

First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC
3 Epiphany
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Pursued
J Mary Luti

1 Samuel 3: 1-10
Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18
John 1:43-51

I once heard someone make fun of prayer by saying, "Pity the poor Almighty who has to listen to needy creatures whining to the heavens every second of every day, 'Love me! Listen to me! Help me! Do this for me! But don't you dare do *that* to me!' Poor old God, reduced to a divine dispensing machine, besieged and bombarded, with never a moment's rest!"

And when you look at it this way I suppose you do have to feel a little sorry for God. But the more I've been privileged to share other people's lives, the more I think that God is not to be pitied. Judging by their stories, God gives as good as God gets. The besieging and bombarding we do to God is nothing compared to what God does to us.

A couple of years ago I told you about an ad for Andover Newton Theological School whose tag line was, "Does God keep you up at night?" I thought it was a hokey ad, and I was sure that prospective students would think so too and go someplace more hip, like Harvard. But apparently a lot of people really cannot get through the night without being jolted awake by the sound of their names. Applicants responded to that ad in droves, and every last bleary-eyed one of them said that it rang true. Like Samuel, they had heard their names spoken like a question, and they had answered, "Here I am, Lord. Speak, for your servant is listening!"

Now, it's not just the people we think of as special whom God pokes in the p.j.'s. Our psalm today implies that none of us is immune to holy sleep apnea. Just by virtue of being human, we are candidates for interference—"O Lord, you have probed me and know me. You hem me in, behind and before. You lay your hand on me..." To be human is to be shadowed by God, infiltrated by God, probed and prodded by God, intertwined with God, hard-wired for incursions by God.

A 4th century North African bishop once famously prayed, "You made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." St. Augustine is telling us something of his own story in these lines. He was a quintessential seeker, intellectually and morally restless, striving for an elusive perfection. But here he was referring not solely to his own experience, but also to a common one. He was describing the human condition.

In some form or another it seems as if we are all seeking God. Sometimes this seeking may look exactly like the high holy heroic enterprise we think a search for God ought to look like, and sometimes it's more like sex, drugs and rock 'n roll. Whatever form it takes, however, it is always an odd sort of search, and not altogether a fair one. C. S. Lewis said that it is like the mouse's search for the cat—long before you are looking for it, it's been looking for you. Long

before you spot it, it has a bead on you.

I have a friend whose pursuit of God has taken her through eight different organized religions and several disorganized ones, not to mention therapeutic and New Age practices, each one finally the one that was going to make sense of everything. The last time I saw her, as she began telling me about the latest thing, I felt a wave of exhaustion hit me. She said she'd finally found it, but she seemed like a child in the woods who's disobeyed the cardinal rule of being lost—Don't try to find us. Stay put. Someone will find *you*. I wished that she would stay put for once and get found. I wished that she would stop listening to sales pitches for the latest and greatest technique of well-being, and attend more deeply to the Someone who has already located her and who has been available to her in the depths of her being from before the day she was born.

Writer Anne Lamott recounts the time when she got found in *Traveling Mercies*—one of those large, colorful over-the-top conversion stories that not everyone relates to, but it makes a point nonetheless. Depressed, alcoholic, and pregnant, Lamott has an abortion and then goes on a week-long binge. On the final night she is trying to sleep, but can't. Then she has a vision:

After a while, as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner... I knew it was Jesus... And I was appalled. I thought about my life and my brilliant and hilarious progressive friends, I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said aloud, "I would rather die."

After that, she felt pursued. She resisted until she finally got tired of resisting and wound up in the back pew of a church:

I stayed for the sermon, which I just thought was so ridiculous, like someone trying to prove the existence of extraterrestrials, but the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling and it washed over me. I began to cry and left before the benediction.

When she got home, she finally gave up:

I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute... Then I took a long deep breath and said out loud, "All right. You can come in."

Dag Hammerskold, who was the second Secretary General of the UN, kept a private journal that was published after his death in a plane crash in 1961. Called *Markings*, it was a sensation when it was published. No one knew that Hammarskjold possessed a mystical inner life and a driving thirst for God. I lost the book a long time ago, but I remember this entry:

I don't know Who—or what—put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone—or Something

—and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful, and that my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.

Unlike Ann Lamott's conversion, the encounter Hammarskjöld describes probably took place over many years of gradual and deepening awareness. He could not pinpoint the hour of either the call or the response—not many of us can. But the “Yes,” when it was finally uttered, shaped his humanity and his mission for the rest of his life.

Did you notice the verb that John the Evangelist uses to describe the calling of Philip in today's gospel reading? He does not say that Jesus *called* Philip. He says that he *found* Philip. Philip later says to Nathanael, “I have found the Messiah,” but he no more found Jesus than I wrote that seminary ad campaign. Jesus found *him*.

