

A Sermon Preached at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church,
Oak Park, IL on the Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 23, 2011 (Year A) by the Rev. Paris Coffey

Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 5-13; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

You speak in my heart and say, "Seek my face." Your face, Lord, will I seek. Psalm 27:11

It has always amazed me that the fishermen in today's Gospel who become Jesus' disciples, drop everything they're doing to follow a man who's basically a stranger. They know little if anything about him, and yet somehow Jesus hooks these four fishermen the way they'd like to hook fish from the Sea of Galilee. Twice Matthew uses "immediately" to describe how these industrious fishers abandon their livelihood – boats, nets, and even a father – to follow Jesus. What moves them to desert their work so quickly? What is **unleashed** within that stimulates so zealous a response? Today's Psalmist might say that it is nothing less than God, writing, "You speak in my heart and say, 'Seek my face.' Your face, Lord, will I seek." Do they glimpse in Jesus long-forgotten memories of their Creator's face? Or put another way, does God stir in the hearts of Peter, Andrew, James and John some primal longing humans have for God?

St. Augustine would say so, writing in his book *Confessions*, "You have created us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." Others have said the same or similar things, like 17th century French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal who said that each person has a "God-shaped hole" in their heart that only God can be fill. At vestry on Tuesday I illogically confused Pascal with Nietzsche, a 19th century German philosopher, who **denied** God's image in the human heart. Nietzsche did indeed perceive a void/a hole in the heart, if you will. He saw it, though, as humankind's own longing for transcendence, which to him was one big bottomless abyss that humans tried irrationally and futilely to fill. That's a pretty depressing point of view if you ask me, although even Pascal

acknowledged that we often try to fill the void within – which he insisted is *hardly* bottomless – with futile things.

Gathering his thoughts on God and life into a book called simply *Pensées (Thoughts)* Pascal writes, “(Man) tries in vain to fill (the void) with everything around him,” “seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are.” By this Pascal means that God and God alone can fill the void within us, which non-believers obviously will argue. Nevertheless, you have to admit that only someone or something out-of-the-ordinary could trigger the passionate, life-changing response witnessed in today’s Gospel in Peter, Andrew, James and John. These four offer a critical clue to the power of personal encounter with Christ, but also hint of our great longing for and memory of some primal bond with the “other” – with a force beyond ourselves. As Augustine said in the 4th-century, this longing is buried in the memory banks of our hearts; or as Carl Jung said to 20th-century listeners, it is in our subconscious or collective unconscious where myths, symbols, and dreams reveal forgotten mysteries and primordial truths.

Bill Wilson, cofounder of Alcoholics Anonymous, discovered this when – after years of battling alcoholism – he surrendered his life to God. Recounting his story in the book called *Alcoholics Anonymous*, Wilson admits that at first he scoffed at the thought of God. He was a skeptic, although he could see that Ebby, an old drinking buddy who had been as hopeless a drunk as Bill, was sober. Ebby claimed that a spiritual encounter had freed him from the bottle, but Bill was doubtful that God was *his* answer. Still, he couldn’t ignore the fact that Ebby was sober and he wasn’t. Moreover, Bill had lost virtually everything he had, including his health, and so despite misgivings he listened to Ebby. He listened to him talk on and on about spiritual things, until finally something broke through, plunging Bill Wilson into a sea of forgotten memories of God.

He *had*, he remembered, experienced a spiritual dimension of reality as a child, and even as an adult in WWI. Stationed in England, he was at that time a young military officer desperate for God. As a

result, he entered Winchester Cathedral one day, and found to his surprise that God was there. It was a fleeting moment, which Wilson soon dismissed. It all came back, though, as Ebby spoke, opening a floodgate of forgotten interactions with some power greater than himself. Even so, Bill could not call this power “God,” so Ebby said, “Choose your own concept/your own word for God?” And with that all of Bill’s defenses – his loaded associations with God – began to fall away. As Wilson later wrote, “It was a matter of being willing to believe in a Power greater than myself. Nothing more was required of me than to make my beginning.”

It was, I imagine, how the disciples felt when they encountered Jesus – encountered a God who was inviting them in, not checking credentials to keep them out. They experienced a presence that radiated light, rather than threatening darkness. They met One who embodied love instead of quizzing them on the Law. In short, they encountered a man – or God – who triggered within them memory of some long-forgotten power, presence and partnership with the Divine. They didn’t have to profess any doctrine or join any club. They simply had to let God speak in their hearts and they were hooked. The catch, though, (if you’ll pardon the pun) was that they also needed to hook others, for Jesus needed their help. He needed help to shine the light of love on people sitting in darkness, revealing One who defies narrow human conceptions of who God is and who God chooses to be God’s hands and feet in the world.

And who God chooses are ordinary men, women and children open to hearing God speak in their hearts. Hearing, though, isn’t as easy as it sounds, and so this morning I invite you to listen. Listen to the places in your life of deepest longing, and to buried memories of moments where mystery and truth have broken through, if only briefly. Moreover, listen beyond your preconceived notions of God, for more often than not God comes in ways we don’t expect, in forms we may not recognize immediately and so are tempted to dismiss. In fact, it’s often in the small, simple, ordinary acts of love and kindness that God is revealed. Sometimes it’s in thoughtful words, a gentle touch or familiar smell. Occasionally it’s in books read, music heard or visions glimpsed. But most of the time it is

through the gifts and offerings of human beings that God is made known. It has been that way since God took human form and came among us, and continues to be so when we follow him.

Certainly it's been that way at St. Christopher's these past 99 years, and with God's grace and our "yes" will be so for many more. Our response, though, is crucial, and so on this Sunday – one week before our church's 99th Annual Meeting – we are asked to follow Jesus and to take seriously what this means for each of us.

What does it mean for us to be fishers of people – in the church and in the world – where there are so many fish that Jesus clearly needs our help? One person – even the Son of God – can't do it alone, anymore than a rector, senior warden or vestry can fulfill the mission of St. Christopher's alone. God needs each of us to do our part – not doing what we hate to do or are bad at doing – but what we love to do and have been gifted by God to do in Christ's name. Next Sunday we'll have a chance to reflect on what those things might be. For the moment, though, we simply pray to you, Lord, that you will so draw our hearts to you, so fill our imaginations and guide our wills, that we may bring light and love to the world.

Amen.