### “Those Who Did Not Seek Me” Steve Finlan for The First Church, June 19, 2022

**Isaiah 65:1–4**

1I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, “Here I am, here I am”, to a nation that did not call on my name. 2 I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices; 3 a people who provoke me to my face continually, sacrificing in gardens and offering incense on bricks; 4 who sit inside tombs, and spend the night in secret places; who eat swine’s flesh, with broth of abominable things in their vessels.

**Luke 8:26–37**

26Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. 27As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and lived in the tombs. 28When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me” . . . 30Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. 31They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

32 On the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these, so he gave them permission. 33Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

34 When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. 35Then people came out to see what had happened . . . they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. . . 37Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned.

Of course you’ve heard the saying “seek and you will find” (Matt 7:7). Spiritually we usually see ourselves as seekers for the truth of God’s message. But in today’s passages, the seeker is really God, seeking us. But our story starts with those who have strayed from God.

The Isaiah passage is a very bitter attack by the author on his fellow Jews, some of whom he finds to be idolators, sacrificing to pagan gods in gardens, eating swine’s flesh and other non-kosher foods in secret places. God is more ready to be found by unknown Gentiles than by those disloyal Jews who provoke him to his face. We should not conclude that all Jews were or are idolators. Third Isaiah (the name we give this author) is clearly frustrated with some minority within the community that is participating in pagan religion, and he engages in pretty extreme language to make his point. It also has a sorrowful side to it. God is holding out his “hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good” (65:2), a statement that shows heartbreak and hurt. This shows God yearning for the repaired relationship that would follow a reaffirmation of loyalty from his people. Third Isaiah sees this only happening in the future, when God creates a new heavens and a new earth, and will “create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight” (65:17–18), but the present looks pretty bleak. God yearns for the relationship, the connection, but God’s family is distracted and scattered.

At first sight it seems that there is no link between this Isaiah passage and the gospel, but the link comes when we realize that the Gerasenes, who live on the east side of the Sea of Galilee, were Gentiles, and so, they were a people who did not seek the Lord, a nation who did not call upon the name of the God of Israel. And yet, because of Jesus’ action, they saw a demonstration of God’s power. Through Jesus, God was saying “Here I am, here I am” to that nation.

The Gerasene demoniac is infamous in the surrounding country for his wild behavior. It turns out he is possessed by a legion of evil spirits, who recognize who Jesus is. For some unknown reason, the demons ask to be sent into a herd of swine, and he grants it. They then rush down a slope and into the lake, to drown. The people of the region are frightened with the amazing story, when they see the man in his right mind, sitting with Jesus, and they beg Jesus to leave their country. Perhaps they fear to lose more pigs. They don’t want all their swine to be sea-bound. Jesus agrees to leave, and tells the cured man to stay in his region and to tell people his story. It’s as though Jesus left an evangelist behind in this Gentile region, to tell of God’s great doings, just as the Samaritan woman at the well became an evangelist for Jesus in the town of Sychar, after he told her about herself, about himself, and about worshipping God (John 4:13–30).

God reaches out to people who have not called upon him. He goes out of his way to reach those who have not heard about the God of Israel. Usually we hear that God responds to those who call upon him; that spiritual effort is rewarded. Today we have two passages that speak of God reaching out to those who know nothing about God. The divine heart longs to reach into populations that have not heard, wanting to speak to directly to each and every child of God.

We have another example of Jesus reaching out to someone who was not himself reaching out to learn. Paul, who was known by his birth name, Saul, was not reaching out to learn about Jesus the Messiah, but was busily getting Jesus believers kicked out of the synagogues, and sometimes disciplined or punished, even to the shocking extent where a mob killed the Christian deacon Stephen.

It may be that witnessing this violence had an effect upon Paul’s conscience, because it is not long after this that Paul has an extraordinary experience that knocks him off his donkey, shuts up his eyes but opens his ears to a message from Jesus, starting “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4). He is told to go into the nearby city of Damascus and await instruction.

