

March 7, 2004

HUNGERING FOR GOD

Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Luke 5:16; 6:12-16

Preached by Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

Several years ago I was on an El Al flight from New York City to Tel Aviv, Israel. The plane was filled with Israelis heading home and Jews from New York going to Israel to visit. The flight stopped in Amsterdam to unload and then reload freight. They also told us they wanted to do another security sweep of the airplane. We took everything we'd brought onto the plane and went to a large room where we stayed under lock and key until the security check was finished.

It was morning in Amsterdam and time for Morning Prayer for observant orthodox Jews. One man decided he'd do morning prayers right there in public. He took a small, leather boxlike pouch from a bag and tied it to his forehead with long leather thongs attached to the pouch. Then he took another pouch and tied it to his upper arm. They're called phylacteries, and have been part of Jewish prayers for thousands of years. Each phylactery contains passages from the Bible. He spread a prayer shawl over his shoulders and asked a secular Jewish woman to hold his prayer book for him.

He began to pray, rocking gently and mouthing the Hebrew words from his prayer book. He didn't care who was watching or what any of us thought. He was being obedient to God and to the word of God. After all, our Old Testament Lesson commands the people of Israel to tie the word of God on their foreheads and arms — and to pray to the one God of Israel.

Most Jews and all Christians think that command is not to be taken literally. We believe that the meaning of the text lies deeper than that. We usually distinguish between what a text says, the words and their meaning, and what biblical texts are supposed to do. Well, if we don't tie God's word to our bodies, what is this text trying to do in our lives?

That's no small question. Deuteronomy 6:4ff is the central creed of Judaism. It stands as the organizing principle of Jewish life and worship. For the faithful, each morning and evening, daily prayers begin by reciting part of that text, Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Every Sabbath service in every synagogue for more than 2,000 years begins with the same quotation, Hear, O Israel.

After all the text is part of Moses' last instructions to Israel before his death and their entering the Promised Land. Remember above all else, Moses commands, remember your God. For Jews ever since, that command has meant a life of prayer. It's included life in the word of God. And, life is always life lived before God. This life means having a heart for God, a heart for Scripture and a passion for an ethical life lived out before God.

That praying man in Amsterdam is a symbol the tenacious faith of the Jewish people that has withstood the centuries and unspeakable persecution. Life is about living in the presence of The Living God, the God of the Bible. And, that means life is lived in obedience to God's word.

That same text, Deuteronomy 6, stands at the heart of Christian faith, too. One day a seeker came to Jesus and asked him what was the greatest of all God's commands. Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy 6:

Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:29-30).

The same passion for God, God's word and life lived out before God is the organizing principle of biblical Christianity. Yes, this text wants to do something — and do it in us!

Above all, this text and Jesus' quotation of it, points directly at God. The text simply means that God demands of us an all-consuming, life-wide passion for God. It's as simple and complex as that.

That profound and life-altering fact is enshrined in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism's* first question. Maybe you remember it. The question: What is the chief end of man?

The answer: The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

That's a rather intimidating life mission. At the very least it means that all of life is a means to a much larger end: the glory of God.

That great biblical demand is another way of coming at our Lenten question this year. I posed the question Ash Wednesday. God asked Adam and Eve, Where are you? The question is larger than it seems and it's our question to. Where are we in this life of ours? What have you done with the days and opportunities allotted to you in your life? What have you made of your life? Your faith? Or, how has your life served that great chief end: the glory of God?

I suppose most of us are feeling a bit guilty about now. We fall short of the glory of God most of the time. And, we ask, in a world like ours and lives like ours, is it possible to live our lives wholly for the glory of God? How do any of us make room for God in our professional lives that demand so much of our time, energy and focus? How can family life these days glorify God when families are busier than ever and even the Christian Sabbath is being invaded more and more with outside activities for our children? God time seems squeezed out despite our best intentions.

How do we make room for God anyway? Our morning Psalm seems like wishful thinking, quaint, remote and even irrelevant. The Psalmist cries, As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.

