

Sermon: Proper 14A

Title: Unexpected Way and Unexpected Places

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord. Grace, mercy, and peace are yours from the triune God. Amen.

I have been thinking about faith recently. Thinking about faith and God and how God interacts in the world.

- What does it look like when God interacts in the world?
- Where do we see God present?
- How does God use us as God's hands and feet?
- How do we know when God is present?
- How does God show up in the world?

As is often the case with faith related questions, I do not have any concrete answers. Unfortunately. BUT I do know that God seems to show up when we least expect it, and often in the most *unassuming* ways possible. And although I have no answers, I do have PLENTY of questions!

From my experience and teachings, I have discovered that God has never been one to show up or act how we **expect** God to show up and act. The Bible is filled with examples of a God who shows up when God is *least* expected and in ways that we never seem to see coming. For example, look at Jesus' humble birth story. The long-awaited, long-prophesied Messiah entered the world as a **human baby**: fragile, vulnerable, dependent on those around him, in a cattle stall, filled with hay.

Then, Jesus had to grow up, as all of us do. He had to learn all the hard things, how to talk, how to walk, how to interact as a human (while also being fully God, but that is a sermon for another time). Jesus then gathered a ragtag group of followers who accompanied him as he taught and healed. Jesus spent all of his time with the least, the last, and the lost; those on the fringes of society that most of the world wanted to forget even existed. Jesus, the Messiah and Savior of the world, did not hang out with the powerful or the elite class. Jesus did not come to conquer and save the world using military force; instead, he came quietly, spreading the Good News of God's love, forgiveness, and grace.

The exact definition of **unexpected**.

Then during Holy Week, we get the finale of Jesus' unexpected and assuming foray into our world. Jesus entered Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, NOT a war steed. Jesus was put on a fake trial, instead of being the one to hold the trial. And finally, instead of overthrowing the

government or starting to wage a war, Jesus carried his own cross to the top of a hill, where he died for each and every one of us: past, present, and future. Jesus did what he always did: he loved everyone until the very end, **and then even more**. Jesus came into the world quietly, shared dinner with his friends quietly, and then left this world quietly. (Well, if you do not count the darkness, earthquake, or tearing of the temple shroud. Another sermon for another day.)

And then, because the story is not over (again, **unexpectedly**), Jesus rose from the grave, through the empty tomb. He walked as a gardener and met Mary in an unexpected place.

Jesus showed up in unexpected places throughout the pages of the Bible, and Jesus continues to show up in our world in unexpected places and unassuming ways. Two of our Bible readings this week share exactly that: our Gospel lesson from Matthew and then the first reading from Track 2 from the book of I Kings. These lessons, among many others, give credence to the idea that God shows up in unexpected places and in unexpected ways.

The Bible reading from I Kings, shows us the prophet Elijah, searching for God. Elijah has run away from the people he serves, the Israelites, because they threatened his life. It would be tough to be a prophet; your life was never truly safe. On Elijah's journey, he was nourished by an angel of the Lord, and then God spoke to Elijah asking him what he was doing. Elijah replied, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." (I Kings 19.10)

Elijah, God's prophet, was afraid, and did not know where to go. The Israelites had turned away from God...**again**. Elijah is trying to lead them, but the stubborn Israelites just will not listen. Elijah feels the only way to proceed is to run away, find a place where God will be, and listen for God's voice.

When Elijah gets to the mountain of God, he waits for God to pass by, to grace him with God's presence. Elijah **expects** to see God in the forceful wind, the shaking earthquake, or the blazing fire. All majestic, powerful experiences of nature, things that cannot be controlled. A place where one might expect to see Almighty God show up. However, because we believe in a God who shows up in unexpected and unassuming ways, God **does not** show up in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire.

Instead, God comes to Elijah in the *sheer silence*. And out of the deafening silence comes a voice, speaking to Elijah, instructing him what to do.

Elijah did not expect to find God in the silence, yet that is how God shows up. Elijah was then able to return to the Israelite people, once again carrying God's message.

God showed up for Elijah. God shows up for us. BUT sometimes just not how we expect it.

In our Gospel text for today, we are continuing our discourse through the Gospel of Matthew. We see the disciples get in a boat and set off for the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Meanwhile, Jesus goes off to pray, which he does often. Jesus had just performed the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, with a small amount of bread and fish.

The disciples were in the boat (think small fishing boat) when a storm comes up quickly on the lake. The disciples are far from land, and the wind was against them. You can imagine their fear.

