

# "Seek the Lord"

Isaiah 55:6-9

September 18,2011

14<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

People, by nature, are seekers, searching for that which they need to make life fulfilling and meaningful. We've been that way ever since Adam and Eve went seeking for something more fulfilling in the forbidden fruit on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden. Many people today are seeking answers for life's questions without even being aware of exactly *what* the question is or *where* the answer can be found. In our text for today, God not only reveals what the real question is but He also gives us the only true and lasting answer.

Many people are seeking a way to fill the emptiness to their lives by filling it with activities, responsibilities, duties, possessions, money, and so on. By having these, you and others may think that life will be fulfilling. Yet many people today, after getting the prized promotion at work, buying the dream house, winning the big game or attaining any other goal, may ask, Is that all there is to life?

Many people are seeking guidance and direction in our confused and directionless society. This has been going on for a generation or two ever since we, as a nation, kicked God and moral absolutes out of our public institutions and lives. People are cut adrift to seek answers from radio call in therapists, horoscopes, and self-help books. Yet when all is said and done, read and studied, listened to and advised, people seem just as confused and adrift as when they started.

Many people are seeking forgiveness, although they probably would never admit the need or use such a "religious" term as that. Yet people find themselves burdened by guilt and shame, despite the world's efforts to convince them that there are no rights or wrongs, only inappropriate choices. They try to ignore the guilt and shame or cover it with alcohol, drugs, or pleasurable activities. Yet they find no lasting peace.

Too often, the problem is not that people are seeking answers, but that they are seeking answers in all the wrong places. People urge us to "get in touch with your spirit," implying that the

answers to the difficulties and problems of life are to be found within ourselves. So many seek moral answers by determining personal moral codes to guide and direct their lives by picking and choosing what they will or will not do. People want no outside help, preferring to live by the words of the old poem, *Invictus*, "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul." If people do seek answers in religion, it is either a "buffet religion" in which religious beliefs and practices can be chosen or discarded according to personal tastes or a vague "spirituality" which requires no commitment or no faith in a personal God and yet offers hope without a Savior and life after death without faith.

If people search for answers outside of themselves, then it is in places such as science and technology. Author Fred Brown wrote a short story about an electronic super-computer that was asked the question, "Is there a God?" to which the computer answered, "There is now." People are willing to endow computers and all sorts of technology with god-like characteristics because they think the answers to life are found there. Yet the greater our technology increases, the more lost and lonely we seem to be.

As Christians, we may think we are immune from such things. Yet Christians listen to and heed the advice of those who urge us to seek answers within. Christians, even those who have been catechized and have memorized the Ten Commandments, still seek answers on moral questions from peers and their own personal preferences. Christians will seek their beliefs from a religious buffet table, depending on what they feel is right for them. Christians will seek answers through technology and science, too. However, if we do this, we will find no more answers in our searching than our non-Christian neighbors.

The prophet, Isaiah, has a different solution for seeking. He is addressing the people of Judah who were seeking answers. Their nation had been overthrown by Babylon and they were all taken into captivity there. They were seeking answers for their desperate situation. They were seeking relief from the guilt over their sin. They were seeking help for their faith. Isaiah says to them, "Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near." Despite the fact that they had

sinned, despite the fact that their world had fallen apart around them, and despite the fact that God seemed so far away in all of this, Isaiah urges the people to seek the Lord because He is near.

The same holds true for us. The only reason that we are far away from God is because of our sin. We turn from God, go our own way, and mess up our lives and our world. We seek solutions apart from God and His will and our problems remain unsolved and often get worse. It is no wonder that God is far off! We've left Him! On our own, we continue to move away from Him and cannot seek Him out.

The Good News is that God is near, not because we came near to God, but because He came near to us. As Isaiah had predicted earlier in his book, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.'" (Isaiah 7:14) - which means "God with us". God became one of us and one with us by assuming our flesh and blood. As St. John writes, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

He not only came near to us, but He sought us out while we were ignoring Him in order to bring us back into relationship with Himself. As St. Paul writes in Romans, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.....when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son." (Rom. 5:8,10).

