***HIDE AND SEEK***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

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Texts: Isaiah 55:1-13 and Luke 19:1-10

Soccer, or fútbol as it is known in most of the world, claims to be the world’s game. But for most kids even before there is fútbol there is hide-and-seek. It is about as basic a game as you can get – no ball or other equipment required, adaptable to any number of players, any time of day, and almost any setting: home, backyard, farm (watch your step), park, forest, garden, or even church in the middle of the night! All you need is someone to hide and someone to seek and off you go. The earliest record of this game is found in the book of Genesis. After Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, they realize they are naked. When they hear God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, they hide among the trees. Along comes the Lord, calling out, “Where are you?” And Adam, who is obviously less skilled in this game than Eve, responds, “I heard you coming and I was afraid, because I was naked, so I hid myself.” Thus ends the first game of hide-and-seek.

It must seem to God that divine dealings with humanity are a perpetual game of hide-and-seek. God creates us, loves us, cares for us, calls to us – and we are nowhere to be found. Sometimes it is because, like Adam and Eve, we don’t want to be found. We don’t want God to know what we are up to, or we know we have done wrong, or we don’t want to be reminded of what God wants of us, and so we hide from God and from any divine demands on our lives. Jesus gives us the benefit of the doubt sometimes in calling us “lost” instead of in hiding. Sometimes that is accurate and sometimes not. “All we like sheep have gone astray!” says Isaiah. Sometimes we aren’t hiding, we have just gotten distracted and wandered away from God to seemingly greener pastures, only to suddenly discover we have no idea where we are or how to get back. Sometimes it is choices we make that take us far from God, so far that we can’t see God anywhere around us – and that may be okay until some problem arises and we realize we need help and don’t know where to turn. Sometimes we are lost, sometimes hiding, but God is always seeking.

“The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost,” says Jesus. His calling, his mission, his purpose was not just to find all those who wanted to be found, but also to find those who were lost or hiding – some of whom didn’t even know it. The poster boy for that hide-and-seek game is Zacchaeus. You remember him – little guy, big bank account, adept at tree climbing. He was a pariah to his neighbors because he worked for the Romans, collecting taxes and pocketing a tidy sum for himself. He was regarded like prostitutes and sinners as a holy outcast despite his wealth, for it was dirty money made in unrighteous living. Was he hiding out from God – denying God’s expectations for more righteous living, or ignoring God’s commands, or denying God’s existence to justify his life choices? Or was he simply lost – having wandered off into a life of legitimized larceny that had carried him far from God? We don’t really know. The text tells us only, “He sought to see who Jesus was” – not “He sought to see Jesus” but rather “He sought to see who Jesus was”. A lot of crowds gather to catch a glimpse of a star or pope or celebrity, to say, “I saw him or her in person that day.” But Zacchaeus wanted to see *who Jesus was*, and in so doing perhaps we find him to be not only the lost who is being sought, but the seeker who is trying to find something or someone to set his life aright. In your relationship with God are you more often the one being sought or the one seeking?

If Zacchaeus was seeking to see who Jesus was, he was doing so cautiously, more cautiously than Nicodemus who sought out Jesus at night to ask a question of him, more cautiously than those who dared to ask Jesus for healing, more cautiously even than those who grasped at Jesus’ cloak amid the crowd. Zacchaeus didn’t come to Jesus, he climbed a tree – a sycamore as we all know from the song – to see out over the crowd, to see this Jesus whom he was seeking. Who knows what he expected to find when he saw him – a sudden revelation, a moment of recognition, an ‘aha’ moment! What he did not expect was to be found. The tree was a vantage point for seeing, but it was also a safe place for hiding, a safe distance from the crowd who hated him and from Jesus who sparked his curiosity.

Sometimes in our seeking we want to keep a safe distance, to risk a little but not too much, to seek to know who Jesus is but not really know him, for in knowing him we might have to change, we might have to do things differently, give up some of our unholy loves, move out of our comfort zones into less familiar ground, go where we do not really want to go and do what we really don’t want to do and stop doing what we really don’t want to stop doing. We want to find Jesus only if it means having him say, “keep on keeping on” with those things we want to do, only if it means, “let me make your life easier and more comfortable.”

