

The old game of hide-and-seek begins with a familiar announcement: “Ready or not, here I come!” And then the search begins. It’s funny watching preschoolers and kindergarteners trying to play hide-and-seek on the playground or in the fellowship hall. There just aren’t that many places to hide. And yet, they try. Day after day, they try.

The point of hide and seek is, of course, not to be found. To stay hidden as long as possible. To, in fact, maybe even hide so long that your opponent gives up altogether. And it can feel sometime like God is trying to play hide-and-seek with us. To stay hidden for as long as possible.

“Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes.” We sang those words earlier this morning. Invisible. Inaccessible. Hidden. We hear it from St Paul in our Epistle lesson as well: *“How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord.”* God can feel very inscrutable. Very unknowable. Very hidden.

But in our text from Isaiah, we find just the opposite is the case. Because in this passage, God is calling out to people who are looking for Him: *“Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the LORD.”*

Despite what we may feel, He doesn’t delight in seeing us confused or frustrated or aimless. He doesn’t hide Himself simply to watch us wander around unsuccessfully. He calls out to us. He reveals Himself. He makes Himself known. God seeks us and makes us His redeemed children.

*“Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the LORD.”* Unfortunately, there weren’t many people like that in Isaiah’s day: people who pursued righteousness and sought the Lord. For many chapters up until this point, Isaiah has described the idolatry and unbelief of God’s people. They had turned away from the Lord. They trusted in false gods, in human strength, in political alliances, and in themselves. They sought salvation everywhere except where it could actually be found.

And yet they were desperate. Because like all sinners who wander away from the Lord, they had discovered that all the things they thought would save them... couldn’t. Wealth can’t save us. Success can’t save us. Pleasure can’t save us. Other can’t cannot save us. Our own strength and intelligence can’t save us.

And so we begin looking. We look for meaning. We look for peace. We look for righteousness. We look for something to tell us that everything is going to be all right. Sometimes that searching is conscious. A person may openly say that he is searching for God or seeking spiritual truth.

But often we don’t even know that we’re looking. St Augustine famously wrote, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.” There is something within fallen humanity that knows that we’re not what we were created to be. Things are not as they should be. We’re restless because we were created for fellowship with God, and sin has separated us from Him.

So we look. And we look. And we look. “Ready or not, here I come.” But we don’t even know where to begin looking. And unlike a child hiding behind a chair in the fellowship hall, God isn’t someone we can discover simply by searching hard enough.

The explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed makes this clear: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him.” If God simply hid Himself and waited for us to discover Him, we would never find Him.

Thankfully, God doesn’t wait to be found. God finds us. And so, to people wandering in the waste places and wilderness of this sinful earth, the Lord says, *“Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you.”*

Look to Abraham and Sarah. It's an interesting image. He describes them as a rock and a quarry. And when we remember the account of Abraham and Sarah, we understand why.

They were, in terms of producing offspring, as good as dead. Abraham was old. Sarah was old. Sarah had spent her life barren, unable to have children. God had promised that Abraham would become the father of a great nation, and yet Abraham and Sarah had no children. Nothing about their circumstances suggested life. Nothing about them suggested that they could become the source of so many people.

And yet God called Abraham. Abraham didn't discover God because he had successfully searched for Him. Abraham didn't climb his way toward heaven. God called him. God made promises to him. God took a man who had no future in himself and gave him a future by His grace.

*"He was but one when I called him,"* God says, *"that I might bless him and multiply him."* That's how God works. God takes the dead and makes them alive.

And that's our story too. We were dead in our trespasses and sins. We weren't merely lost people who needed better directions. We weren't merely sick people who needed some medicine. We were dead people who needed resurrection. We couldn't find our way to God because dead people don't seek God. We couldn't make ourselves righteous because sinners can't manufacture the righteousness that God requires.

So God acted. Christ died for us. The Son of God entered our wilderness. He took our sin upon Himself. He endured our death. He was buried in our grave. And then, on the third day, He rose again. The dead One became alive again so that the dead could live.

And by Baptism, His death and resurrection become ours. We are buried with Christ and raised with Him. The old sinful creature is drowned, and a new man emerges and arises to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

God doesn't wait for us to find Him. God finds us. He found you in your Baptism. He claimed you as His own. He placed His name upon you. He made you His redeemed child. And He continues to seek you through His Word.

*"Give attention to me, my people,"* He says. *"Give ear to me, my nation; for a law will go out from me, and I will set my justice for a light to the peoples."* The Hebrew word translated as "law" is Torah. We often hear the word and think only of commandments, but here it refers more broadly to God's revelation, to His instruction, to His Word. All of His Word. Because that's what God sends into the world. He doesn't leave us to speculate about Him. He speaks.

Earlier in Isaiah, the prophet had looked forward to a day when the nations would stream to Zion to hear the Torah of the Lord. And that day has come. The Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us.

Jesus Christ came into our world to make the Father known. And now the same Christ continues to come to us through His Word and Sacraments. The Scriptures are read and preached. The waters of Baptism are poured. Christ's body and blood are given and received. God is still calling out, "Here I am."

And because God has found us, the wilderness doesn't remain a wilderness. *"For the LORD comforts Zion,"* Isaiah says. *"He comforts all her waste places and makes her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the LORD."*

The wilderness was a familiar image to God's people. Israel had wandered through the wilderness after leaving Egypt. It was a place of difficulty and danger. A place where they had no home. A place where they were dependent upon God for everything.

Isaiah's hearers would also face exile. They would know what it meant to be displaced and far from home. And even when they returned from exile, life would not suddenly become easy. They would remain a small people within the vast power empires that persecuted them. But God promised something greater. He would transform the wilderness. He would make it like Eden.

That's what God does for His people. We live, in a sense, in the wilderness between our Baptism and the Last Day. We belong to Christ, but we still live in a fallen world. We've been forgiven, but we still struggle with sin. We have eternal life, but we still die. We've been given the promise of a new creation, but we still walk through the wilderness of the old one.

And yet God comforts us. And when God comforts you, it's more than a few pleasant words to someone who is suffering. God's comfort is restoration. He speaks, and what was ruined is made new. The God who spoke creation into existence speaks life into His dead people.

And so Isaiah reminds us that this present creation is not permanent. *"Lift up your eyes to the heavens,"* God says. *"The heavens vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and they who dwell in it will die in like manner."* Everything we think is so permanent is passing away. The heavens and earth themselves will wear out.

*"But my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will never be dismayed."* Everything else may pass away. God's salvation will not. Everything else may fail. God's righteousness will not.

If you've ever played hide-and-seek with a small child, you know that sometimes the game doesn't go as planned. A four-year-old may be very excited to hide, but eventually the waiting becomes too much. Suddenly, before you've even had time to look for them, they burst out, yelling, "Here I am!"

The seeker didn't need to be clever enough to discover the hiding place. The one being sought made himself found. That is exactly what God does for us. You think he's hiding, but he's come to you. In His Word. In His Sacraments. Ready or not, here He comes. And He will come again soon. Amen.