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Title: Hiding in Plain Sight

Preaching: Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

Scripture: [Jeremiah 29:11-15](#)

Text: [John 1:35-43a](#)

E-mail: [Randy Spleth](#)

I've been talking about my past. I brought it on myself. Last week, on the first Sunday after the Epiphany, I shared a story about a homeless man finding his way into our sanctuary. It wasn't here; it was in the church I served in Glendale, California. I haven't mentioned Glendale for a while since my time there was nearly four decades ago. A few of you didn't know this about me and have asked about it.

The church in Glendale was located at the junction of two freeways, either the first or the last stop of a number of churches on Broadway Boulevard. As such, a steady stream of the needy and homeless stopped by to ask for hand-outs. It was the early 80's when federal funding for mental health institutions was cut by 60%, resulting in a flood of street people who were troubled.

My story last week was about a fellow sitting in an empty sanctuary but suggesting that he was sitting in a crowd. It brought back a number of memories. I could write a book about them; or at least a good long chapter in a memoir. Some encounters were insightful, like last week's story; occasionally, they were scary. Once in a while, they were both.

Such was the case late one afternoon when I was in my study, with my back to an open door and writing a sermon on a Sears electric typewriter. That dates me. I confess that I began writing sermons on a typewriter. Desktop computers didn't exist. I thought I was alone in a locked building when a voice, so deep and commanding that it felt like it could rattle windows, said, "Hello?" I turned around to see a giant man standing in the hallway, filling up my study door.

He was wild-eyed and crazy looking, likely one of the formerly hospitalized. I stood up, said, "Hello, can I help you?" Without responding, he put his head in the door and looked both ways. Then, he walked into my office, turned-around the room, walked back to the door, looked behind it and then turn back to me and stared. Telling this today still gives me the creeps. I didn't know what to say or do. But since he seemed to be looking for something, I asked the logical question, "What are you looking for?" He

answered, not with the big booming voice but something much smaller, almost childlike, gentle. "I'm looking for Jesus. Where is he hiding?"

Put yourself in my shoes. What would you do? How would you respond? Dealing with troubled street people, you learn to think on your feet. I said what I thought would get him out of my office quickly. "He's not here." To this day, I wish I'd never said it but it worked. He said, "Well, that's weird. I've been looking all over the place for him and I thought of all the places, I'd find him here. He's too good at hiding." And then he left, talking to himself, saying over and over again, "He's too good at hiding."

It was unnerving. No pastor wants to tell anybody that you can't find Jesus in their church. But as I said, sometimes the encounter was both frightening and insightful. As I reflect on this visit, he has company and it is found in scripture. The man could have been the prophet Isaiah who said, "Truly, you are a God who hides himself." (Isaiah 45: 19) Or Jeremiah, who was looking, searching. God said to that prophet, "You know I play hide and seek." "When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will *let* you find me, says the Lord." (Jeremiah 13:13-14a) "I'm looking for Jesus. Where is he hiding?" John the Baptist had an answer. He is hiding in plain sight.

This is an epiphany story for Epiphany. That is to say that the season of Epiphany focuses on stories that reveal who Jesus is. Last week, the story was about the baptism of Jesus, as recorded by Matthew. There was a big revelation when the heaven's opened, the Spirit descends upon Jesus and God blesses him, "saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17) Today, we looked at what happened immediately after Jesus' baptism when John the Baptist says, "He was right there in front of me and I didn't see him."

Don't go looking at your Bible. It is another one of those occasions when I'm reading between the lines of the text. But I think you'll agree with me when I remind you that John the Baptist and Jesus are cousins. The Gospel of John fails to mention this. We learn of this in Luke and cherish it as one of the wonderful stories of Advent. Mary receives the fantastic news that she will conceive by the Holy Spirit and bear God's Son, Jesus. She takes off for the hill country to find her cousin Elizabeth who is herself pregnant with John. Luke says John recognized Jesus "in utero," literally leaping for joy when Mary approaches Elizabeth. Given this story from Luke, John and Jesus grew up together. They must have played together. Maybe they even played hide and seek with each other. Can you see Jesus hiding from John in the hills of Judea? Maybe in a cave with a stone nearby? John looking in

and saying, "He's not here," and then, he finds him outside the cave, in a garden.

They were close. We know this because when word comes to Jesus that John is dead, Jesus was so grieved that he to find a place of solitude to compose himself. Do you have a cousin who you are close with, someone who you grew up with, someone perhaps you have lost?

