

<1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23:1-6; John 9:1-16>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

Where did you see God this week?

One of my favorite movies is the rom-com "Elizabethtown," starring Orlando Bloom and Kirsten Dunst, among others. I could go into a lot of details about the storyline - like the fact that Orlando plays the estranged firstborn son of a rural Kentucky family who has gone on to creative marketing and sales success, but now has to return home to attend to his father's unexpected death, and how he meets a stewardess on the flight, played by Kirsten Dunst, who becomes an unexpected but central part of his life - but I won't. Or I could talk about the themes the movie addresses, topics such as family dynamics, of nature & nurture and the place one has grown up, and of expectations versus new opportunity and reality, but I won't go into those right now, either. But there is one dynamic from this movie which I think is beneficial to us this morning in regards to both our Scripture readings and our continued journey through Lent, and that is the practice of "capturing moments." Simply put, it is the idea of taking a mental picture of a moment and storing it in your mind, or better, in your heart, and doing that instead of taking a physical photo that might be forgotten.

It's a little hokey, but it offers us an important window into life, because such a practice helps us to be more present and mindful in the moments of our lives. And when practiced in our lives of faith, such a practice potentially allows us to better answer the question, "where did you see God this week?" But I can't take credit for the idea of engaging such a question.

I have a colleague, Stephanie, who was serving a smaller, more rural congregation. Every Sunday in worship with this group of about 35 people, the time for Prayers of the People became a regular litany of ailments and difficult times for the people gathered in worship, a time which stretched longer and longer each week. And I am not implying that we should not share our struggles with the community that uplifts us, or with the God who sustains us. But as weeks went by, people started using this time as, as Stephanie began to call it, a "G & G session" - "gossip" and "gripe." There were some Sundays when asking for the concerns of the church took more time than the sermon itself. And Stephanie realized something: everything being mentioned was a negative thing. It was draining on Stephanie's spirit, and more than that, it was draining on everyone else's spirits, as well; people rarely walked out of worship feeling fed, seen, nurtured and uplifted. If anything, they felt more weighed down.

So, inspired by a shared appreciation of "Elizabethtown," and talking about it one day, Stephanie had the idea to start taking time each Sunday morning to ask, earnestly and with expectation of being answered, "where did you see God this week?" And as time went on, the people engaged the question more regularly. As they did so, they found that the concerns of the people did not necessarily lessen, but the oppressive weight of

the congregation was less. Focusing attention on God's presence and activity in the world helped to shift the perspective of the congregation in a faithful direction. Taking this cue from "Elizabethtown," Stephanie's focus on both being aware of God's presence and naming the occasions people were aware of God's presence deepened the faith of the people.

Where did you see God this week? It's less a question about idle observation and more so a question inviting deep awareness and presence, a reality which was needed in both our Scripture readings this morning in two very different, but very related situations.

Samuel can certainly hear God. As the prophet of God to the people of Israel, Samuel hears God's voice regularly and clearly, and even follows God's instructions, proclaiming God's commands. But now Samuel is grieved, as well; the king Samuel had raised up for the people, Saul, has gone astray and fallen out of favor with God, and now Samuel is going to anoint the next king. Except that Samuel doesn't know who that will be. But certainly, he has a mental image of what the king should look like, and what kind of character should be portrayed. And so, as Jesse of Bethlehem begins to bring his sons out for parade, Samuel looks upon each one and thinks, repeatedly, "surely [God's] anointed is now before the Lord."

And each time, Samuel was mistaken. Samuel could hear God, was listening to God, but was not seeing God. In both his own grief and clouded by his own expectations, Samuel was not able to see God, or more precisely in this instance, was not able to recognize God in what was being shown to him.

I ask only rhetorically, but how often have you been unable to recognize God due to grief, or anger, or hopeful expectation? I know I can name several instances of such occasions, when I have been unable - from my own perspective - to see God right before me, or have expected God to be something or someone else. In the season of Lent, it is appropriate to realize that our own vision sometimes clouds our recognition of the Divine.

Similarly, Jesus and his encounter with the man born blind becomes another situation in which we might ask, "where did you see God this week?" Though certainly the blind man, the one who literally receives his sight for the sake of God's glory, now sees God in Jesus quite clearly. He testifies as much, repeatedly; as John relates it, "the neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, 'is this not the man who used to sit and beg?'...He kept saying, 'I am he.'" And then, when asked who performed such a scandalous miracle on the sabbath, the man continued to say that it was due to the instruction and compassion of Jesus.

But the Pharisees are unable, even with such proof in front of them, to see and recognize God in their sight.

This miracle did not occur in the way they might have expected, or even condoned. Jesus healed on the sabbath, which was against the law in their minds. Jesus healed by

using his own spit to make mud, a very unclean gesture in a culture of religious purification. And so, despite repeated questionings of not only the man but also the man's parents, and then even Jesus himself, the Pharisees are unable to see God in their midst because what they do see does not line up with their expectations and understandings.

I love these chapters in John. Chapter Nine, in which the man is miraculously cured and the various interrogations take place leads directly into Jesus' discourse in response at the beginning of Chapter Ten, in which he declares that he has come to bring life to the world, and to bring it in abundance. The fullness of Jesus' ministry encapsulated in a statement: to bring forth life, and life abundant. If only we have ears to hear, and eyes to see.

Where have you seen God in this past week?

The season of Lent invites us, calls us, beckons and even drags us into the spiritual wilderness, and for some we find we want to resist. To push back. Why go into the wilderness? It is harsh and trying and barren, no? It can be. But one thing is also certain, something which I think we overlook all too frequently: going into the wilderness is the place one goes to see God. To find God. To encounter God. Lent is a season which invites us to do just this: to spiritually go and find God, to go and be found by God. Moses saw God in the burning bush. Elijah met God in the chariot of fire. Ezekiel, whom we will read about next week, met God in the Valley of Dry Bones. And Jesus found God when he himself went into the wilderness.

Where will you meet God? Where have you seen God in this past week? It's not a trick question; it's not a difficult one, either. And it's certainly not a rhetorical question. Rather, it is the question of our daily lives of faith? And the way in which we answer, the reality in which we recognize God and bear witness, will continue to shape and uplift not just our own lives but our church, our community, and even our world. I can't wait to hear more about where you've seen God, because whether or not you're aware of it, you have seen God. And we are all more blessed because of it. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*