

“God in hidden places”

- A couple of years ago, Gaius, when he was three and a half, got a new set of wheels
 - A Power wheels Jeep, to be specific, with a 12 volt battery and “fast” gear that can go up to 5 mph
 - That’s faster than I can easily walk, and it meant that if I have to catch up with him, I have to run. Fast.
 - And he loved it- it would go through grass, up hills, had a second seat for his imaginary friend, and even a place to haul sticks behind the seat
 - I even customized it by installing working head and tail lights, and a real car horn
 - And we would work on safety- like when a car comes, you have to pull over into the grass and stop
 - And you have to look both ways at intersections...you know the drill
 - But it didn’t come quickly for Gaius, and in this particular instance he had his Jeep in the fast gear, got ahead of us a bit
 - And could not hear us over the noise it made
 - He was headed right for an intersection, Katy and I were yelling to no effect
 - I’m going to chose to believe he couldn’t hear us, rather than wouldn’t hear us
 - I began to run to catch up to him, but there was that moment when I realized I was not going to get there in time
 - I was running, yelling, and watched helplessly as my son drove his jeep through the intersection never once looking up or stopping
 - I caught up with him just on the other side, and thank goodness nothing was coming, nothing happened
 - Because even though most drivers are watching, and are careful, not all are
 - And every bad scenario possible ran through my mind in that short amount of time as I watched helpless

- Gaius had no idea why I was so upset
- Now I bet almost every parent has this story, with perhaps the details changed, but still, you know the feeling
- And even if you haven't experienced this with young kids, everyone of us has felt the feeling of being helpless
- Of things happening which are out of our control, things that are hard, or terrifying
- And I know we have all found ourselves wondering, "where is God in all of this?"
- Where is God in the midst of the things I cannot change?
- I found it particularly helpful this week to hear that both Jesus and Paul shared in this common human experience
 - Of being powerless thanks to things out of their control
 - In our Gospel, Jesus feels it back where it all began, back in his hometown with the people he knew so well
 - Jesus has just come from the double healing we read about last week
 - The woman with the hemorrhages, and the synagogue leader with the very ill daughter
 - And right before that, two weeks ago Jesus calms the storm by simply speaking
 - And you might be tempted to think he is on a roll and ready to do some serious work for the Kingdom of God
 - And then he goes home... teaches in the synagogue there, and even though they are surprised by what they see, hear and have heard
 - They take offense at him- they are some how offended that Jesus is able to do all of these things
 - That Jesus has perhaps grown too big for his breeches, my grandmother would say- after all he was just a carpenter's son
 - We know his family, we know all we need to know about this Jesus.
 - And Mark writes that Jesus was amazed by their unbelief- I would guess that it would take a lot of unbelief to surprise Jesus
 - And he could do no deed of power there, except he healed a few sick people and cured them
 - This works as a good reminder for me that even though Jesus was God incarnate,
 - He was incarnate in the form of a human being just like us
 - And of course Jesus finds this moment in his hometown, where every knew him, and when his new disciples were watching

- A circumstance that was frustrated and no doubt produced that feeling of powerlessness
- For the author of Mark, it was this village's unbelief that stopped Jesus' work there
 - The lack of faith, perhaps- but I think we have to ask, what is this belief, what is faith they didn't have?
 - Because there is one thing it is not.
 - The one thing we must deconstruct right away is that belief, or faith, is somehow the fuel of miracles¹
 - Having faith, even a lot of it, does not produce miracles, or make hardships and troubles disappear
 - If you hear that in a sermon, turn off the TV
 - You don't have to be a priest long before you see all extremes on this one:
 - I've seen the miracle- the elderly woman, stroke victim, who woke up a week later like nothing happened.
 - And then a family of deep faith- faith that I admire- experience the worst.
 - As a priest you get to see it all
 - And quickly understand that the equation, if you will, the formula for miracles is much more complicated than God + faith = miracle.
 - I think it is much more like calculus can simple arithmetic
 - Instead, I've come to see faith and belief as the desire and ability to see God in the unexpected places
 - The vulnerable, unpredictable, and powerless places of our lives
 - Having faith is to trust that God is working within and around us even when things don't look like it.²
 - Here, Jesus' family and friends were unable to see what was right before them
 - They couldn't see the hidden divine because of their preconceived notions about Jesus and about God
 - They could not even entertain the possibility that God was working in Jesus in new and different ways

