

WHERE ARE YOU?

Genesis 3. 8-15

2 Corinthians 4. 13-5. 1

Mark 3. 20-35

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

It's a familiar scene, one that we all remember from our childhood. It could have happened in our garden at home, or in a park where the family was enjoying a picnic, or even in the garden outside of church. As our parents lingered in conversation with other family members and friends, the children present chose to make the most of a beautiful summer day. They ran through the garden, park or churchyard with cheerful squeals and, after a few moments of frolic, decided to organise a game of hide and seek.

After one child volunteered to be the 'seeker,' the other children would scatter, searching out the perfect hiding place. The seeker would begin his or her countdown: 'Ten, nine, eight...' One child would scamper behind some bushes; another under the stairs; and perhaps another behind the bins. And then time would run out. The seeker would yell, 'Three...two...one...Ready or not, here I come!'

The seeker would then gleefully stomp around, looking under bushes and behind trees, calling out, 'Where are you?'

That joyful and innocent question would ring out across the garden, park or churchyard, but it also rings today in our ears, drawing our attention to our reading from the third chapter of Genesis. The scene unfolding there in the Garden of Eden is also familiar; and it is perhaps one of the most familiar scenes the world has ever known.

By the time our reading begins in verse eight, the serpent has already deceived Adam and Eve into disobeying God's command. Now they are engaged in a hide and seek game of their own; and the stakes are high.

As the world's first man and woman look for an appropriate hiding place in the garden, just like children do, God seeks after them. He is fully aware that something has gone very, very wrong. We listen as God calls out to them, 'Where are you?'

This is the first question that God asks in Scripture; and as is the case with every good story, it is asked not just of the characters on the page and in the scene, but of every single one of us.

And the question assumes an answer. If God is asking the question, it implies that Adam and Eve (and we) are not where we should be; and God's question leads us to ask yet another question: where should we be?

The last one hundred years have been marked by the exponential growth and sophistication of technology. The world is undoubtedly more connected than ever, but it may also be more distracted than ever. Scientists have long warned about the dangers of getting distracted by technology. When left unchecked, technology can distract us from everything, from our ability to have meaningful face-to-face conversations, to keeping our eyes on the road and off our screens as we drive.

So it is with our lives of faith.

In his commentary on the Book of Genesis, Walter Brueggemann suggests that the serpent in the Garden of Eden is the world's first theologian, because it is the serpent who convinces humankind to exchange *obedience to God* for *theology about God*.¹ If we

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 47-48, 54-55.

think about God narrowly enough, we can distract ourselves into believing that we can ‘think’ our way to salvation. Our knowledge becomes a means of self-preservation and protection, rather than a means of transmitting and communicating faith in the living God.

And yet, God cuts through our thick underbrush of words and ideas, persistently calling out to us, ‘Where are you?’

In order for us to consider this question, we must discern correctly *where we are* and then consider that in relation to *where God is inviting us*. Discernment can be a tricky exercise; it is hard to get it right.

One place to start is to take account of all that distracts us from living lives of Christian faithfulness. Distractions may look different for different folks, but their central characteristic is the same: they draw our attention away from focussing on God, our walk with him and the life-giving parts of our lives.

For example, we can become distracted from God when we find that too much of our time is taken up with work, activities and other commitments (not that these are bad things in themselves). We can even become distracted from God when too much of our time is taken up with church!

The fact of the matter is, God loves us and wants to spend time with us. He wants us to grow in our relationship with him; he wants us to get to know him better and to have precious moments of communion with him.

But we as individuals aren’t the only ones who can become distracted from God. Churches can become distracted as well. One way that churches become distracted is by focussing on innovation rather than faithfulness. When churches focus on

innovation, they define themselves by their programmes and ministries, rather than by their witness to the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ.

Another way that churches can become distracted is by focussing on entertainment rather than transformation. When churches focus on entertainment, it is almost as if they exist in a vacuum. You walk through the doors, and it is as if you've entered another dimension and are separated from the real world. Churches like these don't rock the boat. People hear sermons that give them just what they want to hear; and every aspect of the service is designed to please. When churches fall into the trap of offering individual members a custom-ordered faith, sanding off every jagged edge and smoothing out every rough place, they possess about as much transformative power as a social club at prayer.

The possibilities of getting distracted in our lives, and particularly in our lives of faith, are many. But the Good News is that our God relentlessly pursues us, no matter where we wander or try and hide. He is constantly calling out to us, 'Where are you?'; and he invites us back to him.

May we listen intently enough to hear God's voice and discern deeply enough to answer God's call.

Amen.