

Week 2: What do you really want from God?

Can I get your attention over here God?

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne February 8, 2009

*OK you children of God, bring a gift of laughter,
Sing yourselves into God's presence.
Know this: God is God, and only God is God.
He made us; we didn't make him.
We're his people, his well-tended sheep.
Enter his presence with the password: "Thank you!"
Make yourselves at home ... Thank him. Worship him.
For God is sheer beauty, all-generous in love, loyal always.*
Adapted from Psalm 100:2-5 (The Message)

Reading from Psalm 139 (NRSV)

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

Intro to reading and reflection: Some of you may believe it without thinking about it all that much. Others of you may find it hard to believe ... that the God of the universe, who made all things, and has been, since before time began ... that God would know your name. I can see why some of you may have a hard time with that. It seems absolutely amazing to me that God would concern himself with me. Who am I, after all? That's a question the Psalmist asked too. Thousands of years ago he asked, "*What are mortals that you should notice us, O Lord, mere humans that you should care for us?*" [Psalm 144:3 NLT] He asks a question that each of us asks at some time, whether we believe or have yet to believe ... "*Who am I that God would care about me? Who am I that God would know my name?*" Of course, that leads to a bigger question: "*Who is this God who cares for each individual, and even for me? Who is this that has loved me before I knew him, and has known me for all time?*" For a God to do such a thing is simply amazing.

Insert prayers and worship music here

Matthew 10:29-31 (The Message)

Jesus told them, "Do not be afraid my friends ... What's the price of a pet canary? Some loose change, right? And God cares what happens to it even more than you do. He pays even greater attention to you, down to the last detail—even numbering the hairs on your head! So don't be afraid. You're worth more than a million canaries.

I will run to you

*Your eye is on the sparrow and your hand, it comforts me
From the ends of the earth to the depths of my heart
Let your mercy and strength be seen
You call me to your purpose as angels understand
For your glory may you draw all men
As your love and grace demands
And I will run to you, to your words of truth
Not by might, not by power, but by the Spirit of God
Yes I will run the race, 'til I see your face
Oh let me live in the glory of your grace!*

Intro to the message: So what do you want from God? Last week as we started this message series I said one of the first things people want from God are some answers. You may want answers to those imponderable questions like whatever happened to the dinosaurs and what's out past the edges of the universe? There are other questions, more useful questions we would ask too, like, "*How in the world can I make ends meet?*" You may want to know from God how you can deal with that bully of a boss at work or the challenge of a teenager at home. Last week I told you when it comes to things like money and relationships and conflict management God has given us a lot of guidelines in the Bible. It's there if you want to use them. It's there even if you don't, which makes me wonder why more people don't get with the plan and stop making life harder for themselves. That's what happens whenever you try doing things against the current, against the guidelines God has given you. Don't get me wrong here, God doesn't need to zap you with lightning if you get out of line. You and I get into enough trouble on our own when we choose to do things on our own and without God's guidance ...

Last week I also said there was one last type of question we

ask. It's the one that comes down to asking God, "Why?" I imagine every one of you has asked that kind of question before. When faced with a challenge, with a grief almost too heavy to carry, you have looked up to the heavens and asked "Why?" Maybe you shook your fist at the time. Maybe you cursed God. Maybe you just wanted help understanding how a loving God could let something so painful happen. But as I said last week, God answers those kinds of questions, not with facts and figures, not with persuasive explanations at all, but by the power of his presence. God's presence calms my questions. When I have one of those brief moments when I feel I'm in God's presence, I simply forget to ask "Why?" It's no longer important to me. I think the question "Why" comes down to something even more basic like, "Where are you God?" I can only imagine that to be in God's presence for all time will mean the questions I thought were most important will fade away. In God's presence I will have found all my answers.

So if God shows up you have less questions ... even so it leaves open another big question. "How can I get God to show up more?" You know? If God's presence has the power to take away the questions that bother me, then why doesn't God show up more often? This leads to the second thing a lot of

Did God hear your prayers ... or were you just talking to yourself night after night? Inquiring minds want to know. More importantly, human hearts want to be sure God knows and cares.

people want ... they want God to pay attention to them more. I'll bet there have been times you have wondered if God was paying any attention to you. Did God know or care that you were sick? Did God know or care that your marriage was going through a rough time?

Did God hear your prayers ... or were you just talking to yourself night after night? Inquiring minds want to know. More importantly, human hearts want to be sure God knows and cares.

