sons? Or the pithy wisdom of seeking and finding? The biblical narrative draws us again and again to this idea of searching for what is cherished.

Of course we can play with the narrative in any number of ways. I often find myself wondering who is searching for who? The irony of the gospel is that we're searching and searching and searching for the God who comes and finds us. Or I'm looking all over the place just as hard as I can for what was in its proper place all along. The carton of milk in the refrigerator that I couldn't see but Jackson found, polite but understandably annoyed, right away. The glasses on my head. The keys already in my pocket. This is my search for God, certain that I've lost what's just right here.

In both of the stories, the versions of Mark and Luke, Jesus is found by someone close to him who knows him intimately. In one case, it's his mother who first addresses him when he's found. In the other, it's the first disciple that he called and so far as we know his closest friend, Simon. There are many ways that one might address a child or a friend who has been missing. Where the heck have you been? You can sense a little bit of that anger in Mary's exclamation. Perhaps it bears emphasizing that in neither case is Jesus lost entirely by accident. The parents

obviously regret leaving Jerusalem without him but they're also wondering how much attention he paid to keeping up. We're left with the suspicion that Jesus gave them the slip. Likewise, in Luke's telling, with the crowds panting for his attention in Capernaum, he knew that Simon and others would be looking for him in the morning. Everyone is searching for Jesus because Jesus hides himself.

For this reason I don't believe the good shepherd imagery is a complete metaphor for God's interest in finding us. It's not uncommon for one sheep to wander away from the fold and get lost, but it would be unusual don't you think, for a sheep to willfully remain in hiding. That really the challenge God has with us. It's not just that we get lost but that we conceal ourselves.

Self-concealment has become notably easier in the past year. We don't see each other in person like we used to. We're much less visible to one another in meetings over Zoom or Teams or on conference calls. And when we do get together, in a literal sense, we're not even asked to take off our masks. We're actually forming habits by which we hide ourselves at the same time that we also recognize a deep yearning for connection. So it might be worth asking what we're holding back that we'd like to share. We might consider how the version of ourselves that we reveal to each other might be more authentic, more honest and complete. Because the truth is that very rarely do we actually want a dim reflection of those in our community. We want a true and honest portrait of our friends and neighbors. Hardly anything could be more healing in this season of our lives than depth and authenticity. So in a sense Mary the Mother of Jesus and Simon the disciple of Jesus are speaking directly to us when they say, "Everyone is searching for you." What are you holding back? Why do you stay in this hiding place? Come into the light so that God may be glorified by your presence.

It may be that in all this language of seeking and finding in the Gospel all that is actually sought is me, you. The real and true version of us. The version of us unveiled. I'm trying hard to avoid anything thinking what I'm sharing is some kind of self-helpy pastoral psychology. I'm convinced that we are led to God by following what we discover in ourselves. We cannot conclude that there is anything about us that God would not want to see because there is nothing about us that God did not first create and love.

So in the gospel today is a simple invitation. To be a little more honest with each other. To reveal a bit more of ourselves. To tell a fuller and truer story about who we are and how we're doing. To take off our masks. I think you know what I mean.

Everyone is searching for you.

Amen.