

Sermon for Sunday, April 25, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"IN SEARCH OF A LOST GOD"

St. Luke 15:1-10

Text: "And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!'" --St. Luke 15:6

Eight miles north of the modern city of Jerusalem is a mound, called a Tel. Recently archaeologists excavating the site found the handle of a broken water jug and on it were scratched four ancient Hebrew letters. Translated, they spelled the word "Gibeon." At last they had found the ancient town of the Bible. It was here that Joshua had led the children of Israel to a great victory as he called upon the Lord to give him time to complete his victory. So it was here that the sun stood still upon Gibeon (Joshua 10:12) and it was here by the pool of Gibeon that David's men had clashed with those of King Saul. (II Samuel 2:13) And here at Gibeon God had appeared to Solomon and endowed him with a "wise and understanding heart". (I Kings 3:5,12) Yet, all that remains today is a mound of earth, covering the rubble of the centuries. The glory that was Gibeon is gone and until its rediscovery, even its location had been lost.

Down in the Jordan valley, perhaps 45 miles from Jerusalem, lies another Tel. At level one they discovered a gold cross from about 450 A.D., at level two an oil lamp from 100 A.D., at level three a silver ladle from 500 B.C., at level four a stone altar from 900 B.C., at level five an ivory comb from 1200 B.C. As the levels go down the time falls back until at the lowest level they find the clay head of a figurine from 7000 B.C. But again, the glory of Zarethan--the city where the vessels for Solomon's temple were cast--has faded. Change and decay have tumbled into dust the glory that once was and all that remains is a mound of earth. The broken fragments of the past are silent and the only sound is the blowing of the desert wind and the rustle of the drifting sand.

Perhaps three or four thousand years from now a builder will begin to build a building. He will excavate down 20 or 30 feet for the basement. Perhaps his shovel will strike a stone and he will find the ancient foundation of a building. Perhaps he will have dug down to the level where you are now sitting and perhaps the stone he finds will be the cornerstone of a very ancient church. And if he could read those strange markings on it, he would know that it said, "Central Presbyterian Church."

In our hymnbook there is a hymn, the second line of which goes like this:

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;  
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away,  
Change and decay in all around I see;  
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.

That verse was written over 100 years ago. Since that time things have changed. Yet, in spite of our modern inventions, our gadgets and devices--in spite of speed greater than sound, in spite of atomic power, in spite of flights into space--the basic needs of man have not changed at all. As the writer of that hymn looked out on the world in which he lived, he came face to face with the realities of life. Life's little day did indeed swiftly ebb away for he saw friends and loved one's taken by death and his own years had mounted up so quickly it took his breath away to realize how soon they were gone. And indeed, it was true that the

the joys of earth grew dim and its glories passed away. Everywhere he looked he saw the ravages of time. Even the buildings that had been new and wonderful when he was young were already old, outdated and dilapidated. It was so very true that change and decay were in everything he saw. And as he looked out on this changing, shifting scene, there arose in his soul a deep and abiding longing for something permanent, something that did not fade nor pass away; something upon which he could take his stand in life and know that though the very mountains trembled and fell, though the very seas passed away, there was one thing that did not change. Thus he expressed the cry of the human heart of every age, "O thou who changest not, abide with me."

In moments of reflection, is not this the cry of every human heart? We yearn for something or someone who is permanent and unchanging. Like the psalmist, we long for a God for whom a thousand years in his sight are but as yesterday when it is past. So the plaintive cry of every age is the cry, "How can I find God?" And every generation is in search of a lost God. But man's problem--your problem and mine--is this: God is not the one who is lost. No, God isn't lost--you are, I am.

Notice in the first place that some of us are lost in the wrong way. Some of us this morning are lost in tomorrow. Life as it is for us this morning isn't as we want it and we intend to change things. We are going to work for that promotion, plan for that new home, save towards that new car, put aside for that special trip, or arrange for whatever our particular dream or ambition happens to be. As a consequence of this we are always living in tomorrow. Today is just a hindrance to get through and out of the way in order that tomorrow we can really start living or really start enjoying things, or really begin doing what we have always wanted to do.