It is as though Jesus speaks to Saul as a friend and an ally, whom he’s going to straighten out and then instruct. And this is what happens. Saul becomes Jesus’ ally and servant, the scales fall from his eyes, his eyesight comes back (9:18), and he is instructed by Jesus’ spirit. The man who has been persecuting believers becomes the most energetic evangelist, proclaiming Jesus the Son of God, and causing great astonishment (9:20–21).

Eventually, he stops using his Hebrew name Saul and starts using his Roman name, Paul, which means “small.” Many Jews had dual names in those days, such as Matthew, who had that Gentile name, while his Hebrew name was Levi. Paul was increasingly ministering to Gentiles, and apparently started using his Gentile name for that reason.

Our Scriptures show Jesus reaching out to Gentiles both in his own lifetime, when he ministered to Greeks, to a Syro-phoenician woman, to a Samaritan woman, to a Roman centurion, and to a Gerasene, then, after his ascension, to all Gentiles through the Gentile-converting Apostle Paul.

Subsequent to Pentecost, all these people to whom Jesus ministered have Jesus’ Spirit within them, to help guide them toward the truth. We, too, have this Spirit. Have you always been reaching out to God and asking for help before you received any blessings or any truth-guidance? Weren’t there times that you *weren’t* specifically asking for help and yet you received it? I think there probably were.

I met a pastor who believes he was miraculously saved after a terrible accident where a 16-wheel truck plowed into his car. His back and several other bones were broken, and he spent ages in the hospital, but came out healed and with a new sense of purpose, a desire to do God’s will. He now has a church where he is loved, and a wife who loves him. He credits his new sense of purpose to his surviving that accident.

God’s generosity exceeds our spiritual hunger. But our hunger, our prayer, our seeking to be guided by the Spirit, will play a big role in *how* we are guided. We are told in Ephesians to “be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:23–24). We are told to “not grieve the Holy Spirit,” but to “put away from you all bitterness and wrath . . . and wrangling,” and to “be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another” (4:30–32).

It matters less whether we sought out God before receiving his Spirit, than how we act after receiving it. If we embrace kindness and tender-heartedness and put away wrangling and bitterness, then we will not grieve the Holy Spirit.

I think, for any of us, if we have allowed ourselves to be renewed in the spirit of our minds, then we have a new self, a new and spiritual motivation, that signals the new life. The Gerasene demoniac presumably obtained a new motive for living after he was rid of evil spirits. And his assignment, to tell his fellow countrymen what God did for him, gave him a new mission in life.

Some folks in Ohio were deeply concerned about the dividedness in our nation, and right after the 2016 election they called together a group of 21 people, calling it a Red/Blue Workshop, to see if Republicans and Democrats could listen to each other and even begin to like each other. It was a huge success and they formed a group called the Better Angels Alliance. They continued to call such meetings and conversations around the country, and they are now known as Braver Angels. It is a great forum for discussion where understanding and respect are sought and found.

Do you feel a need for a new mission in life, or do you feel that your new mission has begun, but you are still not used to it? You can become more comfortable with the newness in your life if you remember to embrace kindness, to accept newness of mind, and to trust that the Spirit of Truth will guide you.

Listen to those words of Isaiah: “I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me” (65:1). Know that you have been sought out by God. Perhaps there was an unexpected experience that brought you to God? Or did you seek God but got a more powerful answer than you expected?

Give thanks to God’s generosity, which reaches us and draws us upward, renews our minds and transforms our lives, giving us a new and spiritual purpose in life, like the poor fellow who was chained in a cave, but was then freed by Jesus, and sat at Jesus’ feet, in his right mind. God goes out of his way to find the lost sheep, as Jesus said in one parable (Luke 15:3–7). Jesus sought out Saul of Tarsus, found him, and turned him around to become an apostle. God wants to find each one of us, and give us new purpose in life.

I thank God for all of you who made being a good father a purpose in your life. This is a great treasure to your children, whether young or in adulthood now. You are like a god to your little children, and like a senior statesman to your grown children. Happy Father’s Day! Your best relationships change with time, and if you’re lucky, your children become your friends.