

'Looking For God'

A sermon delivered in

**Eastminster United Church
Belleville, Ontario**

on

Sunday, January 29, 2012 - 9am Service Only

by

The Rev. Ed Bentley

Lesson:

Luke 9:37-45

Text:

Luke 9:43

Luke 9:43 -

**“(When they saw that Jesus had healed the boy)
all were astounded at the greatness of God.”**

Imagine that a friend or co-worker who is looking for God asks you to write a reference for the Saviour you claim to know and worship. Simone Panday has done just that:

Dear Sir

Re: Reference in support of Application for position of 'Saviour'

Thank you for your letter requesting a personal reference for Jesus of Nazareth in support of His application to join you in the position of 'Saviour' in your life. I am delighted to be in a position to give Him my highest recommendation.

I have known Jesus for the past sixteen years and have found Him to be an honest, reliable and trustworthy person. His dual qualifications as 'Son of Man' and 'Son of God' place Him in a unique and, I believe, more than adequate position to fulfill all the necessary requirements for the position in question. In addition, His life--revealing as it does the capability to perform miracles, teach with authority and to forgive sins--is further evidence of His suitability for the role of Saviour. Furthermore, I urge you to consider perhaps the most outstanding of His achievements - that He rose from the dead - precisely to bring about our salvation. This claim is supported by historical evaluation and by numerous witnesses and is perhaps the most conclusive proof of His power and suitability for the position of Saviour in your life.

His reputation as an unrivalled leader in His field is well deserved and His ability should not be underestimated. His undeniable charisma and personal qualities of understanding, compassion, gentleness, patience and love inspire the fiercest loyalty in His work colleagues and friends. He has an uncompromising devotion to furthering the individual personal development of others. He is also an activist in society promoting with great persuasive prowess and wisdom such concepts as justice, tolerance and the highest moral standards. To this date I have never known Him to be wrong. This can make Him rather irritating to work with at times, especially for people with strong personalities or conflicting beliefs.

One word of caution with regard to the appointment in question, if Jesus takes up this position with you, He will almost certainly change your life. He will undoubtedly challenge your accepted views on a variety of issues and will also cause you to grow and develop in new, exciting, but sometimes painful, ways.

These changes are not necessarily quantifiable or in keeping with today's social perceptions. Whilst all of Jesus' work is of a voluntary nature and attracts no salary, the process of change in your life can be very difficult and I advise you to count the cost before employing Him. However, I can reassure you that the final results are always good and beneficial both to yourself and others.

I feel sure that the recruitment of Jesus will bring you significant aid in your proposed venture and will certainly guarantee its eventual success. One final word, if you do decide to offer Jesus the position of 'Saviour' in your life, He will also be remaining in that post in the same position here in mine and in the lives of millions of other people around the world!

**Yours faithfully
Anne Witness¹**

Those of us who know how it feels to look for God, or to help others look for God, only wish it were that easy. If only it was as easy as reading or writing a letter of reference for Jesus. But we know it's not. It can't be that easy or else this world would be a very different place, filled with people who have found God and been transformed accordingly. The truth is, all the testimony that has ever been given, every reference that could be written by millions of believers, is not sufficient to convince anyone unless she or he first knows where to look for God.

That story from Luke's gospel ends where we want to be: **"Everyone was astounded at the greatness of God"** - but they had an enormous advantage over us: they saw God in the flesh. Jesus and His disciples came down from the mountain and met them on the road where they were walking. They didn't have to look for God because Jesus came to them. They saw God's miraculous power to heal with their own eyes. When Jesus rebuked the evil spirit, the boy was immediately and completely healed. If only we were shown a miracle or two, we also would see the greatness of God. Here is what is really needed by those who are looking for God: the opportunity to see God in the flesh and a miracle or two, or three.

One of my favourite mystery writers is Erle Stanley Gardner, the creator of Perry Mason. The old television show was too formulaic to do justice to the original stories whose plots and characters were much more complex than what we saw on TV. Gardner was a lawyer himself. Almost sixty years ago he wrote an article for *Vogue* magazine in which he described how one of his partners had the remarkable ability to detect critical information in cross-examination simply by listening to the voice of the witness. That information went unnoticed by everyone else in the courtroom. When they were in court together, the partner made a point of not looking at the witnesses during their testimony. Instead, he kept his eyes fixed on a piece of paper. Sometimes he wrote down what they said in shorthand, sometimes he just doodled, but always he listened intently to the voice. Every now and then the partner elbowed Gardner to indicate that the witness was either lying or trying to hide something.

In the article, Gardner admitted that he was never able to detect those subtle changes in tone or tempo but his partner could spot them with startling accuracy.²

The crowd that day in Palestine may have been able to see Jesus in the flesh but we have the Master's own promise that God is with us every moment of every day that we live, in the turmoil of the busiest chaos, in the loneliness of the quietest darkness, in the celebration of the best happiness, in the desolation of the worst happenstance. The lawyer sitting beside Erle Stanley Gardner knew there was some element of 'wickedness' in every testimony and, by listening for it, he heard it. If we believe there is some goodness, something of God, in every circumstance, then it is up to us to 'listen' for it so we can hear the goodness of God. It's our job to watch for it so we can see the goodness of God.

Remember, no one else in those courtrooms heard the evidence hidden in the voices of the witnesses, not because it was not there but because they were not listening hard enough. When we are overwhelmed by what feels like the absence of God, it's not necessarily because God is not with us but because we are not listening hard enough, or looking closely enough.

