

By now many of you have seen the Tim Whyatt cartoon that shows a pair of door-to-door evangelists asking a woman, "Have you found Jesus?" And he's hiding behind the curtains in her living room. Because of the angle the cartoon is drawn from, the viewer can see the edge of his body, but from the evangelists' point of view, Jesus is blocked by the curtains and by the woman's open front door.

When Jesus was an itinerant rabbi, he was usually easy to find. The Gospel writers depict him often drawing crowds, sometimes friendly, sometimes hostile. This period is even called his "public ministry." Today's reading from John comes at the very end of that period, and with a remarkable twist.

Usually Jesus is said or implied to be interacting with his fellow Jews, but today those who are seeking him out are Greeks. In those days, not all Greeks worshipped the Greek gods; some believed in the God of Israel, and sought to learn about God from Jewish authorities, and even attend synagogue services, without formally converting to Judaism. So while Saint John doesn't say exactly who these Greeks were or what they wanted, we can make a good guess.

Another unusual feature of this story is that John leaves it ambiguous as to whether Jesus actually met with the Greeks who were seeking him. When Philip and Andrew relay their inquiry to Jesus, it says, "Jesus answered them," but it's unclear if he's speaking to the whole crowd, or the Greeks, or only to Philip and Andrew. Although elsewhere Jesus describes his ministry as being directed primarily to his fellow Jews, here Jesus's answer sure sounds like Greeks can be included in his ministry, particularly when he says, "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor." That certainly reinforces my long-held belief that choices define people more than lineages or affiliations do.

On another level, the ambiguity of what Jesus says, and to whom he says it, creates a feeling of alienation, which is reinforced when a voice from heaven speaks, but to the crowd it sounds like thunder. And oddly, Jesus says that the voice has come for their sake, not for his. We might like to imagine God, and especially Jesus, as always being available to us, but even during the period of his public ministry, Jesus was known to withdraw from the public eye, spending time with just his disciples, or with a single family, or in the intense solitude of the desert. So the answer to the old question, "If God feels far away, guess who moved?" isn't as simple as people think.

It is true that we can alienate ourselves from God. The worst way we can do this, of course, is by sinning, and particularly, by refusing to turn back to God and accept the forgiveness that God is always ready, joyfully, to provide us. As today's collect puts it, God will grant us grace to love God's commands and to desire what God promises, and in this way we will find true joys. God will put our sins away, since God knows we are not equal to the task.

But God can feel far away for other reasons. Sometimes we push ourselves too

hard, and even though we may do it for the best of reasons, too hard is too hard. Being limited creatures, we are susceptible not only to physical fatigue, but also self-imposed guilt from impossibly high standards. My heart goes out to parents who run themselves ragged trying to give their children the absolute best, but Jesus was “born in a barn” and he turned out OK.

One of my seminary professors pointed out, in a lesson on the end times, that Jesus does not have a split personality. That is, when Jesus returns, he won't have turned into a ruthless punisher of sin; he will be exactly the same giver of grace and love that he has always been. But that raises another question. If Jesus would take time to withdraw from other people during his public ministry, does he ever withdraw from us? We know he never stops loving us, but we also know that sometimes, even the most saintly of people struggle to find him.

Even the people who are actually qualified to teach about spiritual darkness tend to start by saying that it is a mysterious phenomenon. I'm not a spiritual director, but I'll say it's more than mysterious. The sense that God is far away is frustrating, and scary, and sad. And sometimes we don't know why it happens, or how, and we never know when God will be back, or what will happen then.

We do know, or rather, I have been taught, that periods of spiritual darkness tend to come as part of a life of faith, after a person has already made good progress in cultivating and exploring their spiritual life. And furthermore, people who have endured these periods, or been companions to those who are enduring them, have said that when they do end, it's not a return to business as usual, but rather the darkness gives way to a brighter, deeper, more profound relationship with God. Maybe that's why God allows the faithful to experience periods of spiritual darkness.

Even for those of us who are not in any acute spiritual struggle, now, at the end of Lent, and especially once we get into Holy Week, our spiritual journey may feel like it is becoming more intense. We can meet the challenge with resignation, or with renewed vigor. As Sean Connery says in “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade,” “Why are you sitting there resting when we're so near the end?”

What we do know for sure is what God promised Jeremiah: “they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest... for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.” And Jesus tells us too, “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” Take heart, for we will not always be alone. Nothing can overcome God's desire to be with us. Even if we can't find Jesus in a particular moment, Jesus finds us all in the end, and he will greet us with great joy.