**Series: Questions God Asks**

**Sermon: Where Are You?**

This morning I’m going to begin a series looking at some Questions God asked. I think we can challenge ourselves by looking at them from different angles.

The first question we find in a story I’m certain we’re all aware of. It the one about Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. If you remember, that sin broke their relationship with God. Then…*the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as He was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?”* Genesis 3:8f

Why did God ask that? *“Where are you?”* Was He unaware of Adam’s location? Is it possible that the God who knows everything, who isn’t limited by the five senses couldn’t find the man? Did Adam hide so well that God gave up looking for him?

Well of course not. God wasn’t looking for the man. He knew exactly where Adam was and. More than that He knew why Adam was hiding. When God asked, *“Where are you?”* He wasn’t looking for information. *“Where are you?”* was really asking, *“Why aren’t you where you’re supposed to be? Close to me?”*

*“Where are you?”* was God saying, *“I want relationship, but something is wrong.”*

*“Where are you?”* was about recognizing that there was separation between God and the man. God wanted a loving relationship with Adam, but Adam had drifted away and needed to recognize it before he could return to God.

When Adam “fessed up,” even though in his confession he tried to pass the blame, God restored their relationship bringing Adam close again. Yes there was punishment. Yes there were consequences, but in the end Adam was able to once again walk with God.

This sermon is for anyone who is hiding from God, or should I say, anyone who thinks you’re hiding from God. It’s for anyone who may have drifted away from God. Maybe you’ve got a sin or an attitude in your life that you want to hide from God.

In the spirit of Jeff Foxworthy:

* If you attend church fairly regularly because it’s what “good Christians” do, you might be drifting.
* If you give money to the church as long as it doesn’t impinge on your standard of living, you might be drifting.
* If you choose what is popular over what is right because you care more about what people think of you than what God thinks of you, you might be drifting.
* If you don’t really want to be saved from your sin, just from the penalty of your sin, you might be drifting.
* If you think doing radical things for Jesus is for “extreme” Christians, not average ones, you might be drifting.
* If you rarely or never share your faith with your neighbors, coworkers, or friends, because you don’t want to be rejected, you might be drifting.
* If you gauge your “goodness” by comparing yourself to the secular world, you might be drifting.
* If you say you love Jesus, and He is a part of your life but He isn’t allowed to be Lord of your life, you might be drifting.
* If you love God, but don’t love Him with all your heart, soul, and strength, you might be drifting.
* If you love others but not as much as your love yourself, you might be drifting.
* If you serve God and others, but there are limits to how far you will go or how much time, money, and energy you’re willing to give, you might be drifting.
* If you think about life on earth much more often than eternity, you might be drifting.
* If you do whatever is necessary to keep yourself from feeling too guilty, you might be drifting.
* If you do the bare minimum to be “good enough” without requiring too much, you might be drifting.
* If you play it safe, never sacrificing or risking for God, you might be drifting.
* If you drink and swear less than average, but besides that, you really aren’t very different from a typical unbeliever, you might be drifting.

This sermon is for anyone for whom your relationship with God just isn’t right. God asks, *“Where are you?”* because it’s not God who moved*.* Maybe He asks through me. Or maybe He asks through your brother or a co-worker, *“Where are you?”*

You’re not really hiding from God, but God will not force Himself on you. You’re free to dismiss Him. None-the-less He desires a personal relationship with you just like He had with Adam, and because He wants you to face and admit the separation so you can be close to Him, God asks, *“Where are you?”*

Jesus recognized that separation was still an issue in His day, just as it still is today. Jesus wants a close relationship with us. He doesn’t want to be in the background of our lives. He wants to be right in the thick of things.

On the night of the Last Supper as He explained to His followers that He would soon be leaving, He assured them that they would be OK because they would have the Holy Spirit. But He knew that when He was no longer physically present they would start to drift away. If they were to continue following Him, they would need to stay close. If they didn’t remain close it would destroy the relationship.

