

“I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For”

by the Rev. Robert M. Hardies

A sermon given on January 5, 2014

All Souls Church, Unitarian

Washington, DC

Reading

Loaves and Fishes

by David Whyte

This is not
the age of information.

This is *not*
the age of information.

Forget the news,
and the radio,
And the blurred screen.

This is the time
of loaves
and fishes.

People are hungry,
and the one good word is bread
for a thousand.

Sermon

For Christmas, my partner Chris gave me a great big novel that lots of people seem to be reading these days. It's called *The Goldfinch*. And then, the day after Christmas, my parents took our two-year-old, Nico, for four days and four nights. Leaving me with leisurely mornings and afternoons with nothing better to do than read my big fat novel. My God, it was the best Christmas ever!

But that novel weighs in at about 800 pages—800 pages of very...small... type. So that after a few hours of reading—when I'd look up from the book—I'd find that I couldn't see anything. My eyes couldn't focus. I'd have to blink a few times and rub my eyes until I could see anything besides the 11-point font right in front of me. The same thing happens to me when I've spent too much time staring at my computer screen—I look up and the whole world's a blur. I don't know, maybe my eyes are just getting old.

But you know something: Emerson said that our souls can get like this, too. Near-sighted. If they're focused for too long on things too small, our souls also lose their ability to see the big picture. The larger purpose. The higher calling. The more expansive vision of what our lives might be. When we succumb to this spiritual near-sightedness, Emerson said, life becomes either "comic"—a farce—or "pitiful."

A lot of people have come to me recently admitting that they fear they suffer from this malady—this spiritual near-sightedness. And they don't know what to do about it. They feel as though they are bombarded moment-by-moment by ads, by tweets, by status updates, by 24-hour cable news chatter, most of which—not all—but most of which amounts to nothing more than the fine print of life. Small stuff, unimportant stuff. The spiritual equivalent of 11-point font. And they feel as though they've lost their ability to see the big picture amidst all the trivia, all the noise.

My colleague Galen Guengerich believes that those of us living at the dawn of the 21st century suffer from a kind of "existential overload." "If anything, the world today is too

much with us," he says, "We feel overwhelmed, and we've become jaded in response. Skepticism has replaced boredom, and cynicism has replaced apathy as the dominant spiritual traits of our time. [Yet], our spiritual hunger continues to deepen. We are more connected than ever and also more lonely. We accomplish more, but with less satisfaction. We live more rapidly, but fewer experiences endure. We feel lost in a world teeming with facts and alone in a world teeming with people."

And we still haven't found what we're looking for...

It's been almost 27 years since U2 recorded their hit single, "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For." But for many, it remains the emblematic spiritual cry of our time. Bono sings, "I have climbed highest mountains, I have scaled city walls...only to be with you. I have spoken with the tongues of angels and I have held the devil's hand...if only to be with you. But I still haven't found what I'm looking for."

So how *do* we find what we're looking for in a world that is too much with us? We might find some answers if we look at some of the ancient stories on which Bono's song is modeled. For while it might have a contemporary resonance, the spiritual search that he describes is ancient. In particular, the song reminds me of the story of the prophet Elijah. (I'm sure Bono would flattered to be considered our latter-day Elijah.)

Elijah lived at a time when the Israelites were not keeping their covenant with God to care for one another and to honor God. And Elijah told them so, and like so many prophets he found himself scorned and exiled. In fact, his message met with so much resistance that Elijah began to doubt himself. He thought maybe he'd lost sight of the big picture. Lost his way. And so he went searching for an assurance. A sign from God. A word, anything.

Elijah's search took him all the way to Mount Horeb, where God had once spoken to Moses in the burning bush. And as he stood at the mouth of a cave high atop the mountain a great wind blew, and Elijah thought that God was in the wind, but God wasn't in the wind. And then came a great earthquake, and Elijah thought that perhaps God was in the earthquake.

But God wasn't in the earthquake either. And then there was a great fire on the mountain, and Elijah though well surely this must be God. But God was not in the fire, either. Then after the wind and the trembling and the fire, there was silence. [PAUSE] One translation says "sheer silence." [PAUSE]

And in the silence, Elijah hears a still, small voice, whispering to him. It was almost as if it were coming from inside of him. And it was the voice of God.

Elijah found what he was looking for. And he found it in the silence. The sheer silence. He found it in communion with something holy deep within him. I believe this is where each of us will find what it is we're looking for. In the silence. In the sheer silence. In the still, small voice.

Now, if Elijah were alive today the story might sound a little different. Maybe that mighty wind would be the beltway pundits blowing their hot air. And the earthquake would be the unceasing vibration of our cell phones alerting us to another text, another email. And maybe the fire would burn the cold blue color of all the screens and monitors that are staring at us. And Elijah doesn't find God in any of these things. So in our version he turns off the tv, and powers down his computer, and mutes his cellphone...and soaks in the silence...the sheer silence...until he finally hears the still, small voice whispering to him. Making sense of all the clutter. Restoring proper perspective to his vision. Helping him see the big picture again.

My point is this: We need not travel very far to find what we're looking for. The journey we must make is a journey inward—to that place inside where *our* soul communes with the soul of the whole, what Emerson called the "Oversoul." The place from which the still, small voice speaks.

And so we need to do what Elijah did. Which is create a little space, and a little silence to be able to hear that voice. I think that's what Sunday morning can be for us. People keep telling me that in the age of twitter, the church is going to become obsolete. No one's going

to need it anymore. I think we need spiritual community now more than ever. To help us create times and places where we can listen for the still, small voice within.

All week long we sit hunched over the details of our lives, hunched over our computers, hunched over our desks, staring at whatever is our version of 11 point font. On Sundays we need to throw back our shoulders. Lift our eyes. Blink. Rub them. Raise them up to a higher plane. What's that song the choir often sings? "Lord I will lift my eyes to the hills...knowing my strength is coming from you." What you find when you look up, you might not call "the Lord." I doesn't matter what you call it, so long as it is infinitely larger than that which this world tries to distract us with.

We don't need more information, or more face book friends. We need wisdom and love. And we need times and places of Sabbath—Sunday morning, an hour of meditation, a mid-week vespers service—to help us find that wisdom and love. To help us find what we're looking for.

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My prayer for all of us is that we find that one good word. That morsel of wisdom that feeds and sustains us. So that—at long last—we'll have found what we're looking for.

May it be so. Amen.