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Texts: Matthew 23: 38; Philippians 2: 5-7; John 4: 7-9

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These Weeping Eyes, Those Seeing Tears

I must be going soft. Maybe it's all the bad news happening around the world, but lately, I find that my eyes well up with tears at the slightest provocation. Sometimes it's understandable, like when it was Augie's birthday, and he scored a goal on a penalty kick in his soccer game, the winning goal. I was a pretty teary dad there on the sidelines. Sometimes, though, it's a little more unusual, like a few weeks ago, when I walked into the room where Herman Melville wrote *Moby-Dick*. To my surprise, when I entered, I had to wipe tears from my eyes as I thought about his enormous labor in that room, the enormous gift that he bestowed upon the world, which was greeted with a shrug of indifference. I was moved, and so tears came.

But there are other times that I observe myself, kind of stunned, and I think, "This? This is what moves you? There's a war in Ukraine, there are bombs falling in Gaza, and this is what gets you?" Here's a case in point. The night before Thanksgiving, while visiting Rachael's family, Elsa put on the film *Home Alone*. Mostly, it was just playing in the background while people walked in and out of the room. It's what, 35 years old now? It was ubiquitous in my adolescence. It's been spoofed and mocked and imitated so often that, at least for me, it's hard even to notice it. But there it was that night, and I sat down on the couch with my nephew and with Elsa and I surprised myself by getting totally immersed in it.

I'm sure you know the story well enough, but in case there are a few who don't, well, it's about an 8 year old child, who gets left behind when his large family dashes out the door to catch an overseas flight a few days before Christmas. He fends off house burglars while cycling through a series of emotions about his newfound freedom, ranging from elation to sadness. His mother, meanwhile, moves heaven and earth to make her way home, fending off a never ending series of obstacles that fail to stop her. By the end, when she walks through the front door and finds her son there...well, I sort of lost it there on the couch. I mean, I played it cool and all. I pretended my eyes were itching. But my face was streaked with tears, and I was totally afraid some other family members, or maybe even Rachael, would drift into the room and see me, and think, "Whoa, what's wrong with him? Hasn't he seen this movie before?"

So ok, there's a lot of easy and cheap emotion - kitsch, really - that surrounds the holidays. It may be that I fell prey to it. But I also recalled the words of the great preacher and novelist Frederick Buechner, who we lost last year. In one of his books, he wrote, "Pay attention to the things that bring a tear to your eye or a lump in your throat because they are signs that the holy is drawing near." I also thought of the 17th century poet Andrew Marvell, who wrote, "how wisely Nature did decree, with the same eyes to weep and see." What I wondered, might those tears disclose? And how might they signify the approach of the holy? Can a popular entertainment that is by now more a cliché than a film disclose the holy? Can a sentimental moment - something I often distrust because sentimental moments are so easy to manufacture - can a sentimental moment unveil something of the mystery of God? That's the risk I'm going to take this morning: to suggest that some of humanity's deepest existential questions are embedded

in this little confection of a film. But I'm also going to risk saying that the structure of the Gospel itself, the good news of Jesus coming into the world, is embedded within it as well.

Let us say, first, that the film is an existentialist parable. The child is a stand in for each and every human being, left to fend for themselves in a lonely world. It is a parable of abandonment, for sooner or later we are all thrust up against what would seem, anyway, to be our own basic isolation as human beings. In the midnight hours when you lie awake with your worries, it is you alone doing battle with the night time demons. When an illness strikes, no matter how many friends or family surround you, it is you alone who must descend into the depths to fend off the ailment. When you feel something profoundly and struggle to put it into words, there is, sometimes, no amount of communication that can build a bridge to another consciousness, and so you alone are left to feel it. Even in the closest relationships, there can be an aloneness so profound that to contemplate it too long might be our undoing. To stand alone, as a voice of conscience, is sometimes to sense just how alone in the world one truly is. Sometimes, perhaps for some of us much of the time, we are that child, stranded and alone.

Is it then, a childish desire, what Freud would call a regressive fantasy, to imagine a mother moving heaven and earth to bridge that gap, to find her way home to the lost and lonely souls that we often are? Who doesn't want to believe, at some level of their being, that there is a mother - or maybe it is a father, or maybe it is a spouse, or a friend, or a sibling - who doesn't want to believe, in that part of their being that is still somehow a child, with all of the hurts and longings and terrors and feelings of awe that come with being a child - who doesn't wish to believe that there is someone who loves us so much that that that person will race across the globe just to scoop us up into their arms, relieved to find us at last? Who doesn't want to trust, in our loneliest moments, that someone out there is trying to get to us, to make things right, to soothe our troubled souls? That desire is so powerful, of course, because reality is so often otherwise. We often come to suspect that no one is really trying to find us, and that we really are alone. Still, is there not something mysterious about how unshakable that desire is, for someone to seek us out and to find us? Do our tears, or at any rate my tears, not disclose that, deep down, perhaps that is *the* desire, the one desire toward which all other desires point?

