

Christians, when you want to find God, where do you go? When you want to hear a word from him, where do you turn? Or perhaps a more important question is, how do you know that you have found him? How do you know that you are in fact hearing his voice? Because there are all kinds of claims in the world today from people who claim to hear from God in their own invented ways. And that can cause us a lot of confusion. How do we know where we are going to find God in the midst of all of this? How do we know that we have in fact heard his voice?

Maybe you say, what does it matter? If someone claims to find God in their own way, maybe that just works for them. Maybe they can do their own thing, and we'll do our own thing, and we'll just leave well enough alone. But Christians, the problem with all of this is that there are legitimate ways to find God and there are illegitimate ways too. And those illegitimate ways sow doubt into our minds, so that in those moments when you really truly need to hear from God, in those moments when you're really truly struggling with something, you don't want to maybe hear from him. You don't want to go to somewhere where you might hear him 50% of the time. You want to hear him and you want to hear him for certain. So it makes a difference where we go to find God.

Israel in our Old Testament reading for today was struggling with this same question. Because Exodus chapter 34 is actually the very end of a section that begins two chapters before, in Exodus chapter 32, which, of course, is the famous account of the golden calf--something which we talked about last week too and which will apply also to this week. Because Israel had seen Moses go up into Mount Sinai, but he's been gone for days. They haven't heard a thing from him. So now they're starting to panic. Is he gone for good? How will we know that we are in fact hearing something from God? How will we know where to go when we want to find him? Now in the Old Testament, they didn't have the promise to find God whenever we come to him in prayer or something like we do. If they wanted to find God, they had to go somewhere specific. And up to this point that specific place was Moses. If they wanted to hear God, they had to hear Moses. But Moses is gone! Where are they going to go now? And so in a kind of panic, in a kind of terror, they figure, "We'll come up with our own way to find God." And that's exactly what they did. By making the golden calf and using it as a way of approaching God, as a way of saying that God is here. They even called it God. They said, "Behold, the gods which have brought you out of Egypt." This was their point of contact with God himself.

But it didn't work. Because God had told them specifically not to do this. The second half of the First Commandment--which some Christian groups actually call a different commandment--says, "You shall not make for yourself a graven image." You shall not make for yourself an idol. And God did not prohibit graven images because he hates art or something like that. No, that's not the point at all. God prohibited images in this way for two reasons. One being which we talked about last week, that it could never possibly represent God as he is. An idol would always distort how we understand who God is. It's always going to change something about him by its very nature. So it cannot possibly represent God to his people. But the other reason that God prohibited images is related to the Third Commandment, "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." God tells us how he wants to be worshiped. God tells us the ways in which we can approach him. We can't just make those up on our own, as if we can come up with our own ways. God gives us the specific ways that he wants us to come to him, the specific ways that he wants to be worshiped. To come apart from those ways is to not find God at all. That's why it's so dangerous,

Christians. Because then when we come to him in a way other than what he has told us to, we won't find him at all, or at least there will be very serious doubt as to whether we can.

But this isn't just a problem that was true of the Old Testament, as if this was only something that Israel in the wilderness struggled with. Christians, we also struggle with this too. We struggle with coming up with our own ways to approach God, coming to him on what we think are our own terms. In fact, there are very many well-meaning Christians in the world today who come up with all kinds of ways to try to come to him. They'll say like, "I come to God through my feelings, right? I really feel like I am emotionally close to God. I really feel like God is present with me here." But that's problematic. Well, maybe to put it in a little bit more concrete terms, someone might say, "When I go out into nature, I really feel like God is near, and so that's the way that I'm going to go learn something about him." Or someone might say, "I don't really feel like God is present in this church. And so that's why I'm going to go somewhere else." Or someone might say, "In my quiet time with God, I really feel like he's speaking to me, telling me something directly, telling me something about himself or about what I should do." But how do you know that that's real? How do you know that God is actually speaking to you in that way? You can't just appeal to the feelings again, as if just saying, "Well, I really really truly feel like this is true." No, because feelings can be deceptive. We can feel all kinds of things that aren't in fact true. And we might even feel like God is speaking to us in this way, but that doesn't change a thing. The fact of the matter is, Christians, that feelings can deceive us. Feelings can lead us astray. And for that reason we shouldn't rely on them.

