

Longing for God

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Christmas Eve

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who knocks at
the door of a
brothel is
looking for
God.”***

- G. K. Chesterton

Rolling Stone magazine published its list of the top 500 songs of all time. The 93rd song on the list is sung by U2, “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For.” The refrain of this song epitomizes people’s yearning for something, “But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for.”

People will sometimes tell me, “Something’s missing in my life. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but there’s a void of some kind, a longing for something.”

What do you long for—when the lights are turned off and the curtains are drawn and the blankets are pulled up under your chin? When you lie in bed in the middle of the night unable to sleep, what do you long for?

The sad, pathetic drama of the Tiger Woods scandal played out in the news this last month. I find it ironic that the Associated Press named Tiger the athlete of the decade last week. This celebrated golfer, at the tender age of 33, became the first athlete in the history of any sport to amass a billion dollars worth of earnings. Tiger Woods is not only a golf icon, he’s become a recognized brand name. Tiger Woods seemingly has it all: a beautiful wife, two handsome children, more money and fame than he knows what to do with. All of this came

crashing down when Tiger wrecked his car in the wee hours of Thanksgiving morning and this sordid mess tumbled out. I haven’t kept up with the news lately, but the last I heard, his mistress count was up to 13.

So, Tiger Woods can hit a golf ball farther and with greater accuracy than anyone else, but he’s hardly the role model we imagined him to be. When are we going to learn that sports figures and entertainment celebrities are not the first place to look when we are seeking role models?

When I heard of the Tiger Woods scandal, the quote flashed into my mind that is often attributed to G. K. Chesterton: “Everyone who knocks at the door of a brothel is looking for God.” And you’re muttering under your breath, give me a break. The only thing Tiger was after was sex. Don’t be so sure. When Tiger called on his lady friends, I doubt he would have welcomed God answering the door. But people like Tiger Woods look to fulfill their longings for love and happiness with all sorts of things, even destructive things. I don’t think Tiger Woods is really looking for sex. His search is misplaced. He’s looking for God.

We don’t always initially recognize this longing for God. We imagine ourselves to be searching for something else. We deceive ourselves into thinking this yearning in our hearts can be satisfied with

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new relationships or a different job or a dream house or a new set of friends.

We've been talking this year about God's Big Story in this church. We have crunched this story down to three words: creation, fall and redemption. Let's start at the very beginning. We've been created to live in relationship with God. That's why we're made, to live in right relationship with God and other people.

God cannot possibly give us happiness apart from Himself. Think about it. Since God is God, there's nothing God can give us beyond Himself. And, since God cannot give us anything beyond Himself, He gives us Himself.

C. S. Lewis says it well: "A car is made to run on petrol [gasoline], and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on himself. He is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn and the food our spirits were designed to consume. There is no other. That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion. God cannot give us happiness and peace apart from himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing."

After a funeral recently, a mother talked with me about her highly inquisitive son. Now, as far as I can tell, her family doesn't go to church. Like a lot of families, they appear to be nominally religious. But she asked me if her son could come and talk to me. "He is just so curious about God,"

she said. He is forever peppering her with questions about God.

I'm not surprised. Children are intensely curious about God. Even children raised in secular environments evidence a sincere longing for God. Children find the idea of God incredibly appealing. It almost seems as if they are wired or prepared to believe in God. One author calls children "natural mystics."

Social scientists have been hard at work to study the evolutionary roots of religion. They are grappling with the question of why people are so prone to believe in God. There is something in the human heart that is inexorably religious. Maybe, just maybe, God put this desire in us.

Columnist Peggy Noonan wrote an article about the fall of communism that appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* a few years ago. She writes in the opening paragraph, "I think I know the moment Soviet communism began its fall. It happened in public. Anyone could see it. It was one of the great spiritual moments of the 20th century."

She reflected on the choice of John Paul as Pope back in 1979. On the day John Paul was installed to the highest position in the Catholic Church, he announced his intention to visit his homeland of Poland. In those days, Poland was a communist state, so atheism was the law of the land.

