

**First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)**

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***“‘Hide and Seek’? Or ‘Seek and Find’?”***

Jeremiah 29:1-14 (NIV)

*29 This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. 2 (This was after King Jehoiachin and the queen mother, the court officials and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the skilled workers and the artisans had gone into exile from Jerusalem.) 3 He entrusted the letter to Elasah son of Shaphan and to Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. It said:*

*4 This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. 7 Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” 8 Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. 9 They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the Lord.*

*10 This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. 11 For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. 12 Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. 13 You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. 14 I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”*

**[Slide 1]    Opening**

Good morning church! I must admit that I have some very mixed emotions this morning that have nothing to do with any of you or with our church or worship. I'm still thinking a little about yesterday. I'm pleased, of course, that the Jayhawks found a way to come back after a rough first half and get the first conference win under their belt—hopefully on the way to the start of another streak. But I'm a bit miffed that I couldn't watch the game because of the new arrangement that forces you to have a special streaming service to see them play. So I'm just going to let that slide away from my mind and focus on the things of God. Always a good choice.

Welcome to the first Sunday of the New Year, Epiphany Sunday—the day that the church celebrates the revelation of God in Christ. (The word 'Epiphany,' comes from the Greek word that means 'to reveal,' 'to unveil.')

It's also the day that we celebrate the coming of the magi to worship the infant Jesus. And that is a great combination of things to think about as we come into our season of fasting and prayer—to remember that God has revealed himself to us in Christ, and wise people will still seek him, will travel to worship and offer him their lives.

**[Slide 2]**     *A season of fasting and prayer*

I also have to admit that the idea of starting the year with a three-week period of fasting and prayer isn't original with me. It may be new for you, but it's not a new idea or an unusual practice. Many churches, even entire denominations, are choosing to set aside a few days or a few weeks to fast and pray and seek the Lord as a way to consecrate themselves and the year for the spiritual battles and growth opportunities that lie ahead. As we enter into this New Year, let me encourage you to take advantage of these twenty-one days and find a way to fast and pray that fits with your schedule and your personal bent. As I wrote in my article for the January newsletter, there are many different ways to fast—from a single meal to a single meal per day, or during certain hours of the day, or for a full day or for several days. It's possible to fast from particular foods, or to fast by only eating particular foods. God once told a man I know that for a two-week period he was to only eat what God directed him to eat and when to eat it. So ask God how he would have you engage in this spiritual discipline.

There are lots of health benefits from fasting, but please don't just think of this as a way to diet. Let this be an opportunity to spend time in prayer and the word of God, to actively seek to hear from God and to follow through with the things he tells you or shows you. The prayer stations in the sanctuary will be

available whenever the church is open as aids to guide you with suggestions about what to pray for during this season.

**[Slide 3]**     *Introduction*

I'm starting the New Year with a series of sermons I'm calling, simply, "Seeking God." It seems like a fitting series to correspond with our season of prayer and fasting. My hope is that these messages, combined with our focus on praying and fasting as a church, will help us to position ourselves as a body to hear from the Lord about where we're going in this next season of our life together, and what are the next steps we need to take as we move forward.

"Seeking God" is a common phrase that occurs throughout the Bible. That phrase, or something similar, can be found in a variety of different contexts, with some variations in meaning or emphasis. We find, for instance, exhortations or commands to seek after God, or to seek the Lord, and descriptions of individuals who are said to have sought the Lord. We'll be exploring several of these differing emphases in the coming weeks. But underneath every message will be a basic set of questions that are implicit in our quest:

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- What does it mean to seek God?
- Why does it matter?
- What does it accomplish?
- What does it look like in our lives today?

My sermon today actually has a fairly simple point. It's not complicated at all, though if you get the point, it can be something that makes a powerful difference in your life. But we are going to have to do a little digging through some layers to uncover the nuggets that are buried in our text this morning. Let's start by reviewing the historical background of the passage that we just heard.

