

When You Seek Me with All your Heart

Essay 13 in the series “Encountering the Presence of God”

Here’s the pattern. When I’m with God, when I’m consciously with God, everything is just fine. When I am with God, when I am conscious, when I am mindful, when I stop and look and see, when I am still and know that God is God, everything is fine. Of course, it’s not that easy, is it? It’s not that easy to be in the zone. Busy lives conspire against us. We’re preoccupied by this, distracted by that; worried by this, angry about that. And our transmissions to and from eternity turn to static.

God can be all around us, as close as the air we breath, and we never notice. The realm of awe and wonder and miracle can surround us. The kingdom of God can be amongst us. But because we’re not looking, we don’t see. It’s like the Norse sailors who for some generations frequented the shores of the New World centuries before Columbus but who never “discovered” it because they had no words, no concept, for it. So God can be like in this fourth dimension in which we live and move and have our being, but with our 3-D habits of perception we don’t see.

So all this glory, all this light, all this reality, is there for the taking, and we pass by with only the faintest of premonitions. And then I remember something the prophet Jeremiah said in Jeremiah 29:13. Speaking for God, he said, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.” I remember coming across this verse in my early twenties when I was a graduate student in Sociology at the University of Michigan and I was confused about many, many things, not quite sure of the direction for my life. And I thought, “Aha, that’s it. I can find God. I can find the way.” But then I forget, and get distracted and preoccupied, sometimes preoccupied with the things of God but not God, and I forget that I only really find God when I seek God with all my heart.

Now, things weren’t easy for Jeremiah. Unlike the pundits and doomsayers who prey on us in our times, Jeremiah really did live in hard times. He lived in Judah’s darkest hour. He was of a priestly family from the village of Anathoth, about three miles northeast of Jerusalem. He was apparently well off financially, and he was well-respected during the reign of good king Josiah. But Josiah died in battle in 609 BC, and times changed. The nation reverted to its idolatry and ran through a succession of weak and forgettable kings with names like Jehohaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah.

Jeremiah whose central message was essentially that the Babylonians were coming and that the people had best get used to the idea became widely unpopular. Even his hometown conspired to assassinate him (11:18-23). He was betrayed by his own brothers (12:6). He was beaten and put in stocks (20:1-6); another time, he was thrown into a cistern and left to sink in the mire (chap. 38). One day, as his scroll was being read to the king, the king cut it up section by section and threw it into the fire (chap. 36). Only the Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar liked him; when Jerusalem fell for the final time in 587 BC, he offered Jeremiah a place of honor and a pension in Babylon (39:11-12; 40:1-5). But Jeremiah choose to stay in his now devastated country and was eventually carried

off against his will by refugees fleeing to Egypt (chaps. 42-43) where he apparently died in exile.

So ended the ill-fated ministry of Jeremiah, this courageous, reckless prophet of God who never married and had no children (16:1), who “never sat in the company of revelers” (15:17), who had been ordered by God not to go to feasts (16:8-9), and who, in fact, often suffered deep depression, in 20:14-18 cursing the day of his birth. As he watched the last dark, desperate days of his beloved country, he describes himself in the Book of Lamentations, chapter 3, as: groping in darkness (verse 2), his skin and flesh aging in front of him (4), his bones weakened (4), sitting in darkness (6), feeling trapped – walled in so that he could not escape – and weighed down with chains (7), his prayers unanswered (8), feeling even targeted by God (12). But in the midst of such times, Jeremiah would speaking for God write, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”

If you go back and read the context you’ll see that it’s all part of a letter Jeremiah writes to the people already in exile in Babylon. He tells them (beginning in verse 5 of chapter 29) to settle down and build houses, to plant gardens, to marry and have sons and daughters, to find wives for their sons and to give their daughters in marriage so that they may have sons and daughters, to pray for the peace and prosperity of the cities in which they find themselves. Then “when seventy years are completed,” that is, after most of them have lived their lives and died, God will come and bring their descendants back to their homeland. And it is in that dark context that Jeremiah promises that his readers will seek God and find God when they seek God with all their heart.

Well, actually what he says is this, and this is beautiful, “For I know the plans I have for you (even in the bleakest of times, when times could not possibly have been worse), plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart (that is, with all your will, with all your energy). I will be found by you!” (Jeremiah 29:10-14).

Times change. And different contexts may call for different application. But this is still the truth. This is still the way life works.

– Dale Pauls