

Sermon March 3, 2024

Where Do We Find God?

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In the early days of the current war, the pastor of the church in Bethlehem decided not to hold Christmas Eve services to stand in solidarity with the congregations' Palestinian siblings. Instead there was a simple nativity display in front of the church of baby Jesus lying in the rubble. A stark reminder of horrendous conditions, all around the region.

Sometimes God is found in the most unexpected places.

We are not a people at war and we live in relative comfort. But the question remains.

Where do you look for a glimpse of God's presence in our lives... in our world?

Ask

People look for God in different places. Some go out into nature – seeing God's handiwork in the flowers and the trees. Some climb to the mountaintop, standing in that place where the earth touches the heavens. Others come to places just like this.

Where do you find God?

Scripture is filled with stories of people seeking the presence of God.

The early Israelites, wandering in the wilderness, didn't know how to find God. They had lived as slaves for 200 years in a foreign land. They had forgotten those ancient promises given to Noah, Abraham and Sarah. Like Pharaoh, they had forgotten how Joseph saved all the people and brought his family to Egypt. They had forgotten who God is and how much God loved them. And they had forgotten how to live with one another, without a master to order them around.

And, so Moses climbed to the mountaintop... that place where earth meets the heavens. And there, he had an experience that most people never have. He stood face to face with God, the one who created the heavens and the earth, and God gave him a new covenant. Simple rules that tell us how to show our love of God and one another. A covenant we call the Ten Commandments.

In the covenantal love of God and neighbor, the people find God in their midst.

And this covenant endured. The people treasured them. Carried them safely out of the Wilderness, through the Jordan River and into the Promised Land. They protected the covenant in the Ark and Solomon built a Temple to house them.

If you asked those ancient Israelites, "where do you find God?" the answer would be easy. You find God in the Temple... when you stand in the Holy Temple, you are standing in the presence of God!

A lot happened in the time between the Wilderness and Jesus. The Temple was destroyed... the people lived in Exile... the people returned... the Temple was rebuilt... the Roman Empire conquered them...

And still the people were faced with that eternal question: Where do we find God?

For people in Jesus' time, the answer was the same. Tradition held that you were standing in the presence of God whenever you entered the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

Each year, at Passover, the city swelled with pilgrims who had come to bring sacrifices to the Temple... to experience God's sacred presence. Everyone was expected to come to the Holy City at least once in their lives. Many traveled long distances and could not bring their sacrifices with them. So, over time, the courtyard in the Temple became more of a marketplace where pilgrims could buy what they needed to honor God.

And today we hear of the time that Jesus entered the marketplace, and he is furious. Here, in this place where are seeking a glimpse of the sacred, these vendors and moneychangers are taking advantage of pilgrims. They are profiting from their faith and their vulnerability. He can't believe his eyes and he reacts in a way that the disciples have rarely seen. "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace," he bellows. He overturns the tables, he grabs a whip, and he drives all the vendors out of the marketplace.

All of the gospels tell some version of this story. Matthew, Mark and Luke place this event near the end of Jesus' ministry, in the days between Palm Sunday and Good Friday. In their versions, you can almost see the shadow of the cross cast over the Temple. But John's version is different. The story we heard today happens in the beginning of Jesus ministry, right after the wedding in Cana. In that marketplace, Jesus makes his first public declarations.

When Jesus drives the marketeers out, he is also ushering in his ministry. From the very beginning, Jesus challenges the traditions and the understanding of who God is and where God is present. As the tables are overturned, so is the people's view of the world. The world is turned upside down and Jesus begins the journey of showing us where we always find God – in Jesus Christ himself.

John finds God when he pulls Jesus down into the Jordan River.

The Samaritan woman finds God when she meets Jesus at the well and he offers her the Living Water.

Thomas finds God when he touches Jesus' wounds.

Paul finds God when he is blinded by the light

Martin Luther found God on the steps of a church in Wittenburg, Germany and Martin Luther King found God on the mountaintop.

Where do you find God? Where does God come to you and remind you of how loved you are... how priceless your life is...? God can come to you on a city street or in a hospital room. God comes to the food pantry lines and the

refugee camps. God comes to a small child in Gaza and a dying dissident in Siberia. God comes to us in our times of grief and in our times of celebration. We find God wherever someone needs a glimpse of God's sacred love. God comes to you and to you and to me, when we need it most.

Where do we find God? We find God in the places that reflect God's greatest commandment of all: To love God with our whole being and to love one another. It is in the Love that we find God.