So He said, *Remain in me!* . Five times in six verses He repeated it. That was Jesus’ way of asking, *“Where are you?”* *“Why aren’t you close to me?”* Jesus never moves away from us. If there is separation it’s because we moved.

Jesus illustrated His thought using the ancient metaphor the prophets of Israel used of the life sustaining relationship between a vine and its branches.

*I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.*

***Remain in me****, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you* ***remain in me****.*

*“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man* ***remains in me*** *and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not* ***remain in me****, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.*

*If you* ***remain in me*** *and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.* John 15:1-8

Jesus doesn’t want His followers wandering away. He wants them, us, close. I have witnessed many Christians drift away after years of being close. I don’t know why. Maybe they think, *I’ve got this Christian stuff. I don’t need to continue staying close*.

The truth is that if we’re not pursuing Jesus we’re actually drifting away. Some believers go through the motions of religion but not really connecting with Jesus in a personal way.

Because He wants a close relationship with us Jesus He iterated this advice, *Remain in me.*

**Remain in me because I am the true vine**. Israel’s history was one of faithfulness followed by unfaithfulness followed by faithfulness followed by more unfaithfulness.

While Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments his brother Aaron fashioned the golden calf to stand in God’s place, *Then the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.* Exodus 32:6

It was like they could only be faithful for a limited time, then they had to wander so they got up early to play. The word “play” *tsaheq* is the same word used to describe a man fondling his wife. Oh, but it was OK because they first did religious stuff.

The wife of the prophet Hosea was a living parable of this. She was like Israel, prone to wander. Still he loved her every time. Few wives are as godless as Gomer, but even fewer men are as God-like as Hosea.

Hosea illustrates how God wants to keep us close even though we tend to wander. How is that we find ourselves drifting away from time to time? What lures us away from our faithful loving God?

The answer is in Jesus’ first statement here, *I am the true vine*. The vine is the source of life. We have a tendency to pursue false vines – money, power, pleasure, fame. False vines promise sweet fulfillment, but leave us empty.

False vines thrive even in religious settings. Christians are lured by money, power, pleasure, or fame and in our pursuit of these things we wander from Jesus. So Jesus said, *Remain in me. Continue to exist in me. No hiding. No running away. Stay close*.

***Remain in me because My Father is the gardener***. Jesus’ disciples understood the image of a gardener so they understood the meaning of “*my Father is the gardener*.”

The word is . (To George Tamlin – *Did you know your name means gardener?*) The gardener is more than just a hired hand. He owned or managed the vineyard, thus he was invested in the mission of the vineyard. He wanted to see the greatest possible harvest of fruit.

To that end he tended the crop. He examined every branch, pruning when necessary and removing dead branches in order to enhance the fruit producing ones.

Jesus said God is the gardener. He examines every branch. He prunes us, sometimes using negative circumstances and experiences to cut out stuff that distracts us from Jesus. We’re told in Hebrews 12:7 that when go through difficult times we should endure it as discipline because God is tending us.

So often when we’re in some hardship what do we do? We run from God. We get angry with Him and doubt His love, all the while God is using this hardship to prune that which keeps us from walking closely with Jesus. If we remain in Jesus we can appreciate what the gardener is doing. If we don’t remain in Jesus we’re like dead branches and the gardener has no use for us.

***Remain in me because you can’t bear fruit without me***. A branch of a vine that loses connection to the vine will be fruitless. A broken branch that is still attached by a few fibers may look alive, even sprouting some green leaves, but it won’t receive enough nutrients to produce fruit and will eventually die.

If we don’t remain in Jesus, attached to the true vine, we’re destined to shrivel and die.

We may not see the importance of doing the things that keep us close to Jesus, but learn this lesson:

**A branch that is not nourished by the vine will bear no fruit, and the gardener doesn’t keep fruitless branches**.

He cuts them off, gathers them up, and throws them into a fire.

