

Sermon – “The Nations Shall See”  
Sunday, December 27, 2020  
Scripture Readings: Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Luke 2:22-40  
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The first reading comes from the prophet Isaiah, who speaks in triumphant language about the Lord’s restoration of Israel. Listen for God’s Word to you in Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3.

*<sup>10</sup> I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels,*

*<sup>11</sup> For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.*

*<sup>62:1</sup> For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch.*

*<sup>2</sup> The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. <sup>3</sup> You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.*

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The ancient Jewish covenantal law saw all firstborn, both animals and human beings, as belonging to the Lord, and involved rituals of sacrifice in observance of that. Here in our second reading, we see Mary and Joseph carrying out this requirement with their newborn child, and some who were present recognizing him for who he actually is. Hear now God’s Word in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2, verses 22 through 40.

*<sup>22</sup> When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought [Jesus] up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord <sup>23</sup> (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), <sup>24</sup> and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”*

*<sup>25</sup> Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. <sup>26</sup> It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. <sup>27</sup> Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, <sup>28</sup> Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,*

*<sup>29</sup> “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; <sup>30</sup> for my eyes have seen your salvation, <sup>31</sup> which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, <sup>32</sup> a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”*

*<sup>33</sup> And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. <sup>34</sup> Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed <sup>35</sup> so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."*

*<sup>36</sup> There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, <sup>37</sup> then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. <sup>38</sup> At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.*

*<sup>39</sup> When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. <sup>40</sup> The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.*

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Hidden and found.

What child is this? We have come from our fields, here to this place, having heard tidings of something. Whom have we found here, hid amongst the hay?

Hidden, and found.

What child is this? We have come to the temple here, regularly, for all these years, having once heard a whisper of a promise that we would be met here; through all the dry seasons of life holding on, hoping, waiting. Whose voice was that whisper, and was it real? Who has been found here, hidden among us?

In the beginning of things, the serpent came to the garden, sowing doubt about what riches might be hidden in the forbidden tree, and the woman hearing and wondering "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..."<sup>1</sup>

Found, and hidden.

So it was at the start, and so it has been ever after. In shame, guilt, confusion, fear and worry—some of it nonsense, much of it justified in the face of the lives we have lived—we cover up, and we hide.

My 6-year-old son asked me recently, "What if you were playing hide-and-seek and no one ever found you?"

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 3:6b-8a (New Revised Standard Version).

It is an interesting question, deeper than it sounds if one really ponders it, and only more so for a person of faith. To be not found in this childhood game is success; it is victory! And yet the closer to complete the victory, the more uncomfortable and worried the winner, and the idea of absolute success is unbearable. Anyone who has ever participated in or witnessed the game of hide-and-gO-seek knows well the eventual phenomenon of incidental but not-quite-accidental noises coming from concealed places, a little cough or the sound of movement turning the head and catching the attention of the seeker who was about to pass right by yet another time. There is a point at which the desire *not* to be found can no longer hold back the desire *to* be found. Indeed, the thought, occurring eventually to every child, that others might ultimately give up and go on, leaving you behind, is a source of distress.

Adam and Eve started this game of hide-and-seek, and we continue it today. We ever suffer the tension of being a people who want very badly to hide, with anxiety at the thought of our full selves ever being uncovered, and simultaneously knowing—with alarm at the thought—that we could not possibly bear it if God does not find us, and soon at that.

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One of the interesting things the Bible reminds us of from time to time is the fact that the story visible to us is not the only one. A multitude of threads of human story are woven through the space and time of the universe, passing by one another, sometimes intersecting, other times parallel and unaware. Hidden, out of our own view, other persons have their own powerful narratives, in which God is acting for those people, coming alongside them and showing them things that are for them and totally unknown to us. This sounds obvious when spoken aloud, but the tendency we all have in our minds for to assume ourselves at the center is a strong one. It is so easy for our own story to be understood as *the* story and our viewpoint as the central place from which to see the story, that we often forget entirely that we are even doing this.

Sometimes in scripture, though, we get glimpses that prod us to remember otherwise. Melchizedek, the peculiar Old Testament priest encountered and given a tithe by Abraham, his entire story and religious significance never even explained, is a mystery thread crossing the path of the ancient Hebrew story only for a moment.<sup>2</sup> Or consider Joseph of Arimathea, a man whom we had never met nor heard of up to the point of Jesus's death, having apparently had his own entire story of faith and crossing into the Bible-recorded portions of the Jesus story just at one moment, as he carefully tends to the body of a just-crucified Jesus, and then passes out of our sight again.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Melchizedek, appearing suddenly in the middle of a story about Abraham in Genesis 14, is identified only as a King of Salem and “priest of God Most High.” A little ritual of blessing occurs, and Abraham gives him a tenth of all the spoils from a military victory. He appears to exist altogether outside the main storyline of the people whose narrative is being shared in Genesis, and it is therefore curious how he knows about “God Most High,” and on whose behalf he serves as a priest. Even his name is mysterious, as it means something like “king of righteousness,” and therefore imaginably isn’t even the man’s actual name but a title. He appears to be mentioned once more in the entire Old Testament, in Psalm 110, whose language is incorporated into the Roman Catholic rituals of priestly ordination, and in the New Testament he is referenced several times in the book of Hebrews.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph of Arimathea appears in all four Gospels (in Matthew 27, Mark 15, Luke 23, and John 19) at the point where Jesus’s crucifixion is complete, but almost none of his story is shared there. He seems to have come to be a follower of Jesus but