But the witness of Scripture is clear. The glory of God is the issue in our lives and in the world. The end of Psalm 72 marks the traditional end of the Psalms of David. As the Psalmist sums up his work, his life and his faith, he writes, Blessed be the God of Israel may his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen (Psalm 72:19).

Imagine that: the entire world full of God's glory. And imagine making that our vocation in life. But that is the agenda for the people of God. Scripture teaches that the trajectory of the history of the world is bending toward the glory of God — despite all appearances to the contrary. Paul puts it eloquently in Philippians 2:10-11. so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, *to the glory of God the Father* (Philippians 2:10-11). Note that all salvation and all thoughts about Jesus Christ point toward the chief end — the glory of God.

By the way, that's what we mean when we pray, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth .

When we hold our lives up to that standard we have to ask if it's even possible in lives like ours. How can any of us develop a hunger for God that grows and grows.

One answer is that we will always fall short and it's hopeless. A better answer is to look at Jesus who came to earth to show us the way to God. The New Testament tells us Jesus' life was wholly devoted to the glory of God. And Luke reports that one way Jesus expressed that chief end in his life was prayer. Hear our Gospel Lesson one more time.

But [Jesus] would withdraw to deserted places and pray (Luke 5:16).
Now during those days [Jesus] went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God (Luke 6:12).

What do we learn about living for the glory of God by looking at Jesus? How can Jesus' life of prayer assist us in developing a growing hunger for God?

Well, for one thing, it seems clear that **Jesus decided to make God the chief end of his life**. Without that fundamental decision we'll never glorify God. At any time in our lives, our life is the sum total of the decisions we've made up to that point. Small and large decisions made over a lifetime profoundly shape our lives and our faith. Hunger for God doesn't happen by hoping it will or wishing for it. The decision to make the glory of God the chief end of our life repeated over and over will have very large consequences.

Second, it seems clear that **Jesus made regular time for God**. If we don't make time for God and make a regular part of our life, God will not be part of our life and we cannot glorify God. It's a necessary decision we have to repeat over and over.

I know that's not easy these days. But I also know it can be done. I have a friend out east who's a very busy eye surgeon. Long ago he decided to make God the chief end of his

life and he decided to make time for God every day. He rises at 4:30 in the morning and rides his exercise bike for an hour or more while he reads scripture and prays. And I will attest, he is not your ordinary man.

If that seems an impossible model, I know busy mothers who make child care an opportunity to pray for that child or their children. And they pray about their own life as a mother and pray for the father of their children, too.

I know other busy people who use drive time as time alone with God. I know people who take walks and use it as time with God. I once knew a man who made a room in his house a prayer room where he spent time every day of his life. It can be done — if we decide to.

Third, it certainly seems that **Jesus developed a life of prayer**. Prayer can be many things besides talking to God. Marjorie Thompson talks about the variety of ways to pray in *Soul Feast*. Some of them are:

- Æ Being with God
- Æ Listening to God
- Æ Writing to God
- Æ Speaking to God

Above all **Jesus knew to whom he was speaking — abba**. Jesus knew that the all powerful, majestic, holy, awesome creator God before whom all the creation bows in humble praise is, at the very same time, like a loving papa, a parent who wants to hear our cries, who wants to help us, who wants to walk through life with us. Our God wants to be our friend — imagine that!

And we should never forget that **Jesus created a community in which and through which we know God**. In the community of faith, this congregation, God feeds us by word and sacrament. In our fellowship as the family of God, God feeds the hungers of our hearts.

Imagine, if you will, a congregation in which all of us repeatedly decided to make the glory of God the chief end of life. And imagine that all of us spent time with God every day. And what if we all developed a life of prayer: being with God, listening to God, talking to God. And if our glorious, all-powerful was our abba, imagine what that would be.

Well, I don't know what that might be like. I'm not sure it's been tried. But I do know this: things would be different — and that's the point.