

Genesis 3: 1-13; 20-21

Seeing God

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The Congregational Church of Needham

When I was a youth I spent time in church gazing at the stained glass window over the altar. It depicted a figure in long robes on a throne holding a scepter. In those days the windows in our old stone church were pretty dirty from years of soot but I was pretty sure that this figure at the center of the window was a picture of God. After all God was the topic of every sermon we heard, every hymn we sang, and the focus of every prayer we prayed; so who else could it be? It seemed obvious to me that this was God watching over the proceedings from a lofty perch. Plus I figured the whole point of going to church was to learn how to see God.

It was years before I went back and researched that window and discovered that this was a picture of Jesus seated on his throne. When the window was cleaned up it was clear that the two figures next to him were not the other components of the Trinity as I had imagined but two angels instead. Now maybe this is just a theological distinction because for most of us Jesus is the face of God, but many of us are still curious about God. This month our worship theme is God. Spending a month talking about God may seem unnecessary because this is a topic we cover every week. But sometimes we make assumptions about God- like I did with the window. We all walk around with ideas about God. We all come up with private notions we rarely share that influence our faith. Some people risk their lives to serve the poor in Third World countries because they believe God called them. Other people tell you hurricanes or earthquakes are an indication that God is angry. Orthodox Jewish women wear wigs and Muslim women wear burkas because they believe God wants them to. People pray throughout the day and make pilgrimages to holy sites to know more about God's will. Twelve step programs gather in church

basements across this land as people confess their weakness and talk about their Higher Power, which is just a handy nickname for God.

God is in the news. The Islamic militants who attacked people in the offices of the French Press Charlie Hebdo several weeks ago believed that God was offended by the magazine's irreverent cartoons. When people debate the death penalty they refer to the gift of life that God has given. When public officials take office they put their hands on the Bible and end the oath with the words "so help me God". Then everyone cheers. According to the Pew Research institute on Religion, six in ten Americans believe that not only is God real but God is Someone you can have a relationship with. <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report2religious-landscape-study-key-findings.pdf> Even our grammars show respect for God. It is common practice to capitalize God.

God is the invisible force of creation in the beginning of Genesis, but I have chosen the second story of creation because I like the way that God is personified here. I believe that the characteristics of God in the Garden of Eden are largely overlooked. As I see how the story has been used to convince people that we are all sinful I worry that we missed the message here that shows a great deal about God's character and nature. Let's take a closer look.

In the first place the story makes it very clear that God is With us. I know it sounds a bit trite and predictable for a preacher to say that God is with you. But I think it is something that is all too easy to forget. A lot of people just assume God is too busy for us. God is triaging divine time and God is holed up in a palace in the Middle East, or attending a summit in heaven, or dealing with much more important matters than the small potatoes in our lives.

But that is not what we find in the story in Genesis 2 and 3. God is in this little Garden with Adam and Eve. God is nearby. God is worried about this couple. Where are they? Did they

get lost? Are they hiding? What is going on with them? This is not a God who is distant or distracted. This is a hands-on God. This is a helicopter parent.

When we took our trip to the Holy Land in 2010 our guide was a man of great faith who was determined to prove to us that the things the Bible said about Jesus were really true. As he showed us around the ancient sites he had a masterful command of Biblical facts. Bert was a lot of fun and a more intriguing guide you could not find. But Bert seemed to be striving to prove the existence of God. For him this was like a grand geometry theorem that needed to be explained in minute detail. So if we could just see the logic of the faith the way he did we would know for sure that God was real and Jesus too. I liked Bert but I realized a few days into our trip that we just don't see faith the same way. So, if you think I intend to prove to you that God exists beyond a shadow of a doubt in this sermon you will be disappointed. I think it is fruitless to try. I cannot explain how it works but I know for sure it does, because I test it weekly. You can find God if you search with all your heart. And often you find God when you are not even looking.

Jacob came from a pretty dysfunctional and very ordinary family. His mother manipulated him to steal his brother's birthright. His brother was furious to the point where Jacob feared for his life, and left town. When Jacob ran away from home at the end of the first day he was exhausted and confused and scared. But the first night on his journey he fell asleep and dreamed about angels. When he woke up he remembered his dream and though no one could accuse Jacob of being a very religious man he said "Surely God is in this place and I did not see it". No truer words were ever spoken in the Bible. God is here but we often miss God's presence.

