

## “Finding God in Unexpected Places”

### Genesis 28: 10-17

As I have shared before-this Lenten theme really came about through a series of conversations, the first one occurring at our Elders' & Deacons' meeting back in November. At this meeting, we were sharing a little bit about our faith and were talking about Jesus. The question had been asked-if Jesus was around today, where would we find him? And I think almost everyone agreed that if Jesus was alive today, we would not find him in our churches but out in our community, somewhere really unexpected. And I also remember someone saying, “We certainly would not find Jesus in our churches today or any other expected place because Jesus would probably be turned off by our rules and regulations, our busy-ness, which has become the real business of the church.”

I have to tell you, when I heard that statement, my first reaction was Ouch! Is that how our church or for the matter really any church is seen as today? Just another organization that is busy? Are we as the church seen as just staying busy until Jesus comes back again?

Then as I really began to reflect on the statement about not finding Jesus in our churches, I thought that person is right! Even when Jesus was alive back then, people didn't find Jesus really in the Temple or synagogues except for a few

occasions. For the most part, Jesus really could be found out among the people, teaching and preaching. Jesus could even be found in a few unexpected places like the tables of tax collectors and roadsides, talking to beggars. Jesus was even found, not merely associating but really embracing as friends, a few unexpected people, people like prostitutes and people with diseases, all sorts of people who were pushed to the margins of society and told that they were not important, that they didn't matter.

So through that one conversation and others just like it, it really did begin to feel like God was calling us as a church to explore this notion of finding God in unexpected places and to really struggle with the notion of why we as modern day disciples are truly surprised when we find God in our lives, find God in such unexpected places, places like the checkout line at Kmart when we find the nativity on a pair of socks, a seemingly simple and funny experience but an experience that can bring peace and comfort. Or places like the airport when we are running to catch a flight and someone says I can see you are in a hurry, what can I do to help? Or places like museums that hold beautiful statues designed to capture the extraordinary elegance of the human body. All unexpected places.

So if that is really the case, why are we so surprised to when God keeps popping up in some of the most unexpected places of our lives? Why are we so surprised when God keeps using some of the most unexpected people to teach us

about faith? God has been doing that since the beginning of time! That's nothing new to God but it always seems like it is a new experience for us each and every time it happens.

That's why we will be exploring this notion of finding God in unexpected places and people along our Lenten journey this year and it is my hope that we will truly become aware of God's presence in our midst and realize what an awesome and holy gift this really is for us as people of God.

Just like it was for Jacob in our Scripture today. I invite you to turn to the story in your pew bibles. This Scripture contains our main bible verse that we will be using for Lent. And as we read this story, we will hear about an experience that happened to Jacob-an experience about finding God in an unexpected place along his journey, far away from home, lost and lonely and in need of grace at this point in his life the most. Hear these words:

(Read Scripture)

God sure does have a funny way of showing up in some unexpected places and in such an over the top production! Angels ascending, Angels, descending and then here comes God, talking with Jacob, like they are old friends, like there is nothing unusual about this experience, like God shows up in this fashion everyday to Jacob or anyone else for that matter.

And in response to such an amazing, crazy, experience, all Jacob can say is “Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place. Awesome. Wonderful. Holy”. Holy-that’s it. Holy-That’s the word that sums up this experience for Jacob. It captures this amazing life changing moment for Jacob. And it is the same word that we use when we have similar experiences in our own lives. Sometimes when words fail us because we know that we have had an experience with the presence of God in our midst, in that moment and in that place, sometimes all we can say is that the presence of the Lord is in this place and it is holy.

And we start thinking, if something like this holy experience really did happen for Jacob, then surely such an experience, such a life-changing experience happened in a beautiful and significant place but the funny thing about it all is that that was not the case. The whole experience, this holy experience with God for Jacob happened in a non descript place.

This place was just a stopping place for Jacob; somewhere he could rest and get his bearings. This place was just a means to an end. There was nothing extraordinary about this place. In fact it was ordinary, so ordinary the story doesn’t even give it name, so ordinary that the story doesn’t say anything distinctive about this place.

It certainly wasn’t a five star hotel known for its guest services nor was it a place where people would flock to to communicate with the Divine. This space

was not even on anyone's maps. There were no billboards or flashing lights that said, "Stay here and you will experience God." There was nothing in this place that would give any indication that it was holy or hold any life-changing moments. In fact, there was nothing in this place but a bunch of rocks!

But this ordinary, non-descript place became holy ground for Jacob and the experience that took place in that ordinary place changed his life—all through the transforming power of God, the power that can transform the ordinary into the sacred, the ordinary into the holy.