**[Slide 5]**     *The historical background*

The year is 597 BC. The place is Jerusalem, in the southern kingdom of Judah—all that is left of the nation of Israel after the conquest of the northern kingdom by Assyria more than a century earlier. Jeremiah is a prophet—the only voice that is speaking for God among all the people. There are others who claim to be speaking for God, but they have proven to be false prophets who are only interested in securing a cushy living by feeding the egos of the king and the nobles with phony promises of peace and prosperity based on a religious delusion.

That delusion was the notion that God would ignore his people's sins and would not judge the city because Jerusalem was the place where the temple stood. That monumental structure, built by Solomon, which was one of the wonders of the ancient world, housed the presence of the Lord. So the false prophets claimed that God would not allow the idolatrous Babylonian armies to destroy his glorious temple, but would protect it and turn them away.

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The problem was that the temple was not only housing the presence of the Lord. It was also housing various shrines and idols to other gods. And there were places of worship for numerous other gods throughout the land. The people had abandoned the covenant that made them God's people, that made them special. They had abandoned biblical morality; they had failed to maintain a just society, and had persisted in stubbornly refusing to listen to God's call to return to him.

Jeremiah put it quite bluntly:

*"My people have committed two evils:*

*they have forsaken me,*

*the fountain of living waters,*

*and hewed out cisterns for themselves,*

*broken cisterns that can hold no water."* (Jeremiah 2:13, ESV)

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Jeremiah had been prophesying for years, calling the people to repent from their idolatry, injustice, and immorality, and warning of judgment to come. He repeatedly told the people that the Babylonians would come, destroy the city, and take the nation captive into exile.

Now his words have come true. Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian ruler, has defeated Judah, plundered the riches from the temple, and taken the king and the nobles into exile. They are the second group he has removed from Jerusalem, about 3,000 people in total. In Babylon, the court prophets, who predicted that God would not allow the Babylonians to enter the city, are telling the king and the nobles that they will not be here long. God would quickly restore them to their land. Jeremiah, in Jerusalem, hears about these prophets and their lying prophecies. He responds with this letter, countering the foolishness of the court prophets with a true word from God.

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Jeremiah's letter shows us his character, as well as the genuineness of his prophetic calling. He took no pleasure in bringing his words of judgment to the nation. Jeremiah had faithfully prayed for the people, weeping over their sins and

over the coming judgment, lamenting the devastation that his people would experience. Instead of saying to the king and the rest of the exiles, “*I told you so,*” Jeremiah encourages them that God would continue to care for them, despite their sins, and would bring them back to the land, but only after they have served a seventy-year sentence in exile.

[Slide 9] *The promise of God’s providential care*

Verse 11 is often quoted, memorized, and preached on—for very good reasons. *For I know the plans I have for you,*” declares the Lord, “*plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*” This promise of God’s providential care is one of the most encouraging and uplifting promises in the Bible. It’s a great reminder that God is always working to secure our good, to give us hope.

It’s even more significant when we consider the context. This promise doesn’t come as an encouragement for the nation’s faithfulness. It comes after they have been judged severely for their idolatry and sins, after they’ve suffered great judgment. It comes at a time when they are just starting the sentence for their punishment, which will last for seventy years. Nevertheless, God says that he is promising good that will come to them, and instructs them how to live so that they can enjoy prosperity even while they are reaping the consequences of their sin. That’s the God we serve—even when we’re guilty, when we need to be disciplined or judged, he is quick to offer mercy, and to find a way to bring us good in the end.

[Slide 10] *The heart of the matter*

But I want to focus today on a different part of the letter. I want us to look at the verses that follow verse 11—verses 12-14: *Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,*” declares the Lord, “*and will bring you back from captivity.*”

These verses are absolutely key—they explain the conditions that the people will need to meet in order to receive the promise that God has made to them and see its blessings realized. The hope and the future that God is promising them comes only when they realize their need to turn back to the Lord, to seek him with all their heart.