I know it’s not PC to talk about judgment but Jesus did so I can too. He is serious about this. Branches that lose their connection to the vine don’t produce fruit and are burned.

We’re not talking about Christians who are struggling with a sin or who don’t always do what God wants. We’re talking about Christians who disconnect from Jesus because they don’t stay close.

***Remain in me. I will make you fruitful***.

We all want to be good Christians. We want to be nice to people. We want to help. We want to be positive and supportive. Sometimes we’re even willing to sacrifice to serve. Sometimes our kindness is taken as weakness. Sometimes our help is abused; we’re taken advantage of. Often we’re unappreciated or un-noticed.

It’s not unusual for Christians to pull back if we don’t receive enough recognition for the good things we do.

Maybe we need to rethink what it means to remain in Jesus. If we’re doing good things because that’s what Christians do, we’re missing the point. Instead we ought to think about remaining in Jesus, knowing Him, trusting Him, knowing and trusting His Word. Then our “do-gooding” will naturally flow from that relationship.

If we stay close to Jesus, good stuff happens. *If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*

Note what Jesus said and didn’t say. He didn’t say that apart from Him we could only do a little or that we would do less if not in Him. He said if we’re not in Him we can do nothing. Apart from Him our “do-gooding” will be about us rather than about being like Jesus.

What do you do if you sit down at your recliner to read a book but when to turn the switch it doesn’t come on? Maybe you change the bulb. Maybe you fiddle with the socket to make sure it’s tight. Eventually you might check the plug. If it’s not plugged in nothing else you do will make it work. Even a new bulb won’t turn on. It has to be connected with the source of power.

That’s how it is with Jesus. Without Him we have no power to produce fruit. Without Jesus we are light-less lamps, salt-less salt, fruit-less branches. That’s why Jesus said, *Remain in me*.

If you ever feel like you just don’t have it going anymore, don’t hide from God. Check your connection. If you ever feel like life is too much, don’t just try harder. Remain in Jesus.

My friend Jeff Walling says that every church should have a sign that reads, **It’s Jesus, Stupid!** His point is that we don’t need more training or more motivation. We need more Jesus.

We preachers tend to think that if we just preach better sermons; if our church has better programs; if we can get more people active, then we will see more fruit. That’s vain thinking. It’s not my sermons; it’s not our church, it’s not our volunteers that bear fruit. It’s Jesus. We need to be connected to the vine.

Jesus drove the point home in verse 8, *This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.* When we bear fruit, all those good things we used to do because we’re good people we now do because we follow Jesus, and we know that it’s the power of Jesus that makes it happen.

The Apostle Paul understood, *I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.* 1 Corinthians 3:6f

By remaining in Jesus we stay connected to the power, and through that power we bear much fruit. To God be the glory.

You know, wherever you are, God knows. If He’s asking, *“Where are you?”* it’s not because He doesn’t know. It’s because you have drifted away and He wants you close.

Let me share a story from a friend. Years ago when he was very young he was in a big box store with his father when the toy aisle caught his eye. He drifted away to check out the treasures. Everything he could imagine was there; trucks and games and puzzles and video games. You name it, they had it.

He hadn’t been there long when he noticed that his Dad had moved on without him and now was nowhere to be seen. He thought, *Oh no. I knew this would happen someday. Daddy ditched me*.

My friend, in a state of panic started calling, ***Daddy! Daaady!*** Fifty men whose name happened to be Daddy looked down the aisle, but none of them was his Daddy. He began to wonder what they do with left-over kids. Do they sell them or lock them up somewhere?

He shouted some more and finally it worked. His Dad appeared at the end of the aisle. He says he took off like a heat-seeking missile running to his father’s arms. His Dad lifted him up and gave him a big hug.

*Daddy*, my friend said, *don’t ever leave me like that*.

His Dad smiled and said, *How about we make a deal, son? You don’t leave me and I won’t leave you*.

Where are you? Right now. Are you where you should be in your relationship with Jesus? Is there any separation?