In that moment, in this nondescript place, Jacob's eyes were opened to the workings of God all around him. He realized that he was part of something much bigger than himself, that God had things in store for him that were beyond his limited human plans and schemes. In that moment, the ordinary became sacred, became holy all because Jacob's eyes were opened. and he realized that God had never left him, that God's grace was bursting into his life, that the holiness of God was shining all around him. In that moment, God had transformed the nondescript, the ordinary into the sacred into the holy.

Just like God does for us each of us each and every day of our lives. The good news is that God can and does transform the ordinary nondescript places of our lives into something special, something sacred, something holy. Something that constantly reminds us that our lives are filled with ways that we can and do

engage the Divine, ways to connect with the God in our midst. The good news is that God is everywhere and in every place if we would just open our eyes and really see. If we would just understand that God is not somewhere far away and remote but here, right here, in this moment. God is not in some past promises that has no meaning but here, right here in the present, filling our lives with grace and with love.

God is everywhere and in every place. We just need to open our eyes to the glory of the Kingdom that surrounds us.

the ironic thing about it all, about our great quest for meaning in life and search for God, is that we are the ones who say that we've found God in unexpected places while really it has been God who has been saying all along, "I've been here the whole time!" God's been saying, "I'm found in all places." God has just been waiting for us to open our hearts and our eyes and really realize this amazing gift that we have in our midst.

Maybe the thing we need to realize is that it is not that we find God in unexpected places but that we are in unexpected places with we finally become aware of the presence of God that was there all along!

God's been there all along, all we have to do is open our eyes and really see the holy in our midst.

That is what Jacob did. He was in this ordinary place and his eyes were opened to the presence of God all around him. Soon, this place became not just some ordinary nondescript place. This place became a place where he could connect with God, a place where Jacob could really hear God saying that God had been there all along, a place where the grace of God could enter in. The place that was just a stopping place for Jacob became a place where God was waiting for Jacob to wake up and realize that God was in his midst.

Just like Jacob, we need to understand that we are not the ones who will initiate the search for God. God initiated the search for us a long time ago. And as we look at our story today, we realize that this story is not about Jacob's quest for God. In fact, looking for God was the last thing Jacob was thinking about when he arrived in that ordinary sacred space. It wasn't even on his radar. All Jacob was focused on was not getting killed by his brother. All Jacob was focused on was fear!

It was God who first came to Jacob. It was God who first spoke to Jacob. It was God who first said, "I'm the God of your ancestors and I've been with you since the beginning of your journey." God was there all along. God was just waiting for Jacob to wake up and realize it!

And the same holds true for us today and all days. It is not that we first go looking for God, even when we look in unexpected places. It is that we are in

unexpected places when we realize that God is in our midst, when we realize that God has been there all along. God initiated the search for us a long time ago. God has been searching for us for a while. God has been looking for us since God first named us and claimed, since God first called us beloved. We are not the ones who will initiate the search for God. God first initiated the search for us. God has been and continues to look for ways to connect with us, to embrace us, to bring us home. All we had to do was open our eyes. All we have to do is really begin to understand that God lives in all the places that we have the courage to let God into our lives. God lives where we let God in our lives.

God is there in all places, the special and the ordinary. God is there in all the places that we have the courage to let God in our lives. God is just waiting for us to wake up and embrace this good news, this amazing, this wonderful, this holy life changing gift that is ours to claim if we have the courage to really embrace it.

That's why this theme is so perfect for Lent. We tend to think that Lent is the time when we will go searching for God but that is not the case. Really Lent is the time when we let go of our distractions and just be. Lent is the time when we quiet the noise and open ourselves up to the many ways God is already trying to talk to us, to connect with us. Lent is the time for us to begin seeing the transforming power of God-the power to transform the ordinary into the sacred, into the holy. The challenge comes for us during Lent, really the challenge comes

for us at all times as people of faith, is to really open our eyes and see, to experience and embrace where God is already in our lives. God is there, in expected and unexpected places. God is just waiting for us to wake up and realize it.

It is not that God is in unexpected places. It is that we are in unexpected places when we truly open our eyes and see, open our hearts and experience, open ourselves up and truly claim the gift of God's presence in all aspects of our lives.

The story of Jacob tells us that we don't initiate the search. God initiated that even before God knew us. And the good news is that God is still searching for us. All we have to do is open our eyes and make God visible, make God visible in our lives, make God visible for others, make God visible in others, all by becoming aware of the glory and beauty of God that surrounds in all the places of our lives.

God has been here all along, waiting for us to have the courage to embrace this amazing, this wonderful, this holy gift, this knowing that we are not alone on our journey through life. we just need to have the courage to wake up and realize it.

May we never again find ourselves surprised to discover God in the unexpected places of our lives. Amen.