For several years we rented a condo in Delaware near a big state park with broad beaches. In the lazy days of late August almost every afternoon a large school of dolphins would swim north jumping and arcing in the late afternoon sunlight. It was not a busy beach but no one missed this. Some people paddled far out to see the dolphins; some put their heads under

water and swore they could hear them calling to one another. Most of us just stood in awe and smiled. Caught in the sudden wonder of life on this planet, we knew it was a blessing to see the miracle of life up close like that.

In his book on God, Rob Bell says “Sometimes it catches you off guard; sometimes it sneaks up on you from behind; sometimes you find yourself slowing down and becoming gripped with a certain stillness like your heart is slamming on the brakes while it whispers in your ear, ‘This matters, this is significant, slow down, pay attention’; like your soul is trying to take a picture because of the realization that whatever is going on here right now is worth capturing.” {Rob Bell, *What we talk about when we talk about God*. New York: Harper One, 2013, p. 103}

We try to describe these moments as transcendent, out of this world or deep. {Ibid} but the important thing was that something jerked you into the present. Whether it is a moment in prayer, or when you enjoy something wonderful about a child, or when someone is crying, or when you see beyond the moment. These things point past themselves to a larger reality. You recognize, like Jacob did, that God is in this place we call life, but you had been overlooking it.

The ancient Hebrews used the word *ruah*, which means breath of God. It was a feeling they had from time to time of divine energy. When the psalmist says “The earth is God’s and the fullness thereof” he means that God’s fingerprints are on everything. This creative force means breath. God breathed life into our lungs and each breath we take reminds us that starting with our breath everything here is a gift. When you think of all the hours people spend on yoga mats learning all over again how to breathe, you realize that what they are doing is slowing down enough to remember whose they are. Whether they see it or not, they are re-connecting to their Creator with every breath.

Finally, God is **for us**. This story in Genesis has some lovely details which most people miss. That is because the story of the Garden of Eden has been used to depict a God who is

angry, unforgiving, and vindictive. I do not believe in the doctrine of Original Sin as it was developed by Irenaeus and St. Augustine. It concerns me that this doctrine has perverted this story and undermined God's affection which is demonstrated here, more than anything else.

The story says that God is worried about Adam and Eve and God is looking for them. Most theologians think of this story like a story of a parent with toddlers. They need to learn a lesson and the verdict is swift. But I see the Garden as a story about teenagers who are no longer content to follow the parent's rules. When they disobey they have to leave home. There are consequences to their actions. But like a worried parent of someone sending a young adult off to college, God is scared too. God makes sure that they have clothes, so they won't be cold or embarrassed, and so they will feel God's presence on their backs each day. They won't ever be able to forget where they came from and who loves them more than they will ever know. Like a parent who has yelled all day in frustration at these offspring he cherishes, God sits by a lamp long into the evening sewing garments. This one detail in our Bible tells us more about God than most of the theological rhetoric you will read. That is the message at the heart of Holy Scripture, not that they are banished and need to be saved through substitutionary atonement. No. They and we are loved and cherished from the beginning of time. God is on our side.

For many people faith in God is much more important that we want to admit. In a 2014 survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute, more than 50% of those who consider themselves football fans believe that some sort of supernatural force is at play on the field, according to this morning's Boston Globe. One woman who was so shy about her faith that she would only give her first name, Sherry, told the reporter, "I am not really a religious person but I do believe in a Higher Power and I do believe wholeheartedly in prayer. She has prayed for the New England Patriots before every game since 2001." That comment may say more about her than it does about God.

We live in a world that bombards us with ads and forms of escape and mind-numbing things at every turn. I don't know what brings you to your knees but I do know that God is looking for you. I believe that God is best seen as a wise and discerning counsellor, a loving parent, a friend in the night when you cannot sleep, a voice that speaks through others – both strangers and friend- when you hear something that rings more true than ordinary advice. God is always looking for you, more than you know.