It also says that Philip went and found Nathanael, and brought him to Jesus. But we soon find out the deeper truth—Jesus was the one who had found Nathanael. He had already seen him, already known him, already chosen him, before a word was out of his mouth. “Here is a true Israelite!” says Jesus about Nathanael. “How did you know me?” Nathanael asks, bewildered. “I saw you sitting under the tree,” Jesus replies. “Before you saw me, I saw you.”

“O Lord, you know when I sit and when I stand. You are acquainted with all my ways. Before a word is on my lips, you know it.”

My colleague in Wellesley, Martin Copenhaver*, reminds us that the Bible doesn't tell us stories about people searching for God. It is instead one long story about God posing the first question, God taking the initiative, God searching for us us. Even in the comforting cadences of the 23rd Psalm the point is driven home by a familiar line, “Surely goodness and kindness shall follow me all the days of my life.”

The word “follow” conjures an image of something that trails along after. A puppy dog may follow me. My shadow may follow me. And there is comfort in picturing God's goodness following that close. But, in Hebrew, the word implies something more active and persistent and determined than that. The word often translated as “follow,” is more accurately translated, “pursue,” or “chase down.” And that sounds different, doesn't it? “Surely God's goodness will pursue me, God's mercy will chase me down.”

No matter how much our modern religious culture encourages and affirms the seeker, the biblical record insists that we are not really ever the ones who are doing the searching. We like to think of ourselves as the lone heroic protagonists of an epic story, but it isn't so. God is not a prize or a reward at the end of our human struggle. God is not passively waiting to be found in some place we have yet to reach. No, we are and always have been the precious objects of desire. God pursues us. God find us. And only when we have been found like *that* can we finally say that we have found ourselves.

Now, a lot of us do feel pursued, hounded, chased down. Martin reminds us, however, that to be pursued is not always a great feeling, like when we feel haunted by the relentless passage of time. I know that when I look at photos of myself as a child, I am often overcome with sadness. I want to know who that is and what happened to her. Instinctively I begin to count the

number of years I may have left if only I get lucky, avoid cold drafts, certain foods, and drunk drivers. It's not a big number.

You may feel pursued by a question about the meaning and direction of your life, or its lack thereof. How does it all add up? Does it all add up? Many of us feel under the gun to make something of our lives. Like the proverbial hamsters on a wheel, we run as if something were chasing us, when we ourselves are the ones propelling the infernal machine.

Maybe you feel that restlessness of heart that St. Augustine described. Maybe you are longing for a way of living, for a way of belonging, for something you can't quite put your finger on, but that you long for with a longing that springs to your eyes in tears when you hear a certain kind of music, or come upon some breathtaking scene, or wake up in the night because you thought you heard someone say your name.

Our hearts and imaginations are pursued by anxieties, fears, and longings of many kinds. But what if their pursuit of us enclosed a more encompassing pursuit? What if they contain something greater than the sum of their parts? As Martin writes, perhaps "that which nips at our heels, tugs at our hearts, and haunts our imagination is in fact God." And what if God is unlike everything else in our experience that comes after us and haunts us? What if God is chasing us down not to harm us, not to scold us, not to embarrass us, not to punish us, not to frighten us, and not to demand our lives or our wallets or that we meet some impossible standard, but rather to give us a blessing, to give us a life, to give us God's own and very self?

The biblical story is remarkably clear that the One who pursues us and hems us in, who calls and finds, wants only to make us happy and to bless us with the greatest of all blessings—to draw again in us the original design of our creation, to help us shed the false selves we have made out of fear or obligation or pride and give us back the persons we were born to be, to give meaning and purpose, courage and direction to our existence by telling us our names.

The first disciples in today's story, found and called by Jesus, are eventually sent to find others and call them into the cost and joy of the gospel. When he is older, the little acolyte, Samuel, found and called by God in the night, will be sent to find and call another little boy, the shepherd, David, who will rule justly over God's people. Like them, we who hear our names on the lips of God, we who are daily found as we wake and sleep, are also sent. Sent to find and call the waiting, warring, wonderful world to reconciliation, to justice and to peace.

If this were a different kind of church, right about now we'd have an altar call. I would tell you that Jesus has been looking for you, that he has found you now, that he is inviting you to come to him and live his life, and that he wants an answer.

We're not that kind of church, and I'm not going to do that.

But just because we're not, and just because I'm not, doesn't mean that you are not pursued, that you won't ever be found, that you won't ever hear that call and won't ever have to answer it one way or another.

Whether your time comes in the back pew of a church, via a triple waking in the middle of the night, or over decades of human experience (it is all the same), say this:

“Speak! Your servant is listening.” “All right. Come in.” Say, “Yes.”

*Some of what follows is indebted to a sermon by Martin Copenhaver, “Seeking Us Out, Bringing Us Home,” March 14, 2004.