

“As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my heart longs for you, O God,” sings the psalmist.

That the human soul was made to long for God, to desire union with our maker, is a theme of our faith.

“You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts cannot find rest until they rest in you,” wrote St. Augustine. Something in us desires something, someone who transcends the creation. We frail, mortal, finite creatures long to hide in God’s arms. We flit from flower to flower like bees hoping to alight in that one place where we can sip the nectar that preserves us from decay. So, we fall in behind the flag, merge with the group, meld our frail identities into something bigger than ourselves. But no group, no earthly project or mundane happiness can satisfy our deepest desire or calm our restless hearts.

Aristotle said we ought to pay attention to this desire. That we have hunger implies that we need something to end our hunger - food. That we desire companionship implies that we need people. We ought to pay attention to our desire for God because it implies some divine object of our desire.

C. S. Lewis writes of his own childhood desire for God. As he grew he came to understand that it can’t be fulfilled by any earthly means, for all earthly pleasure is fleeting. Why, he asks, would there be a desire, a seeking, for something beyond the earthly, if there weren’t something beyond the earthly to desire and to seek? Why would there be this emptiness and need if there weren’t something to fill it?

Yet before he ended his search he realized that what he’d been seeking was seeking him. While he was wanting God, God was wanting him. So, he became a witness to the powerful draw of God’s love on us.

You get this in St. Augustine, who starts with, “I searched, I read, I wanted.” I, I, I! But ends with “You came,” “You touched me,” “You spoke.” You, You, You! The God he was seeking was, all the while, seeking him. Didn’t Jesus promise, “And when I’m lifted up, I’ll draw all people unto myself”?

This is what words like “conversion,” or “born again,” are pointing to, that surprising, joyful moment, when it dawns on us that the God we thought we were pursuing was, all the while, pursuing us.

This is important because if we’re honest we have to admit that usually our desire, for all its fervor, is rarely a desire for this God. What we want is life without risk, freedom without obedience, no sacrifice or tough choices, in other words, definitely not this God. We want to be gods unto ourselves. So the deep desire C. S. Lewis extols often leads to some form of idolatry, some worship of self, or some god we’ve made for our self, not the true, living, loving, yet demanding God who meets us in Jesus.

In regard to desire, the important thing, the saving thing, is not that we want God, but that God, in Jesus, wants us! The biblical story is rarely about our desire for God, but about God’s amazing desire for us! That’s how the Bible tells it. Hardly anyone is looking for Jesus. He looks for them. He intrudes.

That’s why it’s unusual, in today’s Gospel, that some “Greeks” have come searching for Jesus. It’s more typical that Jesus goes looking for people, than that people come looking for him. But here they do.

Jesus responds with strange talk of grains falling to earth and dying, of losing a life to find it, and of his Father being glorified, saying, “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.”

Jesus has been trying to do this in his whole ministry - draw people to himself. Now he is “troubled” for he’s about to go to the cross. Yet, he speaks of that terrible hour as his hour of glory. How’s that glory?

It’s the glory of a God who’s determined to have us - the glory of a God who’ll stop at nothing, even

death on a cross, in order to have us. That's why he says, "When I'm lifted up, I'll draw all people to myself."

Remember, a people of God, a family of faith, was God's idea, not ours. God came to a rag-tag bunch of nomads, making a promise to be their God and form them into God's people. That was the promise God offered. Sadly, the story of God's people is one of how we broke, abused, turned against that promise.

In today's first lesson, Jeremiah says that one day a "new covenant," will be written on our hearts.

God will have to do that writing; we'll never do it ourselves. Our hearts are captive to other things that make us incapable. So, when Jesus comes to people, it's not that they've been looking for someone, searching for something, but that they're quite content, minding their own business, going about their daily work. So the gospel story is not so much of our longing for God, but God's longing for us!

Jesus says that the day is coming, when God's new covenant will be written on our hearts. It will come as he's "lifted up." Now "lifted up" might be taken to mean that Jesus, the Word made flesh, God with us, is at last ascending away from us, being lifted up from the grubby confines of earth to another, more heavenly, world. But there's a double meaning in this "lifted up." Jesus is being "lifted up" on the cross. He's being lifted "up," not "away," from us. He's being lifted, in fact, even closer to us. He's being lifted up, into God's purposes, which is to confront the power of sin and death, the heart of our violence, our cruelty, and hatred, not with counter-violence, or overwhelming power, but with self-giving love. That's what makes this his true hour of glory. That's why he says, "When I am lifted up, I will draw all people unto myself."

Being "lifted up" isn't easy for Jesus. Today, we see that he's "disturbed" as he moves toward the cross. Yet, he moves toward this terrible end in obedience to the Father. His obedience reveals the truth of his words, "the Father and I are one." Though he's honestly disturbed by the horrible fate that awaits him, he moves inexorably toward the cross, determined to draw all humanity to himself, to God.

As we stand on the threshold of Calvary, take this as a working definition of the gospel, of the heart of the Christian faith: God deeply desires us and will do anything to get to us, even death on a cross.

And his cross, the sign of the terrible cruelty of which we are capable, is turned by his sacrifice into a great magnet that draws all into its field, a large net that catches sinful humanity within its cast. "And when I am lifted up, I will draw all people unto myself."

Albert Schweitzer notes that Jesus begins that drawing us to himself as he first did. "He comes to us, as of old, by the lakeside. He speaks to us in the same words: 'Follow me!' and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey him . . . he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship."

Your life can best be explained as one long story of God's unquenchable desire for you. You began your response to that desire when you said, "Yes!" to Christ's "Follow me!" Since then, every step you've taken, even the ones you thought were away from God have, in the great mystery of God's love, been steps toward God. Where ever you move, you are within the field of that magnetic draw of the cross. For we know what Jesus said is true, "When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself."

Lord Jesus, your unquenchable light has shone into our darkness,
...your relentless love has reached out to our loneliness,
...and your resourceful determination to have us has drawn us in your grasp.

As we move, this Sunday, closer to your cross, give us the light to see your cross as our salvation,
...your cross not only as a sign of your great, eternal, unstoppable desire to have us.

We give thanks for your assurance that you have come to save us all.

Let our response be acceptable to you as we live lives of praise and thanksgiving,
...hoping by word and example to lead others to the joys we share in you.

We pray for the sick and the suffering, the struggling, the lost, for the unseen in our society,
...for the lost and forsaken,

We pray for the proud and the haughty, those who ignore your law and scoff at the cross,
...yet loudly claim your blessing on their actions,

We pray for the leaders of the world, that together we may reject the claims of nationalism
...and embrace your vision of all nations bearing their gifts to the New Jerusalem,
...not an ancient city on an embattled hill,
...but a new creation in a new earth fashioned out of reconciliation and love.

We pray for our own special concerns, for those things that weigh upon our hearts.

We pray especially for those known to us with special needs...