All of a sudden, Jesus comes walking towards the disciples. **Walking.** Not in a boat, not swimming, walking upright on the water. The disciples, rightfully so, do not expect to see Jesus join them in this way, because the Gospel tells us their first response was to think a ghost was walking towards them. And again, they were rightfully afraid.

Jesus, the aforementioned ghost, arrives at the boat, in the middle of a storm, and reassures them of who is standing before the scared disciples. Jesus tells them who is walking in their midst, to attempt to calm their fears.

Peter, doing a very **Peter-like** thing, tells Jesus to command him to come to Jesus. Peter wants Jesus to take control of the situation, to prove who he is, to tell Peter what to do. But instead, Jesus does yet another unexpected thing and offers Peter an invitation. Jesus does not command Peter to do anything, because Jesus will always allow us to do our own thing (you know, freewill and all). Peter has to make his own decision. But what Jesus does do is **offer an invitation.**

God showed up in the middle of the storm because God will always show up. Sometimes, or rather oftentimes, God shows up how we **least** expect. And, more often than not, when Jesus shows up, an invitation is offered.

Peter takes Jesus up on his invitation. Peter steps out of the rocky boat into the wind tossed waves and walks toward Jesus. Peter gets distracted by the winds and waves (who wouldn't?) and starts to lose his footing, sinking beneath the water. Peter cries out to Jesus and immediately Jesus is there to offer a helping, stabilizing hand. Jesus is there **immediately.** Jesus WILL NOT let Peter sink, just as Jesus WILL NOT let us sink underneath whatever waves and water we face.

In our world today, we have been offered invitations to follow Jesus, to listen to the voice of God. Most of the time, many of us respond positively to those invitations. But sometimes we miss the invitations because we **expect** God to show up in certain ways (we often try to put God in a box). But God shows up in **different** ways. The important thing to remember, if you do not take anything else away from this message, is that **God will always show up, right in the middle of our messy, broken world. Every. Single. Time.**

Where does God show up in your life? In the wind? In the fire? In the earthquake? Or perhaps God is showing up in the sheer silence, through a still, small voice. In the moments when we quiet our brains, turn off the world around us, and focus on the little things.

Perhaps God is showing up in the blossoming of a flower, in the fluttering wings of a hummingbird, or in the setting and rising of the sun. Maybe God is showing up through the laughter of a child, in the happy tail wags of a dog, or in the third nap you have taken this day.

Like all of you, I know all too well that this world is hurting. There are times when we feel alone or scared, and sometimes those feelings come far more often than the feelings of joy and peace. Like Peter, we need to know that Jesus is still there, in the middle of the winds and waves that we face. We need to know that we have not been abandoned, even when it feels like we are starting to sink.

We need to be reassured that when we cry out, Jesus will **immediately** hold out his hand, just like he did for Peter. That Jesus, through his strength, his love, his grace, his forgiveness, will pull us back above the crashing waves and set our feet on solid ground.

Like Elijah, we sometimes feel that the world is turning against us. Like Elijah, we do not always know where to turn to find relief. And although we are not physically running for our lives (I hope), it often feels like we are running from *something*. That we are trying to find relief from the ever-changing world around us. And like Elijah, maybe it is time we stop running and wait for God to come near to us, not in the earthquake, not in the wind, not in the fire. But instead, God will **unexpectedly** show up in the sheer silence, and through that silence there will come a still, small voice.

The voice of one who loves us unconditionally and wants only the best for us; the voice of one who will continually take away all of our fear, all of our pain, and all of our uncertainty. Even if we do not understand how or *when*. The voice that takes away our fear and our pain belongs to the God, our maker and creator, the savior of the world. And this voice will always remind us that we are loved and that *we can do this, we can do hard things*. The voice will remind us that we are not alone, that we have not been abandoned. The voice of God will call to us out of the silence, reminding us that we are beloved children of God, and will help us find a place to rest.

I do not know how or where God is showing up in your life. But I do know for certain that **God IS showing up**. Because God will always show up. If we think for some reason that God is absent or not where we expect to find God, maybe we are looking in the wrong place. Because **God is here**. God has not, and will not, leave us. God has not, and will not, abandon us. When you feel like you are sinking, just like Peter, cry out to God. Jesus will **immediately** reach out his hand. God will offer the reassurances you need. God invites us to listen and follow; it is our responsibility to take God up on that invitation.

Siblings in Christ, grab hold of God's hand. Trust that God is here. Continue to search for God in the sheer silence, **in the unexpected places**. I cannot promise much, but I can promise that God will always show up. **Today. Tomorrow. And forever.** Amen.

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