Partway through her pregnancy, Susan Williamson was told that her baby girl had spina bifida, a spinal disorder that can damage the brain and kidneys and which often makes walking difficult. In this case, tests indicated that the baby was already showing signs of brain abnormalities. Susan and her husband, Jason, were told of a new prenatal surgical procedure that had been developed by doctors at the Vanderbilt University Medical Centre. There was a possibility that the operation could help their baby, but also the very real risk that the consequences for the child would be even worse. They decided to go for it.

Before authorizing the surgery, officials at the hospital required parents to be screened for their physical and emotional fitness to deal with the possible negative outcome, including an interview with the university's ethicists. The Williamsons were asked a series of questions, including these: ***"Do you believe in God?"*** and ***"What kind of benevolent God would do this to you?"***

Their answers met the required standard, the operation was permitted and it was a wonderful success. Ten weeks later, Anna Williamson was born. Other than a club foot, she is a normal, healthy, happy little girl with the prospect of a full life before her.³

The task of the ethicists was to assess the parents' ability to cope with what could have been a very different outcome. They wanted to predict how the Williamsons would handle the challenges of raising a child with significant disabilities. It would have been good to know they believed in God, but that was not enough. Many believers, when faced with tragedy, become convinced of the absence of God and are therefore left to struggle without the benefit of faith. That's why they asked the second question, the hard question: ***"What kind of benevolent God would do this to you?"*** The ethicists believed that the answer to that question would be a good indicator of the parents' ability to claim the presence of God, and receive the help of God, if the worst should happen.

Even if the worst should happen, God is with us. When we are overwhelmed by what feels like the absence of God, it may not be because God is not with us but because we are not listening hard enough, or looking closely enough.

That day in Palestine, the crowd had another advantage in their search for God. Jesus gave them a miracle. He healed the child by driving out the evil spirit that was destroying him. If God would give us such a miracle, then surely our search for God would be over!

The truth is, we human beings have been given an extraordinary, some would say miraculous, capacity to get what we want, to see what we want to see, to become what we set out to become. The doctors who helped Anna Williamson learned how to operate on a child before it is even born. Jesus gave quite a show to the folks in Palestine when He freed the boy of the spirit that was hurting him, but is a wonder of medical science any less a miracle? And don't we have something even better still? Have we not been given the ability to rebuke the destructive forces of evil in our own day? Have we not been given the ability, by the grace of God in Jesus Christ our Lord, to accomplish our own miracles for good?

Thomas Barnardo was born in 1845 to a poor family in Ireland and was a very ordinary child whose most outstanding quality was the trouble he made at school. He made his way to London where he studied for a degree in medicine. That's when he began to work with illiterate children in an organization called Ragged School. One day, a child he met in the street offered to take him to where he could find many more children he could help. The little boy led Thomas to a rooftop where eleven homeless boys spent their nights. Barnardo decided there and then that he would dedicate himself to finding shelter for the destitute children of London. Within days he had found temporary homes for sixteen boys.

When he was given the opportunity to speak at a missionary conference, Barnardo described the rooftops, alleyways and other haunts which were filled with homeless children. While many in the audience refused to believe it, at least one was willing to listen. He was the Earl of Shaftesbury and asked Thomas to take him to where he could see for himself. At their first stop, an outdoor market near the river, they found seventy-three homeless youth. The Earl immediately became a supporter of Barnardo's work.

To raise money, Barnardo sold Bibles on the streets, in the shops and taverns of the city. One day in a bar, he was attacked by one of the customers who broke two of his ribs. When Barnardo refused to press charges, word of his generosity caused many others to become aware of his work.

Thomas Barnardo opened his first children's home in 1870. He and a colleague took in boys, fed them, clothed them, educated them. After learning that a boy he had been forced to turn away had died of exposure, he immediately placed a sign outside the home: 'No Destitute Child Ever Refused Admission'.

As he spent his nights out in the streets looking for homeless children, Barnardo became aware of the negative influence of an establishment called The Edinburgh Castle Gin Palace and Music Hall. In the language of Luke's gospel, he decided to rebuke that evil spirit. Thomas set up a tent nearby and began preaching about the goodness of God and the dangers of drunkenness. So many people were drawn to his ministry that the Hall was finally forced to close. Thomas wanted to buy the place but didn't have the 4000 pound asking price. He signed the contract anyway and two weeks later, just minutes before the deadline, he received the last of the necessary funds. The former tavern was transformed into the Coffee Palace where 3000 people came to worship every Sunday. With the increased donations, Thomas was able to build a housing complex for homeless girls. For the rest of his life he continued to open new facilities staffed by loving people who gave children what they would not otherwise have known: safe homes, positive guidance, education and religious instruction.

By the time of his death, Barnardo's homes had helped more than 60,000 children. There is a bronze memorial at his grave on which are carved these words:

'I hope to die as I have lived, in the humble but assured faith of Jesus Christ as my Saviour, my Master and my King.'¹⁴

Thomas Barnardo knew where to find God. He looked to the streets of London, into the faces of children for whom he could rebuke the destructive forces of evil. He found God in the good which he, by the grace of God, was inspired and enabled to accomplish.

It is no different for us. God is waiting to be found in the good that we can do in Jesus' name.

Amen.

1. © Simone Panday. Permission is granted to share with others, but not for commercial purposes.
2. Erle Stanley Gardner, 'How to Know You're Transparent When You'd Like to Be Opaque', *Vogue*, 1956/07
3. Sarah Aver, 'A Chance for Anna', *The News and Observer*, reprinted in *Reader's Digest*, 2003/07
4. J.D. Douglas, 'Thomas J. Barnardo - The father of Nobody's Children', *Decision*, 1995/10