Why then does John say, "I myself did not know him." (John 1:31a, 33a) He says it not once, but twice. "I didn't know him." What's up with that? I think this. Jesus was hiding in plain sight. If we could go back in time and interview John, it would be like those interviews we hear on the news. Most of the time it is when someone does something bad. Neighbors are interviewed and they almost always say the same thing. "He seemed like a nice guy. I can't believe he did that. He was quiet, polite." They did not have a clue who was living right next to them.

"John, did you know that Jesus was the Son of God? Did you suspect that he was the Messiah, the Anointed One?" I think John would say, "I missed it. It was right in front of me all of the time. I thought he was just my cousin, just an ordinary kid. He seemed just like everyone else until I baptized him and I '... saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove and it remained on him.' (John 1:32) Wow! God revealed who he is. Now that I look back, I think, how could I have missed it? Jesus is the Son of God? He was hiding in plain sight."

It might be something to hold onto, something to take home with you today. Even one who knew Jesus had trouble seeing him. Even one who was actively seeking God, trying to be faithful, experienced Jesus as hidden. Do you feel that way sometimes? Do you feel like Jeremiah, that God is hiding and you are seeking but you just can't see him? Then you too are a cousin of John the Baptist.

There is something about this little verse of scripture at the beginning of Jesus' ministry that sums it all up. "What are you looking for?" It's life's big question. What's are you seeking? What are you looking for? How would you answer?

I've asked that question over the years when talking to people about joining our church. What are you looking for? I get all kinds of answers. Inspiring worship. A warm and caring fellowship. A place for the kids, a place to give back, Bible study. I have never once had anyone say, "I'm looking for Jesus." In fact, I've never again had someone say, "I'm looking for Jesus. Where is he hiding?"

Jesus turns and says, "What are you looking for?" and they couldn't answer him. The question is too personal and at that moment, it was Jesus who was asking it. I'm sure the intensity of the moment was intimidating. So, instead of a meaningful answer, they said, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" (John 1:38) If you let me bend the text a little, I think that's "Where are you hiding?" I think Jesus understands it that way because he responds, "Come and see." (John 1:39) Come and see. Find me if you can. Look for me. It is the way for you to see God." They do and they do.

They spend time with Jesus. Come and see becomes come and stay. Staying with Jesus allowed for seeing. It always does. Then, "One of the two...who followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He found his brother and said to him, "We have found the Messiah." (John 1:40) Now I'm reading between the lines again but I think the next thing Andrew said to his brother was "Come and see." And he does and when he does, he discovers the Messiah was there all along as if he was hiding in plain sight.

You have to play the game, you know. The spiritual life could be described as a game of hide and seek. God is hidden, mysterious. Where are you, God? Where can I find you? Jesus has the answer. "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find.... For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds..." (Matthew 7:7a, 8a) That sounds a lot like Jeremiah. You have to look hard, seek, search, with others who play this spiritual game. Otherwise, you will never see. Few of us have the capacity to walk our own spiritual paths and encounter God. The Lord hides too well when we choose to play the game alone. But when we find fellow disciples and spend time with each other, we can see. If you've had that experience, you understand what I am talking about.

When you visit a church member at a funeral, what do you see? Do you see a broken grieving friend alone in pain? Look more carefully. Hiding in plain sight is the Messiah, comforting them during their loss.

When you stand in line at the homeless shelter, serving food with fellow members, who do you see? Men and women down and out? Look more carefully and you might just see the Son of God, feasting.

When you gather at this table, eat bread and drink wine, who do you see? People going through the motions of an ancient ritual? Look more carefully. There, hiding in plain sight is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He is our host. He's always there hiding in plain sight.

Depending on how hard you seek, it might feel as if Jesus is hiding. But most of the time, he's there in plain sight. You would think that the disciples who followed Jesus, from Bethany beyond the Jordan to Galilee and then back to Jerusalem, would know this. But evidently, they had the same problem as we have. That's why just before Jesus ascends into heaven, he leaves them with an image of where to look. "... for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." (Matthew 25:35-36) That's where you'll see me, hiding in plain sight. Here, caring for one another, involved in ministry, here we find Jesus.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus names what each of us longs for and gives an answer to address that need. "What are you looking for? "Come and see." It's an important question and a simple answer.

What are you looking for---love, acceptance, communion with God, peace truth, forgiveness, grace? Come and see. It takes some effort; it requires some work, involvement. You can't just show up every now and then. You have to come and see and come and stay. If you going to find Jesus, you have to look for him. It may feel like he's hiding from you; but John will tell you, he's been here all along.

"I'm looking for Jesus. I've been looking all over the place for him. I thought I'd find him here. He's too good at hiding." If only I said, "You've come to the right place. Come on in. Come and see. Come and stay. He's here, hiding here in plain sight."