He sought us out individually and came near each of us in our baptisms where the reconciliation -the peace for the conflict between us and our God earned by Jesus on the cross - was personally delivered to us. We were united to Jesus Christ in our baptisms, made children of the Heavenly Father, and given the new life with which Christ Himself rose from the grave on Easter Sunday.

So, why do we, as Christians, still think that God is far off? There was once a bumper sticker which read, "If God feels far away, guess who moved?" The only reason why we, as the people of God, still find ourselves engulfed in doubt, worry, and guilt, is not because God has moved away from

us, but because we, by the sinful actions which still plague us, leave Him. Isaiah says to the people of God in the 21st Century A.D., as he had to the people of God in the 6th Century B.C., "Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near."

God can still be found by His people. God is not found by seeking within ourselves. God is not found by seeking our own moral standards or our buffet religion. God is not found by seeking answers in science and technology. The prophet instead speaks about finding God through repentance. Repentance is not simply a rite mumbled in a worship service or a feeling of being sorry. Isaiah describes it this way: "Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts. Let him return to the LORD." Repentance is not merely being sorry for the evil and the wrong that you do, but it is to turn away *from* evil and returning *to* the Lord.

What happens when God grants that repentance to a child of God? He is found. He is found, not by an angry judge or one who says, "I told you so!", but by a merciful and forgiving Father. As Isaiah says, "Let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon." True fulfillment, true peace, and true direction for one's life are found when one has been shown mercy, received pardon for one's sins, and been reconciled with God again.

Now, these wonderful things don't come to us as we might think or hope they might come in our day and age which emphasizes the flashy and spectacular. They do not come through an impressive miracle, through the voices of angels, or through lightening bolts from heaven. True pardon comes through the speaking of an ordinary man like me, daring to speak in the place of God. True direction for life comes through plain words written in an ordinary book and distributed by the thousands. True peace comes through simple bread and wine to which the promise of God has been attached.

How can all of this be? None of it makes sense. None of it can be explained or rationalized by us. Even some Christians doubt that these things occur, preferring to substitute our own efforts,

abilities, or piety in place of them. Yet God says through the prophet, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." God does not always work as we think He should. His ways are not subject to our approval or understanding. If God chooses to reveal Himself in this book, then He will be revealed. If God chooses to convey His forgiveness through the words spoken by one of His creatures, that forgiveness will be conveyed. If God chooses to give us that forgiveness in a visible way and grant us assurance of it through a sacred meal of bread and wine to which the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ is added, then that forgiveness will be given.

So, seek the Lord, not within yourselves, not in new and trendy religions or spirituality, and not in science and technology, but seek Him where He has promised to be --- in water, in words, and in bread and wine. Though the world discounts these things and often mocks them, there is where you will find God and there you will find what you need to face the difficulties of life and the certainty of death.

There is a sense of urgency in Isaiah's words. He urges us to seek the Lord and call upon Him "*while* he may be found" and "*while* he is near." The people of Judah had taken God's mercy for granted and, in their pride, believed that nothing bad or negative would ever befall them. The destruction of Jerusalem, the burning of the temple, and the taking of the people into captivity by Babylon woke them up.

We, too, take God's grace and His gifts for granted here in our church. We think that, as American Christians, life-long Lutherans, and long-time members of this congregation that nothing ever bad or negative will ever befall us and that God's gifts will always be here. Don't make the same mistake as the people of Judah did and take God's mercy for granted. God could take His Word away from us and give it to others. He could allow this congregation to close down or withdraw the pastor at any time. And, of course, there is the day of final judgment which is surely coming. Christ

will return and find many people, even some professing Christians to be unprepared for His coming and judgment. There will be no second chance to receive God's mercy and pardon at that time.

Paul wrote this to the Christians in Corinth, "As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation." (2 Cor. 6:1-2). Now is that day for us. Continue to seek the Lord in His Word on a daily basis. Don't look elsewhere. Continue to call on Him in worship in His House on a regular basis. Don't call upon anyone or anything else. Continue to receive His gifts of forgiveness, faith, and salvation through words, water, bread, and wine. You will find Him. And you will receive mercy and pardon which will give you the answers you seek for life. Amen.