And today, we hear of Simeon and Anna, whose long stories of deep and faithful relationship with God have been lived without our knowledge, who have heard the promise independently, outside the frame of narrative visible to us. Anna was an aged prophet, with years of prayer and worship of the God she knew, whom she still sought in the temple day after day. Simeon had, somewhere along the pathway of his life, heard it “revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.” Both of those threads of human life, spun forth and unrolled by God in places we had not seen, crossed in the temple on this one day, when the narrative we do know follows Jesus and his parents, some forty days after his birth, to the temple for his ritual presentation there.

And these two, Simeon and Anna, were looking; they were seekers for things which were hidden. The world did not mostly know yet what was hidden in the infant, aside from Mary and Joseph, and the shepherds, and those wise men who were probably still on their way at this point. But just when Anna and Simeon were near, God let out a little cough, as it were, from the secret hiding place of the salvation of humankind, and they turned their heads and saw it, in a tiny child. With great joy they spotted what they had been looking for, and not only they. Anna “began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.”<sup>4</sup> “All who were looking,” this untold number of additional threads, human lives, not named to us, whose courses took them there at that moment, into whose lives, looking and seeking, God had provided the sight of what they sought.

But theirs was not the only finding happening there, for what Simeon and Anna and the others found was something whose truth echoes to the depths of all our human need—that *God* had come to find *us*. They were not, as we are not, the primary seekers, for in their seeking they too were being sought. Some kinds of religion understand each of us to be some kind of spiritual Indiana Jones, searching all the hidden caves for a precious artifact, hoping to stumble upon the riches of salvation, stashed in a secret place where only a few blessed and lucky ones may ever encounter it. But Anna and Simeon did not rejoice for having decoded the mysterious map to enlightenment and hiked the long trail through the wilderness to find it. They rejoiced that after having listened to their instructions to wait, patiently—like children are often taught to do when lost— God came and found *them*.

They rejoiced, for what they sought was not some object of infinite value that we either find and gain life or fail to find and lose out. It was not an inanimate treasure, up to human ingenuity to discover. No, God was *incarnate*, in human form, and was coming after us.

Later in his life, that same infant child, as a grown man, would describe it this way: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’”<sup>5</sup> Our God does not sit back impassively, leaving us to find God; no, we are the ones found by a God who came to earth in human form and suffered death in order that life may no longer be hidden from us.

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without us (the readers of the Bible) having heard of or encountered him at any point prior to this, nor is his life beyond this point chronicled there.

<sup>4</sup> From Luke 2:38 (NRSV).

<sup>5</sup> Luke 15:4-6 (NRSV), from a series of teachings stretching across the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke.

Yes, we still try to flee. Simeon spoke of as much. “This child is...to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.”<sup>6</sup> Many of us, really all of us, are definitely afraid to encounter any situation where all of our inner selves will be revealed. Psalm 139 captures this relationship between seeker and sought so well:

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,” even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.<sup>7</sup>

That uneasy mixture of comfort and worry is here in this language, the tension between trying to hide, running to the very ends of the earth to escape; and being relieved and thankful, too, that all our attempts to hide will fail.

This is the source of our Christian hope. However we have gone astray, wherever in the wilderness we are lost, even when we are lost on purpose, we thank God there is no place where we cannot be found. Nothing in our own power, nor in the power of anyone else, takes us beyond where God’s reach can go. Not brokenness and sin. Not enslavement. Not even Abel, hidden in the ground by his brother Cain, was out of God’s sight.<sup>8</sup>

The apostle Paul knew the game of hide-and-seek was futile with God; that we could not win. “I am convinced,” he wrote, “that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”<sup>9</sup>

Hidden, and found. Unto us a child is born. God has found...you. And me. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> From Luke 2:34-35. (NRSV).

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 139:7-12 (NRSV).

<sup>8</sup> The story of Cain’s murder of his brother Abel and God’s response to this is found in Genesis 4.

<sup>9</sup> Romans 8:38-39 (NRSV).