“*You will seek me,*” God says. And note what he equates this with: calling on him, and coming and praying to him.

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“Calling on the Lord” is something we’ve looked at before, but it bears repeating. To “call on the Lord” is to position myself as someone who is actively identifying with God. It is to announce my allegiance to him, to recognize him as my God, to whom I have pledged my life and to whom I give my undivided worship. For the Jews in exile, it meant turning away from the idols and false gods they had worshiped in Jerusalem, as well as from those that were worshiped in Babylon, where they had been taken captive. For us today, it means turning away from living as our own god, surrendering to him instead, and living by his word instead of by our own inclinations and ideas.

“Coming and praying” means more than simply asking God for stuff. It implies worship, devotion, an acknowledgment of God’s lordship and of my dependence upon him. It implies an active faith, not a passive indifference; a conscious and personal involvement with God, not a passing recognition that he is there, somewhere; engagement with a specific person (the living God!), not a generic religiosity or undefined spirituality.

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Seeking God doesn’t mean living like a monk in a cloistered community, going without sleep, eating poorly, and spending your day going to prayer meetings. Now, there are some people who are called to such a life, who give themselves to worship and prayer and intercession, who live just such a life of separation and solitude. But that’s not the norm; more importantly, that’s not necessary in order to do what the Bible says we’re to do, namely, to seek God.

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Notice what God tells the exiles in this letter from Jeremiah. He tells them to do all the normal stuff of life: build homes and plant gardens; harvest your crops and eat them. You’re going to be there a long time, he says. Put down some roots. Build houses, not temporary shelters. Plant gardens—and not just a couple of tomato plants. Marry, and have children. Find spouses for your children, so they can have children. Raise children. Get to know your grandchildren.

God tells them to look beyond their immediate family. He says, get involved in your city, your community. Do whatever you can to bring good to that place, to cause it to flourish. That requires involvement with other people—including these pagan idolatrous Babylonians who are living around them.

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This is normal life! God is telling the exiles, I want you to seek for me, not in some isolated religious ghetto, but in the midst of the places I have sent you. Seeking God doesn’t require you to abandon the world around you, but to live as

God's people in the midst of that world, to be his ambassadors to a world that completely misunderstands who he is and what he wants.

So God isn't saying that he wants us to seek him *instead of* doing all the normal stuff of life. He wants us to seek him *while* we're actively engaged in the normal stuff of life. And he isn't saying that the two things are the same thing—that is, that seeking him is simply living a good life. No, think again of the historical context in Jeremiah's time.

The people are in exile because they've abandoned God's covenant and lived like the idolatrous peoples around them, forcing God's judgment upon them. Jeremiah writes this letter because "seeking God" means, returning to allegiance to God. It means returning to the covenant and living according to what God commanded. It means listening to the true words of God instead of listening to the phony prophets who tell me what I want to hear and promise me that everything will always go well for me, who fail to call me to a life of conformity to the ways and will of God.

"Seeking God" means maintaining your awareness of God and of being his people in the everyday stuff, in your home, in your business, at work, at school, at play, so that you live as his people even among your captors. You're not just going along with the flow like everyone else. Like Abraham, you're living in a land that God has brought you to, but you're looking for the city that is beyond this world, whose builder and maker is God, the eternal city, the Celestial City of *Pilgrim's Progress*. In the wonderful words of Os Guinness, "*You're living for an audience of One.*"

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The apostle Peter said something about this in his letter to the Gentile churches living in the northern part of what is now known as Turkey.

*9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

*11 Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. 12 Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. (1 Peter 2:9-12, ESV)*

Because you are God's people, Peter says to these young believers, you need to live like God's people all day, every day. I think of what a friend of mine once said about one of his mentors: "*He decided to live as a Christian, on purpose.*" Peter says, you're God's people, living as aliens in this world, so keep your conduct honorable. Don't live for your lusts and the desires of the world around you.