¹ *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year B After Pentecost 1*, Marion Soards, ed., (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 96

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- When it comes to other people, I know I have been guilty of this one- I have done the same thing as this village
- Of thinking that I know all I need to know about a person, and deciding that they have nothing else to offer
- I wonder how many amazing things God could do if we were able to see each other with fresh, forgiving eyes rather than holding onto the past we already know
- If we could trust that God was working out something new each time we encounter someone
- Whether we are meeting them for the first time, or seeing them again day after day
- Seeing God, finding God, believing that God is at work in people and circumstances that seem least likely
- EVEN GENERAL CONVENTION, AM I RIGHT??
 - GOD AT WORK IN THE MESSINESS OF HUMANITY
 - That's what I think faith and belief are really about.
- Later, Paul would also give us some insight in finding God in those hard to see places in our lives
 - This morning we read his letter to the church in Corinth, and Paul is writing in a very personal way
 - We get see Paul's understanding of faith, and just how deep it goes for him
 - For Paul, belief and faith are seeing God hidden in the midst of physical illness and difficulty
 - Paul speaks of his mysterious "thorn in his flesh"
 - I would love to know what that was! There has been much speculation.
 - But all we really know is that it caused Paul a lot of pain- it tested him
 - It was something he could not get over on his own, and he carried it with him.
 - Even Paul. The man who was struck blind by Jesus on the road to Damascus, and then healed by a Christian there
 - Who has founded countless churches, an apostle by faith alone without even meeting Jesus in the flesh
 - Paul, this pillar of faith, having experienced and done so much in the name of Jesus
 - Still carrying around this thorn in spite of his repeated prayer to have God take it away
 - Paul finally concludes that God can even work through this thorn

- Talk about faith as seeing God in places where we usually do not!
- It is in his own weakness that he finds God's grace to be enough
- He even becomes grateful, I think, for the lesson the thorn teaches- now that's faith
- As we go through the Gospel of Mark these last few weeks, it is easy to see God in the big and powerful moments
 - The huge stories from the Bible-
 - Noah and the ark, David and Goliath, Moses and Elijah
 - In Jesus, his miracles, and even what the disciples go on to accomplish
 - That's easy- what's hard is seeing God in hidden places, the hard places, when things do not always work like we expect
 - Believing, trusting, and having faith that no matter what comes our way, God can still use it
 - I like to think of it like this:
 - It's the big difference between believing things happening for a reason
 - And something bad happening without a good reason, and God working to make something good come from it.
 - I tend to believe the latter
 - Believing and having faith will not prevent hardships and challenges, the grief and sorrow- our readings say nothing if not that
 - They even happen for Jesus and Paul
 - But our good news is that no matter what comes: the powerlessness, the stuck relationships, the physical and emotional hardships and disasters
 - Even death itself no longer has hold on us
 - Faith is seeing God at work in spite of them, working to use them, recycling them
 - To take away their power to define us
 - Faith is knowing that no matter what happens, none of these things get to change who we are
 - That we get our value and our identity not from the things that happen to us, the things out of our control, or even the miracles
 - But in that we are children of God, and no thing can take that away
 - That's where we get our strength, faith, and even our gratitude
 - I know you already know it, but I remember my grandmother having a little plaque on her wall with the serenity prayer on it
 - And I think it's a great way to end a sermon like this one

- Reinhold Nieburh is its original author ³
- God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
- Courage to change the things I can,
- And wisdom to know the difference.

Amen.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serenity_Prayer