

**GOD'S INITIATIVE; JEREMIAH 31:31-34; JOHN 12:20-33; MARCH 29, 2009
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We have a built-in desire for God. The word “religion” comes from a root word meaning to bind up the fragments. So the religious quest is our quest for wholeness in this life.

Something in us human beings desires something, someone who transcends this world—because this world is incomplete. “Now we see in a mirror dimly,” says St. Paul, “but then face to face.”

Augustine said “our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.” Or the psalmist, “As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my heart longs for you, O God.” Gathering up the pieces. Completion. Wholeness.

And we do get glimpses of the transcendent oneness of life; the sense of wholeness with the creative life of the cosmos.

Charles Darwin whose 200th birthday is this year is an interesting example. Before becoming the naturalist aboard the HMS Beagle which led to his discovery of natural selection he was preparing for the Anglican ministry.

Many conclude he remained a believer all his life because in his *Origin of Species* there are dozens of allusions and ambiguous references to a creative force beyond the laws of nature. You get the sense reading parts of Darwin that the laws of nature were ordered by a higher power. And in the closing, famous sentence to his great treatise he refers to a mystical “grandeur” in this view of life. We long for such grandeur.

But God also longs for us. C.S. Lewis who said the longing for wholeness, for transcendence was itself proof that God exists because according to the Greeks if the object for which we have natural or ‘built in’ desires does not exist we live in an absurd world.

What makes Lewis’s spiritual autobiography *Surprised by Joy* alive and even thrilling—almost like a mystery or detective story—is Lewis’s increasing awareness that his life quest is being met and responded to by a Living Presence.

What makes his experience different is that he realizes that it is God who is *pursuing him*. Most of us most of the time think we are the ones pursuing God – we go to church, we read the bible, we reflect on life. But what Lewis discovers is that while we do or do not pursue God, God is eagerly pursuing us. Lewis says God “checkmated” his attempts to avoid acknowledging God as the source of his being and of creation.

Yet, much of the time God is the last thing on our hearts and minds. Lewis’s attempt to deny God in his life is the flip side of the religious quest.

Our longing for God is not always evident, rather our rebellion against God – or if you prefer – our rebellion against the principles of decency and order and truth that drive and plague us much of the time.

A colleague judges Christian songs by how often they use the pronoun: I. Much Christian music reflects a culture that defines everything on the basis of what I want, what I desire. But today’s story says our lives change and expand when we shift the focus and accept God’s desire for us.

Perhaps the quintessential Old Testament text on the theme of God's initiative, God's pursuing us is the one we have today from Jeremiah.

"The days are surely coming says the Lord when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah....and this is the covenant that I will make...I will put my law within them. I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they will be my people."

Yes, a covenant is a two-way agreement, but the initiative for this covenant starts with Israel in exile because they have forsaken the law. So God takes unilateral action to establish a new covenant, to reignite his dream for the human family.

God's initiative is not in the category of "let's give it the old college try one more time," but in the category of a spurned lover or betrayed spouse which is the theme of Hosea.

This relationship with God is based on intimacy and trust; based on our acceptance of God's sovereignty and vision for human life – spelled out for Israel in the Torah.

Nor does God make covenants with individuals but with God's people. This is a corrective to our consumer culture that worships the individual. So we keep asking ourselves what is God's vision for Westminster, for the church in the world—not just my personal life. Not only does God, the spurned lover, seek reunion with *his* people but with *all* the human family.

Shift with me to the reading from John. It anticipates the coming crucifixion. Jesus is speaking to his disciples and says that his hour has come.

You might remember earlier in his ministry Jesus says to his mother that his hour has not yet come, but today he says his hour has come. What he means is that the powers of darkness and light are aligned against one another to the breaking point. He is about to be tried and crucified. The great irony and paradox is that through the negation of his life his mission is fulfilled and God is glorified.

And this is a big problem for some people. The notion that God sacrifices God's son is a horrid, outdated idea some say. But power protects itself in every generation just the way it did when Jesus confronted the chief priests and rulers of the temple. The powers of domination are terrified and so they seek to silence Jesus and deflect us from following him. Horrid yes, outdated, no. Evil will unfortunately never be outdated.

To say there is no such significance in Jesus' death is to say his life has little relevance other than as an interesting human example. It is to negate the essence of his divinity. It is to say he was nothing more than human, a very good human, but not the object of our heart's desire for wholeness.

Yet, as soon as we allow that he was not just 'good' but 'one-of-a-kind' then we admit the divine in him. The best our language and even our art and music can do is point to the holy.

But because our theology or music or art are not perfect and all-encompassing does not negate the direction in which they point.

You never know what will penetrate our armor. I had the good fortune to meet a young man recently from the south who came to Buffalo in a career change to be closer to his then fiancée who lives in Toronto.

Once in proximity to one another the couple decided to re-evaluate their plans to get married. So the engagement ended.

But the young man reflecting on his circumstances said although the main reason for his being here did not work out there were many other unexpected blessings that have enriched his life, new relationships he cherishes, a career path that is moving in a new direction.

C.S. Lewis would call that the active presence of God in that man's life, pursuing him. I would agree. It's so often a matter of perspective. Unlike our contemporary culture that defines our world by what "I want" the story today is about what God wants. And God wants a deep, personal, trusting relationship with each and every one of us.

It's a Copernican revolution of the soul. Remember Copernicus discovered that the planets did not revolve around the earth but the earth and planets around the sun? Once we realize that life doesn't revolve around what we want but what God wants, we are able to participate in a spiritual solar system that places God at the center of our lives.

We are given a spiritual reality that makes God's pursuit of us the new gravitational force that defines our days.

You never know what will penetrate our armor until you have an experience like that young man. My hunch is many of us here today have similar stories we could tell if we thought about it and were so inclined.

Sharing those stories is one of the most important things a church family can do because they tell about our common yearning for wholeness. To tell someone else when and where God pursued and found me gives the other person permission or causes them to wonder what would happen if they saw their life that way.

About a generation after Darwin made his discovery another great scientist reflecting on his life said this: "he comes to us as of old, by the lakeside. He speaks to us in the same words: 'Follow me!' and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey him he reveals himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship."

Those are the words of Albert Schweitzer the great medical missionary and concert pianist. But don't just take his word for it.

The grandeur of God this time of year in Western New York; an unsolicited act of kindness you received lately; your own inner longing to be free of power protecting power are signs.

Signs of the Creator trying to get through to you and me. Amen.