

Finding Cornelius

The Season of Epiphany

- Last Thursday, on the 6th of January, we celebrated the 12th Day of Christmas, the Feast of the Epiphany of Our Lord, when we hear the story of the Magi traveling to Bethlehem
 - We are now in the Season of Epiphany, which goes on until Wednesday, the 1st of March, Ash Wednesday
 - Epiphany, means “manifestation” or “revelation” of Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ.
- I’ve usually considered Epiphany as a Holding Pattern
 - That couple of months between Christmas and Ash Wednesday,
 - we wait around, decompressing from all the excitement of Christmas, until we’re called upon to fast and repent in the Lenten season
- However, there is a Big Story that we need to pay attention to during the season of Epiphany;
 - Jesus the Christ is not something that we discover. Rather Epiphany is the story of how God discovers us.
 - We do not find Jesus in searching after the truth, Instead Jesus reaches out, Jesus goes out and calls to us.
 - 1 Epiphany: Acts 10: Peter going to the house of the Centurion Cornelius
 - 2 -3 Epiphany: Jesus calling out to his disciples: “Come, follow me...”
 - 4 – 7 Epiphany: Revealing himself as one who speaks with authority:
 - Speaks of the Kingdom of Heaven: the beatitudes and the law
 - 8 Epiphany: the Transfiguration on the Mountain, when Jesus reveals who he truly is to the disciples.
 - In Epiphany, we learn that Jesus still reaches, still goes out among us, still reveals himself to us.
 - In Epiphany, we recall that Jesus does not sit passively, an aloof teacher, waiting for people to come to him

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- Instead Jesus manifests himself as one who actively seeks us out
 - Even as the shepherd searches for his sheep, the woman searches for her missing coin, so Jesus the Christ, searches for us and looks for us in all the strange places we hope to hide.
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We are a Nation of Seekers

- I think that when most people, myself included, think about my relationship to God, I think about it in terms of a Search.
 - That's what we do: search.
 - You can see it in the Community Announcements page of the Anacortes American:
 - With presentations from the Fidalgo Atheists, the Center for Happiness, the Methodist Church and the Socrates Café.
 - A few years ago, Huston Smith, one of the preeminent comparative religion scholars in the US, wrote a 18-part series on PBS, which he called "The Long Search."
- We often think of our groping after God in terms of a journey, a long search,
 - But that is not the story of the Good News of Christ
 - Instead the Good News is the account of the extraordinary means that God takes to search after us.
- That's certainly true in the stories of Christmas
 - Hardly anyone in all those accounts was looking for God; mostly they were living out their lives; going after their daily bread.
 - The Magi were searching, following a star, not seeking after God, but searching for a King
 - The first Christmas story is not an account of how people found God,
 - But rather it is the story of how God found us.
 - And when people finally do encounter the manifestations of God, it's a frightening event:
 - So much so that the first words the angels say are, "Do not be afraid," to Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds in the field

Cornelius and St. Peter

- God finding us is the story we find in Acts this morning.
 - Today's reading is the mini-homily that Peter gave as he entered the House of Cornelius, the Centurion of the Italian Cohort
- This is the culmination of the story of the conversion of Cornelius, the first Gentile Convert to The Way
 - It is one of the major turning points in Acts
 - Cornelius is not portrayed as a pagan, but as one who is sympathetic to Judaism
 - Who is at his prayers at 3 in the afternoon, when he saw in a vision an angel of God,
 - And, as was usual and as we are told, Cornelius stared at the angel in terror.
 - The angel told him to send for a Simon Peter, who at the same time, was having a vision about the large sheet being lowered from heaven, and in the sheet are representatives of all the beasts, birds, and reptiles, which have all been declared as fit to eat, and none of which have been declared as ritually unclean animals.
 - The servants bring Peter before Cornelius, and Peter understands that not only was the dream about ritually unclean food, but it was also about doing away with the restrictions that prevented Jews from associating with or visiting Gentiles.
 - And Peter says, as we open our reading from Acts, "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but *in every nation* anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."
- Cornelius was a seeker after Judaism, not Christianity, and Peter had never considered spreading the message about Jesus to anyone else but Jews.
 - Cornelius was not on a search for Jesus and Peter was not on a search to convert Gentiles.
 - But this was not their search. It was God's search for them.

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- They didn't know that they were lost, but God found them anyway.
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God and Church

- This story has much to say about why many of us find ourselves in Church on a Sunday morning.
 - Many of us are here because we believe we are searching for something.
 - Although our lives may be rich and rewarding in many ways, there often is a niggling feeling that there must be something more,
 - And perhaps in our hour in church, something may be sung, or said or prayed about that will help us in our search
- But that is not the way the Bible tells it.
 - According to the Bible, as I understand it, we are here in church at this particular time, is because we have been sought after, called and given a summons.
 - We are here because God has put us here.
- Our time in church should remind us to pay attention to how God is seeking for us.
 - We should notice those little coincidences in life that somehow we find possible to put in the context of other things that reveals God working in our lives
- The message of the Epiphany is that God will not leave us to our own devices
 - God is among us, or as we hear in the opening of the Gospel of John as translated in the Message,
 - "The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood."
- Christianity is not so much a religion of seeking and discovery; it is a religion of God's being made manifest among us, of God's revealing himself to us, right in our own neighborhood
 - Our long search is over. God has already found us.
 - And that is the Good News.