It's no accident that Jesus addressed this question with his followers shortly before he died on the cross. He wanted them to know he was there to care for them, and would care for them always. To explain Jesus used a metaphor the disciples would understand: "I am the good shepherd ... I assure you, anyone who sneaks over the wall of a sheepfold, rather than going through the gate, must surely be a thief and a robber! For a shepherd enters through the gate. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice and come to him. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. After he has gathered his own flock, he walks ahead of them, and they follow him because they recognize his voice. They won't follow a stranger; they will run from him because they don't recognize his voice ..." [John 10:1-5 NLT]

Many of you may have heard that lesson before. Today I want you to hear it fully. Notice what Jesus tells his followers (and us): **(1) The sheep who hear the shepherd come in recognize him.** That's because they are listening for Jesus. They

recognize him when he is near. Indeed, the sheep recognize him because they are accustomed to listening to him. How about you? Are you accustomed to listening to Jesus's voice? Would you know it if you heard it? Or would you confuse his voice with someone else's? And have you already done that more times than you know? I think most people need more practice listening for Jesus. Then Jesus explains **(2) The shepherd calls his own sheep by name.** He knows them as individuals. Now I grew up on farms and my best friend had a lot of sheep. I have to say that sheep are a lot like babies. They all look alike to me. My friend Warren knew each one and had names for them all, mostly taken from TV shows. Yup, I grew up taking care of sheep known as Radar and Hot Lips, not that I could tell them apart. But he knew each one. So too, Jesus claims to know each of his followers by name. Or as we heard earlier in the service God "pays great attention to you, down to the last detail—even numbering the hairs on your head!" Like he doesn't have enough to do, but there you go. He's an amazing God. And so, Jesus claims, **(3) "The sheep follow him because he knows them."** Folks, that's an amazing thing, something the disciples would have automatically recognized as either Jesus stretching the truth or Jesus claiming something new. You see, sheep do not follow. They wander, and often they wander off. Heads down, they follow the grass, or the sheep in front of them. They don't follow you like a well trained dog might. Shepherds back then walked behind the sheep. I can tell you from personal experience, unless they're really hungry and you're carrying food, it's the only way you can keep an eye on them and keep them from wandering off. But here Jesus claims that the normal rules no longer apply. He, the good shepherd, is so spiritually magnetic the sheep will follow him. Why? Simply because they want to. I think Jesus asks the same thing of you ... to follow him not from fear or for what Jesus might do for you, but simply because you want to.

Jesus continued: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. A hired hand will run when he sees a wolf coming. He will leave the sheep because they aren't his and he isn't their shepherd. And so the wolf attacks them and scatters the flock. The hired hand runs away because he is merely hired and has no real concern for the sheep ... I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me." [John 10:11-14 NLT] Here Jesus explains that unlike the paid help, he is the owner of the flock, and his life is tied to the lives of his sheep. He is willing to protect them, even to lay down his life for them. Then he describes this intimate relationship, as simply as he can, saying: "I know my own sheep and they know me."

Again, maybe you buy this, maybe you don't. For some of you this may just sound like an old Bible story. For me, it's as current as my needs, it's a powerful cure for my hurts. It's this promise which stops my need to get God's attention.

Consider this: it's not really God's attention you want. When a child acts out to get attention, it's not really the attention he's seeking, it's the father's (or the mother's) love. Often when a child acts out, they get attention, but it comes in the form of punishment. Not what they wanted, but at least something. I

had a little guy on Wednesday at our Kids in the Kingdom program who just couldn't sit still or do what we asked. He was all over the place. Well, we've had lots of kids like that before and we have some patience with them. But I also set clear boundaries and so I asked the little guy to keep his hands to himself and not touch other people, not to run around, all the usual things. He was warned twice and I told him next time he'd sit in time out. Not exactly the attention he wanted, so he came up to try to hug me. Cute, but not appropriate in the middle of teaching the other kids about the Bible. I didn't want to reward him with hugs after he was acting badly so I kept saying, "No, I can't hug you right now." Well, he was trying to get my attention, but really what he wanted was my affection. He wanted me to acknowledge him, maybe that's what he wanted from the other kids too. For whatever reason, he needed to know he was not forgotten, not invisible, that people knew he was there and cared about him. I can hardly blame the little guy. That's what we all want in life. Tell me you don't care whether or not people know you exist, that people care about what you care about, and that they treat you properly. And while you may not be bothered if everyone in the world does not love you, you want to know that at least someone, somewhere, loves you for who you are. It would be really hard to go through life feeling like you are invisible, that no one sees you, no one cares. No wonder so many people act out in ways that are not helpful in the long run. Only instead of this, God offers you his promise: He will call you by name; he will lead you if you will agree to follow and not wander off. He is the one who knows the real you and loves you anyway. He's even willing to lay down his life for you. At least that's what he said. And Christians believe that's exactly what Jesus did, proving his words were not just words after all.

Why is this so hard to believe? Why is it so hard for some people, perhaps for you, to believe God will love you, forgive you, call you by name and lead you? Is it possible that one of our biggest challenges is learning to see ourselves as loveable? When the Psalmist asked that big question, "*Who are mortals that you should notice us, O Lord, mere humans that you should care for us?*" [Psalm 144:3 NLT] maybe he wasn't just asking about how amazing it was that God could take notice of each and every one of us. Maybe the Psalmist was asking a more difficult question, a more penetrating one. Maybe what he wanted to know was why God would want to know us in the first place. Who am I that God should care? Am I really worth loving ... I mean would you say so if you could see into all the dark corners of my heart? I wonder ...