"Seeking God" means I've got a different code, a different lifestyle, a different set of values that governs my life. I'm living by principles, not driven by my appetites, or my cravings, or my fears, or my anxieties. I'm not living to please the crowds or the neighbors or my parents or my boss. I'm living for an audience of One. I'm seeking him, not fame or fortune or pleasure or comfort. I'm living as one of God's people; I belong to a different kingdom and I measure everything by the standards of that kingdom instead of by the standards of the advertisers or the politicians or by what "they" say I ought to be doing or thinking or wanting.

**[Slide 16]** *The starting point*

Seeking God, like almost everything else in the life of a Christian, starts with repentance. In fact, having a heart of repentance is one of the most important keys for a fruitful spiritual life. I'm not talking about constant introspection; not endless self-examination trying to identify some piddling little sins that you imagine are the cause of your problems and unrest (à la Luther). But constantly listening to the word of God and the voice of the Spirit: *Are you speaking to me, Lord? I am aware of my frailties, my tendencies, my stubborn proclivities; show me where I need to change. Is there something specific you want to correct in me? How can I be more like you?*

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So let's review:

God calls us to seek him—meaning that we repent from whatever is in our life that is contrary to his ways, that we come and pray to him. We give him our allegiance, our worship, and live on purpose as his people. We are actively involved with the living God, taking care of the ordinary stuff of life in an extraordinary way, because we're living in conformity with God's ways and will.

Now—don't miss the final point. This is really important.

Centuries before Jeremiah's day, Moses stood before the people of Israel as they were preparing to enter the promised land. He rehearsed their history and then warned them not to forsake the Lord. Listen to his words from Deuteronomy 4:25-31 (NIV):



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*25 After you have had children and grandchildren and have lived in the land a long time—if you then become corrupt and make any kind of idol, doing evil in the eyes of the Lord your God and arousing his anger, 26 I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you this day that you will quickly perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess. You will not live there long but will certainly be destroyed. 27 The Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and only a few of you will survive among the nations to which the Lord will drive you. 28 There you will worship man-made gods of wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or eat or smell. 29 But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul. 30 When you are in distress and all these things have happened to you, then in later days you will return to the Lord your God and obey him. 31 For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your ancestors, which he confirmed to them by oath.*

Jeremiah (probably intentionally) echoes these same words in his letter to the exiles: *“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”* This is what we really need to hear: *God promises that you will find him when you seek for him.*

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When we were kids playing “hide and seek” in the yard with the neighbor kids, I was pretty good at hiding. I could find places to hide where the rest of the kids couldn’t find me at all. So they just quit looking after a while.

You may feel like that sometimes. Like God is hiding from you, making it difficult for you to find him. So you’ve stopped trying; you’ve quit looking for him. But listen to me, please—God is not playing “hide and seek” with you. He’s not trying to prevent you from finding him. Yes, there is some seeking involved; but he is far more interested in you finding him than you are in looking for him. So if you’re not finding God, it’s not because he is blinding your eyes to keep you in the dark. Either you’re looking in the wrong places, or looking for the wrong things. He might be leading you down a path where you can’t see him right now, but it’s a path that leads you to himself. Because he’s eager to be found.

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But finding God takes faith. The author of the letter to the Hebrews says this:

*And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (Hebrews 11:6)*

You can't find God without faith, because you'll misinterpret the signs and the evidence he leaves for you. And you can't have genuine faith without repentance, because that's like trying to walk in opposite directions at the same time. But if you begin with a repentant heart, and honestly seek to know God, to give yourself to him, to learn what he wants from you and how to live as his people, you have his promise that you will find him, you will find his ways, find his will. Take the journey that the wise men, the magi, took—go and seek for the child born to be the king of Israel, the divine Son of God. “*Seek and you will find,*” is what God says. Settle that in your heart—that God is not trying to hide from you, but is looking to show himself to you, if you'll seek him with all your heart.

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*Transition to communion*

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