But that does not seem to be the way of Jesus. While Zacchaeus was seeking him from the safety of that limb, Jesus sought out Zacchaeus, called him out of the tree, named him in front of the crowd, and invited himself to dinner. In this game of hide-and-seek, Jesus did not just find Zacchaeus, he helped Zacchaeus to find God. He went to the tax collector’s home and sat at the table that no righteous person would sit at, and broke bread with the little man who no righteous person would eat with, and in so doing he helped Zacchaeus to find God and sort out his life and be at peace as one who was lost and found. Being found for Zacchaeus meant giving half his wealth to the poor and repaying four times over those he had defrauded. Being found meant changing how he lived and how he worked and who he was, because he had seen who Jesus was – the Savior. “Today salvation has come to this house,” said Jesus. That day salvation came to Zacchaeus.

We are not all like Zacchaeus – some of us are not that lost, or don’t think we are. Some of us would never even have left the comfort of our homes to try to see who Jesus was. Some years ago Connie Kurtz shared with me a parable called “The Boat”. It goes something like this:

*I have a great boat. Someone else looking at my boat might not be too impressed, but I think it’s a great boat. I probably spend too much time in my boat, but I feel so safe in it that I just can’t seem to help myself. I really don’t want to leave it. It has a comfortable seat; it is long and spacious and the sides are quite high, maybe a little too high, because I miss some things. But the wood is really nice to look at, and several people have even commented on what a really nice boat I have.*

*There is one problem with my boat – God doesn’t like it. God calls it a faithless boat. I’ve tried to tell God that’s not true and that if God would send people to my boat, I would minister to them faithfully. But God always tells me that I must come out of the boat and trust God if I am to be of any use. But I like my boat. I have even spruced it up with some bright paint and a large umbrella in case of rain. It looks good! I thought God would be excited to see it, but God didn’t share my joy. God just said something about people noticing the appearance of the boat but God being more concerned with hearts, and that ticked me off. After all the work I had put into that boat, God still wanted me to leave it! But God didn’t understand how safe and secure I felt there, how welcoming I would be to anyone who actually came. But God didn’t send anyone as I had asked, so I stopped asking and didn’t even ask God to visit anymore – for a long while. But then I began to get lonely in the boat and a storm blew the umbrella away and the waves began to wear down the paint and some stuffing started coming out of the seat and it rubbed my seat.*

*Finally I knew I had to do something, so I invited God back to my boat, and to my surprise, God came immediately, as though God had been waiting for that invitation all along. God stood beside the boat, speaking to me. God wasn’t angry or self-righteous (though I guess if God was self-righteous that would be appropriate). God just looked at me with a tender loving smile, reached out a hand and said, “Come on. Step out of the boat.” And this time I did. We walked to shore where we stood together and watched an unexpected wave take my beautiful boat out to sea over the horizon, never to be seen again. There was a brief moment of panic then as the boat disappeared, but my panic was transformed into excitement as I looked up at God and heard how God was going to use me - now that I was finally out of my boat.*

God is always seeking us – in sycamore trees and boats and homes and jobs and lifestyles that we think keep us at a safe distance from God. But God still finds us, still loves us, still saves us, still waits for us to come out of hiding and become the seekers.

“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters!” shouts Isaiah. “Seek the Lord while the Lord may be found, call upon the Lord while he is near!” Be the seeker, not the one hiding. Come down from the tree, come out of the boat or house or pew or rock or wherever you have been hiding! Come and seek the Lord. Come and be found! For, the promise of finding the Lord and being found, is the promise of a full life and great peace and unending hope – like a watered garden in a thirsty desert, like a free feast of rich food to which you are invited, like a symphony of song sung by creation with which you are in harmony, like salvation in your house, in your life.

Forget the hide-and-seek and just seek. See God and know that God is always seeking you – always! Amen