Some of us who are older are lost in yesterday. All of the good things and the good times lie in the past. Today is just another bit of time to be endured, for real life has already been lived and lies in the past. But the fact is we cannot deal with God as he was yesterday or as he will be tomorrow. God is in the here and now. God is in today. The only life we can live is the life we have this very moment for it is the only moment we truly have. We cannot serve God in a day that is already past nor a day that has not yet come. The only place we will find him is in this day and this moment.

Do you remember the way the Bible tells the story of Jesus calling Levi (or Matthew, as we know him best)? Levi was a tax collector, sitting at his place of business conducting his affairs. Jesus stopped in front of him and said two little words, "Follow me." Levi could have said, "Lord, I served you yesterday." But Jesus wasn't interested in that. He could have said, "Lord, when I get my business affairs in order, I will serve you tomorrow." But Jesus wasn't interested in that. No, Jesus was interested in Levi's response to him in the right now time. He was interested in today, for that's where Jesus was. Yes, "Follow me." How do you fit a call like that into your life? Not yesterday, not tomorrow, but right now. You see, God isn't so interested in what you have done or will do, he is more interested in what you are doing.

A second reason we can't find God is because we are looking for him in the wrong place. Where do you look for God? Do you expect to find him when you have a quiet moment to read the Bible or pray? Do you expect to find him at church or in some big spiritual experience? But isn't it a matter of fact that you

haven't found God as often as you would really like? And if that is your case--as it is with most of us--do you suppose it is because we haven't looked in the right place? For example, maybe God comes to meet you in the middle of an argument with your wife. Or maybe he really comes to meet you when you are shouting at the children. Or maybe he is meeting you in the middle of some business deal and you aren't looking for him there. Is there some person who irritates you, is there some problem getting you down? Maybe that's where God is in your life and you just haven't seen him yet.

Do you remember the story Jesus told about the Good Samaritan? A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves. He was badly beaten and robbed, and passed by on the other side. Maybe they were thinking about meeting God in some religious service when they got to Jericho and they didn't see God in that needy man lying there, so they passed by. But it was the Samaritan who saw God meeting him in that situation and stopped to aid the wounded man. And maybe you and I would find God more easily if in every event of life we asked ourselves, "What is God saying to me in this situation? What does God want me to do?" You see, as we respond to each moment, we discover that God is already there.

Are you looking for God? Well, God isn't lost. You will find him in your relationship to your spouse, to your children, to your neighbor; you will find him in your business decisions, in your social relationships. And if you are having trouble finding God, he isn't the one who is lost.

So some of us can't find God because we are living in the wrong way. Again, some of us can't find God because we are looking in the wrong places. Thirdly, some of us can't find God because we are doing the wrong things. You see, the fact is, many of us really don't want to find God, at least not right now. If we did, we would have to stop doing some of the things we are doing. We know that. We won't admit it to anyone, but deep down in our hearts we know that if we got serious about finding God, we would have to change some of the things we are doing, some of the ways we are acting, some of the ways we are spending some of our money, some of the ways we treat people, some of the things we are enjoying. Yes, if we found God we would have to make some changes and the fact is, lots of us don't want to change.

Do you remember the story of the rich young ruler? He wanted to find God. He wanted assurance that he was saved. So he came to Jesus and asked how to find eternal life. Well, Jesus told him how to find God, but it cost, it meant giving up something. And the rich young ruler wasn't really willing to give up anything; he was not willing to make any changes in his life. The Bible says he went away saddened. I want to say to you this morning, if you really want to find God, it may cost you dearly. If there is sin in your life, you will have to clean up your act. You won't find God as long as you are doing the wrong things. But then, it really isn't God who is lost, is it?

The two parables we read this morning have three things in common. First, in each case something was lost; second, in each case the owner sought diligently for the lost object; third, when it was found in each case there was great rejoicing. Something is lost this morning--it isn't God, but it may be you. But if you are lost, God is looking, searching, for you. He loved you and lost you, but he is not content to let you go. He has sent the Good Shepherd Jesus in search of you.

Do you remember how Jesus put it? He said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep...I lay down my life for the sheep."

So something is lost and the owner is looking for it. Our hearts cry out, "Change and decay in all around I see; O thou who changest not, abide with me." And whether we are lost in the wrong day, or looking in the wrong places, or doing the wrong things, God comes searching for us for he is not lost--we are. The parable says, "There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." If you are looking for God you don't have to look any more. In Jesus he has found you--all you have to do is repent and there is rejoicing in heaven. Will you do it right now?