

Sermon for Sunday, December 4, 2016

## HUNGRY FOR JESUS

John looked up from reading the news and sighed. "What is happening to our society?" he said aloud to himself. Conservatives and liberals are at each other's throats, social media messages are coarse and cruel, teenagers bully each other. Heroin use is epidemic, police are under assault, and racism is commonplace. Private information is hacked, consumers are scammed, and refugees are the enemy. "What's happened to our values?" he thought. "Where and when will this all end?" "We can't keep on this way. We can't keep devouring one another." "Why can't we live in peace and tolerance, and just, love each other?"

John doesn't realize it, but he's hungry. He's hungry for peace in a world of violence. He's hungry for hope in a world of despair and tragedy. He's hungry for courage in a world of fear, and for security in a world of anxiety. John doesn't realize it, but he's hungry for Jesus.

Linda is at her wits end. Christmas is in just two weeks! She still has shopping to do, packages to mail, cards to write, and the house to clean and decorate. The kids have extra rehearsals for their dance program, she's supposed to help with a school field trip on Tuesday, and now the church wants her to help with the Children's Christmas Pageant. Her life is just one great whirlwind, running here, driving the kids there, cooking dinner, helping with homework. "I'm so tired," she admits to herself, "tired of it all." "There must be something more to life than this!"

Linda doesn't realize it, but she's hungry. She's hungry for meaning in activities that seem pointless. She's hungry for energy in a life that is depleting her. She's hungry for rest and fulfillment in a schedule that offers her neither. Linda doesn't realize it, but she's hungry for Jesus.

Julie is afraid. She's all alone now. Her husband died before his time, and now she is left with all the burdens and decisions herself. Her children are grown and live far away. Her neighbors are nice, but she can't continue to ask them to do every little thing for her. They have their own problems to deal with. She worries about what will happen to her if she gets sick, if she runs out of money, if she has to go into a nursing home. But the nights are the worst, the nights that remind her of her loneliness and her fear and her grief. She hates the night.

Julie doesn't realize it, but she is hungry. She is hungry for security in a life now filled with fear. She is hungry for trust in a life now filled with anxiety. She is hungry for the relationship, for the companionship, and for the love that her husband once provided her. Julie doesn't realize it, but she's hungry for Jesus.

Bill is frustrated. He feels uneasy, unfulfilled. No, that's not it. He feels ... empty. Yes, empty. He's gone to church his whole life; baptized as an infant, confirmed as a teenager. But now that he's older, he senses that something is missing. He's served as a deacon and on the session. He's made his pledge with steadfastness, and he's sung in the choir. But he's not sure who Jesus is for him. He admires Jesus, but he's not sure he's ever felt God's presence, and sometimes he's not sure he wants to. But no matter what he tries to do, in the church or elsewhere, the emptiness remains.

Bill knows he is hungry, for something. He feels the emptiness, the gnawing desire for more. Deep inside he yearns for a faith that will catch fire. But he's also afraid of what that kind of faith might do to him, how it might change him, and what it may require of him. Bill knows, but has trouble admitting, that he's hungry for Jesus.

Innate to each of us, is a hunger, a gnawing desire, for a relationship with God, for a transcendent wellspring of meaning and purpose in life. Centuries ago Saint Augustine confessed to God, "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." Until that relationship is sought and found, we experience an existential emptiness at the core of our being that cannot be satisfied by possessions, prestige, power, or money.

Writes Marjorie Thompson, "There is a hunger abroad in our time, haunting lives and hearts. Like an empty stomach aching beneath the sleek coat of a seemingly well-fed creature, it reveals that something is missing

from the diet of our rational, secular, and affluent culture."<sup>1</sup> Or echoes the Psalmist centuries ago, "O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water." (Ps. 63:1)

For some, the hunger is recognizably spiritual. They know that the emptiness inside can be filled only by a transcendent source. They recognize that their hunger pains are a hunger for a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. And they are actively engaged in the spiritual disciplines that nurture and strengthen that relationship.

But for most of us, for far too many of us, the hunger is vague and unidentified. "Like free-floating anxiety, it lurks just below the surface of consciousness. Perhaps we feel an emptiness that leaves us restless for a larger meaning and purpose in life. Perhaps we sense that we are sailing through life in a rudderless ship. Something is missing. Something is out of balance. But it remains nameless."<sup>2</sup> We know we are hungry for something. What we don't realize, is that we are hungry for Jesus.

The background to both of our scripture lessons this morning, is this hunger, this gnawing desire for a close and enduring relationship with God. Isaiah responds to a people who worship God with all the right actions, but with little heart. He speaks to a people who have forgotten how to give God the gift God desires most, themselves. In their own eyes they are bringing sacrifices to God. But in God's eyes they have become useless and decayed like the short, jagged remains of a fallen tree.<sup>3</sup>

But, declares Isaiah, this will not always be so. There is hope. A shoot will grow out of the stump. A branch will grow out of the roots of the fallen tree. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. In that day, the creatures that kill each other, that devour each other, that fear each other and abhor each other will live together in peace, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord. With a vision of hope, Isaiah calls us home from wandering in a far country. With a promise of peace and fulfillment, Isaiah renews our desire, our hunger, to renew our covenant relationship with God.

In the New Testament, John the Baptist, cries out to a people who have lost their way. "Repent," he shouts. "For the kingdom of heaven has drawn near." Come back to the way of life charted by the covenant. And the people went out to him and were baptized. Why? Because they were hungry for a new relationship with God, and because they heard the promise that someone was coming who would fill them with Holy Spirit and with fire, with energy and passion, and with strength and courage. With a promise of new life, John the Baptist renews our desire, our hunger, to renew our covenant relationship with God.

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry." Jesus has come, and is coming again. Advent is the season, in which we are invited to remember and rekindle our longing for him, our yearning to be in relationship with him, and our hunger to be fed by him. In this age in which there seems to be so much emptiness, so much confusion about right and wrong, so much anxiety and fear, so much ambiguity and doubt, and so much weariness and despair, we need to reclaim the gnawing desire in each of our hearts to be fed by communion with Christ. We need to find, and admit, and feed our hunger for Jesus.

Jesus is coming, Immanuel, God with us. It's time to come to him, and feast with him in glory. I promise you. You will never be hungry again.

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Isaiah 11:1-11  
Matthew 3:1-13

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<sup>1</sup> Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast*, Westminster John Knox Press (Louisville, 1995), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Mary Donovan Turner, *The Christian Century*, November 22-29, 1995.