Ken Davis the Christian comedian tells about looking for a attention in his life. After all, he's a comedian, what class clowns do when they grow up. But he acknowledges it's not just attention he wants, but to know he's loved:

I love to hear my grown children say, "I love you." When they were small, they spoke the words freely. They'd leap out from behind a sofa in ambush, giggling with delight then they'd yell, "I love you." When my oldest daughter Traci was fourteen, she stopped saying the words. I'd try to coerce her. I'd force eye contact and say, "I love you." She'd respond, "Me too."

"Then say it" I'd demand. "I just did," she would respond,

incredulous that I couldn't see that "Me too" was the same as "I love you." Only it's not the same.

Years passed. She turned sixteen, then seventeen. When she was eighteen years old I stood in a tiny college-dorm room. I chose my words carefully. I held her by the shoulders, looked into her eyes and said, "I love you." My heart broke when she said, "Me too." Several months later I was invited to speak at a chapel service at her school. I felt nervous as I delivered the message. I didn't want to embarrass my daughter. I stumbled through my message. Afterward, the chaplain invited me to join him for lunch at a quaint Italian restaurant. We'd just begun to eat when he reached into his briefcase and pulled out a stack of blue response cards used by the students to critique chapel programs. He told me he'd never seen such a positive response from the student body. Then he went on to read several very positive comments from the cards. As I took another bite of pasta, he pulled a single blue card from his coat pocket and said, "Here's a card I think will interest you." I laid my fork down and took the card. Neatly printed on the front was my daughter's name. I stopped chewing. On the back of the card was a space where the students could write their comments. What if she didn't like my talk? Summoning courage I flipped the card over. Written on the other side were the words, "I love my daddy."

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Davis continues, "*I spit spaghetti all over the table. I excused myself and stumbled into the bathroom, locking the door behind me. Hot tears spilled down my face. "Oh thank you God!" I wailed. "She loves me, She loves me." What I didn't know was there was someone in another stall. I only learned this when I heard a disgusted voice growl, "Get a life man."*

But this is life. This is what makes life special. None of us wants to be invisible or overlooked. We want to be known and to be loved. I don't know any place in the world where you can find that love on a consistent basis. Maybe you've experienced some of that kind of attention in your marriage and maybe not ... or with your kids, or maybe not. But my friends, there is one place you and I can go, where we don't need to do anything to get the attention we want. There is one, there is a God, who knows you and everything about you and loves you just the same. No other religion believes in such a loving God. It's amazing.

That's at least something I have come to believe. I have come to trust that God knows me and loves me. I have learned over the years to trust God to lead me and help me, and yes, to correct me when I get off track. (After all, love isn't very loving if it doesn't help you stop doing dumb things or if it doesn't warn

you about doing hurtful things. Why is it that the modern church thinks God would never ever be so hurtful as to reprimand us for doing bad things? That would not be a loving God at all!) So I've come to trust in God as my shepherd. I know now I don't need to look for his attention. I don't have to do anything to make God love me. He already does. What a freeing realization that is! I no longer have to worry about whether or not he's going to pay attention to me or hear my prayers. I have his promise about that.

Only ... that does leave one last unanswered question. It's one I struggle with every day. It's not about whether or not God will pay attention to me ... but whether or not I will pay attention to him. Remember those sheep were listening for the shepherd's voice and they recognized it because they had heard it before. That's the challenge I face, and the challenge you face too ... will you listen more clearly for God's voice in each day? How? Well, let's get back to basics, folks. Will you listen for God's voice in reading the Bible daily to hear what he's said before? Will you listen for God by worshipping him, by praying to God and that includes listening for what God has to say and not just doing all the talking? Will you listen for Jesus by meeting with other Christians in small groups. (Remember Jesus said he would meet you when you gather with two or three others in his name. Why are you not taking him up on his promise more?)

You see, those are ways you can pay more attention to God. Only will you? Will you learn to listen for his voice so you'll recognize it when he speaks to you this week? And are you ready to respond when Jesus invites you to come and follow his lead? Because if you're not, it's not surprising you'd start to wonder if God was paying attention to you. Let us pray ...

Without you

*Without you I would have no hope,
I'd be all alone, without you.
Without you I could not be strong.
I could not go on, without you.
Who would I be if you didn't love me?
Who would I be without you?
Who would I be if you didn't save me?
Who would I be without you?
Without you, life would make no sense,
Dreams would always end, without you.
Without you spring would not appear,
Storms would never clear, without you.
Who would I be if you didn't love me?
Who would I be without you?
Who would I be if you didn't save me?
Who would I be without you?*