If we know enough to desire that seeking and finding, it must also be true that at some point in our lives, we have actually been sought, and we have actually been found. It's like becoming hungry - when we haven't eaten anything in a while, our minds turn toward food, toward nourishment. That's no regressive fantasy, unless you no longer believe in the existence of food. Or it's like becoming thirsty - sooner or later, when we have been deprived of it, the only thing we crave is water. That's not because water doesn't exist, but rather because it does, and we need it. I think the same thing is true of that desire to be sought out, and found. We crave it because sometime, somewhere, we have tasted it, drunk of it, and we need it if we are to remain truly human.

That's why this little practice we have begun, that of the sacred bowl, and meeting with one another, is so very important. It's not that we'll replicate what it was like to be sought and then found when we were children, and it's not that any lasting connection may happen at all in those conversations. But it may be that a small, yet durable bridge is constructed in such meetings. It may be that, speaking as if into the void, another may catch our words, and respond in kind. It may be that in such a way, the persistent hunger to be sought out, and found, is satisfied, at least in part. The good news of being a church, at least when we are at our best, is that we stand a chance of becoming both the seeker, and the found.

But I also think this process replicates what our mission partnerships and our experiential education programs are attempting to do: to reach into the abandoned places of the world in order to create a durable and living connection, a two-way bridge to alleviate the terrible isolation visited upon too many people. To live on a reservation is, more often than not, to have been forgotten by the rest of the world. To live in Haiti, or in parts of Africa, where a handful of members from FCCOL will shortly be visiting, or especially now in Gaza and the West Bank, is to have been left behind and abandoned by the world. I do not know how to fix the decades and sometimes centuries of wrong visited upon those places. But I think that sometimes, a group of committed and caring people can become the Presence at the door, a Presence that says, you are not alone. And I also think that sometimes, it is actually we ourselves who are the most isolated of all, and that actually it is our friends and partners in those places who are reaching for us, telling us the same thing: you haven't been forgotten, trapped though you are inside of your prosperity. Locked inside of your own forms of emptiness, they tell us, you are not alone.

Let's return now to those most basic symbols, a child stranded in a house, alone, and a mother seeking to return to and embrace the child. That is, in its essence, the very core of the Gospel story. And it is, at its root, the central motif of the Christmas narrative. The house in which the child wakes up alone now becomes a stand in for the world itself, a planet floating through empty space. And the emptiness of the house is a sign of the world having been abandoned, left to fend for itself. At first, that can feel like a cause for celebration, for the child, or in this case, humanity, has been freed from the strictures of all those suffocating relationships, just as, for a time, it can be liberating to feel oneself freed from God, freed from religion, freed from the whole mess created in the name of God. That too can be intoxicating, but it can also lead to a hollowness of spirit, an emptiness of the soul. And so sometimes, for at least some of us, a deeper kind of loneliness, a cosmic loneliness creeps in, an ache which many people feel, without knowing how to address.

That is the situation the Christmas narrative attempts to speak into: a planet adrift in the cosmos, a lonely world-house, which God has visited, and is trying to get to still. One of John's Epistles puts it this way: "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent God's only son into the world so that we might live through him." So too, the words we read from Philippians, thought to be some of the earliest fragments of language in the New Testament, put it thus: Jesus, though he was in the form of God, emptied himself, being born in human likeness." Or as the words of John's Gospel have it, "the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us."

It's easy to miss the passion behind those words. But I like to imagine that they convey a kind of pursuit, a chase in which human beings have somehow become stranded in their fear, in their violence, in their (our) warring madness, and in which a mother God is leaping across every obstacle to get home to her beloved child - to you, to me, in order to say, it doesn't have to be this way.. The bold claim of Christmas is that on a certain morning, at a certain moment, a door opened within the world itself, and a loving Presence stepped through it in order to say, I have been trying to find you. You are not alone. You have never been alone. I am with you always, even unto the end of the age.

Watch the child now. Watch his face. It is like ours. It is locked first in a kind of stoniness, filled with hurt and resentment. You forgot about me, the face says. You left me here stranded. Then there is sadness in the face, for it has been hard to be alone. But then something like joy flickers onto the face of the child, for deep down, this is what he has wanted. Deep

down, this is all that he has wanted. For someone to reach across space and time in order to find him. And so he goes running into the arms of that loving Presence.

Every year at this time, a door swings open within the world, and a loving Presence steps through. And every year it is our face that registers all those emotions - stony, or sad, or hurt, but maybe also gladness, for deep down, we have wished for Someone to step through the door, and to put out their arms.

“These weeping eyes, those seeing tears,” Andrew Marvell wrote. I think perhaps that’s what my tears enabled me to see that night. That down in the depths of my being, I longed for the old story to be true, longed to sense that Presence standing at the door of the world, speaking those words. But I think my tears conveyed something else as well. They conveyed that deep down, down in the place where tears come from, down in the place where prayers well up from inside, I already trusted the story to be true, with all of my being.

What about you? That door has been flung open for you too this season. There stands at the entryway of the world a loving Presence who has been struggling to reach you, to find you, across space and across time. In my mind’s eye, I see your faces too, just as I see them now, registering a range of emotions. How will you respond?