This put the Polish communist party in something of a bind. If they didn't allow John Paul to visit his homeland, they would be accused of being defensive and frightened. But,

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if they consented to let him come, the people might rise up in opposition to the government. In the end, they let him come.

In advance of the Pope’s visit, the communists took extra measures to dampen people’s enthusiasm. They sent directives to all teachers, requiring them in their classrooms to reinforce atheism as the state religion.

When the Pope arrived, he was taken by motorcade to Warsaw. The route was jammed with overflow crowds. When he arrived at Victory Square, the crowd had swelled to a million people. During his memorable sermon, John Paul wondered aloud why God had ordained a Pole to the position of the papacy. He observed that God had chosen the Polish people to share in this moment with him. He then asked whether the people were ready to accept this unique role in human history. The people’s response started quietly and steadily gained momentum as his sermon progressed. Every time the pope asked whether the people accepted this role, the people shouted as one, “We want God! We want God.” The communists couldn’t stop the shouting. Had they arrested people, there wouldn’t have been enough jails to hold them. In that moment, Noonan writes, the days of communism became numbered. Although atheism was still the official state religion, it was now obvious, God would prevail.

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Children cry it. Adults do, too. We want God.

One of the reasons I love the Psalms is they express so eloquently this longing for God. Psalm 63 begins, “My soul thirsts for you, O God. My body longs for you, as in a dry and weary land, where there is no water.” Or consider these words from Psalm 42: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.”

St. Augustine captures this sentiment well in his autobiography, of sorts, called *Confessions*: “Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.” Or consider a similar sentiment expressed by the brilliant scientist and philosopher Blasé Pascal: “There is within every man a God-shaped vacuum, an emptiness that only God can fill.”

What will we do with these longings? Do we just let them lie in a heap on the floor? The Bible declares cover-to-cover that God longs for us, too. The Creator longs to be in relationship with His creation. In God’s Big Story, people fall out of relationship with God through something called sin. But the good news of Scripture is that God will stop at nothing to redeem people back into relationship with God.

Brennan Manning speaks about God’s longing for us. He as much as says so in the title of his book, *The Furious Longing of God*. The fury of which he writes is not a reference to God’s anger. Rather, God’s fury expresses itself most clearly in inexhaustible, uncondi-

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tional love. The first thing God thinks about you, when you come to mind, is not disappointment or anger over your sin. The first thing God feels for you is love—relentless, unconditional love.

Those who are parents among us can empathize with this kind of love. There is nothing our kids can do to make us stop loving them.

What we are celebrating tonight (and, indeed, you wondered if I was ever to get around to it!) is that God takes human form and comes into our world to love us. This love becomes incarnate. That is, this love takes on flesh in Jesus Christ. God will stop at nothing, not the indignity of a cosmic God taking the form of a helpless infant, not the ingratitude of people ignoring His message, not even the insult of nailing him to cross. God will stop at nothing, not even the death of His Son, to redeem people back into relationship.

In other major world religions, people come to God. Adherents are taught to approach God with prayer, alms, good works and worship. But what we are celebrating tonight is something altogether unique. God has entered our world in the person of Jesus Christ. God became flesh and blood and moved right into the neighborhood.

If you feel this longing tonight, let me save you the trouble of investing so much time and money on things that ultimately will not satisfy. You may be knocking at the door of some destructive behavior that will not assuage this

longing. You may already have some inclination that this quest you're on won't truly satisfy. Let me help you in the search. What you are really seeking is God. I'm sure of it.

Prayer:

We long for you, O Lord. We didn't know our hearts yearned for you. We thought this longing would be satisfied with people, places and things.

It is you our hearts long for. We have come to find out that you have been longing for us, too! You have been pursuing and loving us. Your love is relentless and inexhaustible. How thankful we are that you never stopped loving us.

We want to follow Jesus in the way of love. We endeavor to become his disciples and learn what it means to follow Jesus our whole life long. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