But a Christian might also say, "I approach God through other people." We have these teachers who say all kinds of things about God, and it seems to be very impressive. It seems to be something that is true. You have popular teachers in the United States today who claimed to do things like predict things, prophecy, or to work miracles, or even to speak in tongues, heavenly languages which only they can really understand. And it can all seem very official. It can all seem very real. But how do you know that it's true? How do you know that God is speaking to you in that moment? Take, for example, the many evangelical leaders in our country who were trying to make predictions about how the election would turn out and say that this was what God had revealed to them, that ended up not being true. That at least raises a very big red flag and injects a whole bunch of doubt into everything that they have said. And if there's even a little doubt, Christians, then how can we trust in it at all? We don't want to go 50% and say, half the time they're right, half the time they're not. We don't even want to go 90%. We don't want to have any doubt when it comes to the things of God. So we don't want to turn to these ways which we invent for ourselves, because if we do that we may never find God at all.

But God does not leave us in the dark, struggling to find him in whatever way that we can. God gives us the specific ways that he wants to be found. And in fact, that's what he does for Israel in our reading for today. If they want to know where to hear the voice of God, if they want to know where to go to meet God, they only have to go to whom God has chosen, to Moses himself. And God proves that with Moses' face. Because when Moses went up into Sinai to talk with God and then when he came back down to speak to the people, his face was literally lit up. It was literally glowing with a borrowed glory of God. He was reflecting God's own light within his face. It was so bright, in fact, that whenever he was not speaking with Israel, he actually had to cover it up, so that they would not completely be terrified by what they saw. This was God's way of showing

them that Moses was his chosen man, the one who spoke for him. And if they wanted to know where to go to find God, they only had to listen to him. Listen to Moses, and you would have the word of God.

And Christians, God has done the same thing for us too. Because the face of Jesus also lit up, shining with light. Not with a borrowed light like Moses, but with his own glory, because Jesus is in fact the Lord. And [in] that moment God showed to us that Jesus is his spokesman. When we hear the voice of Jesus, we are hearing the very voice of God. And the glory which Jesus showed in that moment was actually far greater than anything Moses had. Because Moses could hide it, but Jesus was so great that even his clothes turned bright white, whiter than anything which we could possibly create in this world. This was God's way of saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!" When you listen to Jesus, you hear the voice of the Father. As Jesus says in John chapter 14, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me." Go to Jesus, and you will meet God. Listen to Jesus, and you will hear his voice.

But where do we go today, Christians, to hear the voice of Jesus? Because we didn't see him on the mountain with the apostles. We haven't even seen him face-to-face. Where can we go in these latter days to hear the voice of God? Go to the place that Jesus has told you to go. Go to the place that he has commanded you to go. Above all to his Word. Because here in the Scriptures, here in the living Word of God, we have his voice. Because Jesus has promised to us the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who spoke to the prophets, the Spirit who spoke to the apostles, and caused these words to be written down. When we hear the words of the Bible, we don't have to wonder, "Is this true? Is this not true?" We know that this is God's voice which he has given to us. And when we come to this Word, we will hear him without any doubt. And this same Word also points us to the other places that God has promised to be, that God has commanded us to go to, such as the sacraments. When the Word and the water come together in your Baptism to make you a new creation, God has promised to be there. When we come to the Lord's Supper, the Word and the bread and the wine bringing us the very body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, God has promised to be there. You will meet him there, just as he said. And God has also promised to be in his Church. That when we gather together as the body of Christ, we meet our Lord. As Jesus has promised, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am also among them." So here, today, as his church, we gather together to hear that Word and to receive his gifts, and we know that we are, in fact, meeting God himself. When we come to where he has promised to be, we will meet him without fail.

So don't invent ways for yourselves, Christians. Don't try to come to God in your own ways that you think might work. They'll always at least be doubtful. But come to the place where there is no doubt, the place where God has promised to be: in his holy Word, his holy sacraments, and his holy Church. And you will meet the Lord.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, who gave us the apostles and the prophets to speak to us your holy Word, we pray that you would strengthen us by that Word today so that we may always seek you where you have promised to be; through Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.