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“Experiencing God”

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1 Kings 19:1-12

Today I am continuing my sermon series on Simple Spirituality by examining the ways in which we experience God working in our lives. This is something that we all desire—a tangible experience of the holy and the divine. Some people spend their entire lives waiting for just such an experience.

I remember visiting with a woman in her late 80s who was dying, who said: “I have never once felt the presence of God or heard God speak to me.” I told her that God had been present and even speaking all throughout her life, she just didn’t realize it. Too often we think that if God is going to communicate with us it will be something dramatic and grand. Most human beings are spiritually hard of hearing with preconceived notions about how God will communicate. But in my experience, it is not always in large, dramatic ways with visions and prophecy and fire and smoke. It is far more subtle than that.

There are essentially two classic theological doctrines of how God is at work in human life. The first is Deism. Deists believe that by rational methods we can understand the true purposes of God. Originally, God designed the universe and the laws of nature and then stepped back to watch all of this unfold. You could compare that to someone who builds a ship inside a bottle, they create this intricate beautiful thing and then once it is assembled, they cannot alter it again. Once it is finished the one who created it walks away. So God’s power is displayed in natural laws which were set in motion at the creation of the world.. Deism offers a reasonable explanation for evil in the world, as well. God cannot do anything about evil and suffering, things have already been set in motion and God has stepped back to watch. Many of the founders of our country were Deists, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine being the most well known. In Deism the highest human goal is to lead a moral life aligned with God’s intentions.

We do not embrace Deism because it is neither Biblical nor consistent with our understanding of a God who is actively engaged in human history and human affairs, and sends the Holy Spirit to guide, bless and comfort us. It does not account for a loving God who is deeply engaged with all creation.

The second view of how God works in the world is Determinism. This belief system holds that God is indeed behind everything that happens. Whatever happens to you, it is God’s doing—there are no coincidences, no accidents, everything is foreordained by God. Predestination is a theological doctrine which arose out of determinism. Now some people take this a step further to say that there are only two forces at work in the world--God and the devil. Bad things are the devil’s doing, good things are God’s doing. God might have some bad things

in store for you, but that is only because you need to learn a lesson or be punished. Otherwise, it is the devil's doing.

Of course you know why we reject determinism, not only for its extreme oversimplification, but because it conveniently absolves human beings of personal responsibility. Nothing is your fault if God planned it or the devil made you do it. It was your destiny or it was the devil.

United Methodists try to offer a middle view of how God is working in human affairs, based upon our experience of God. Do any of you remember the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, the four things that we consider essential for an understanding of faith? Scripture, Tradition, Experience and Reason. Our experience of God gives us insight into the nature of God and how God works in the world. We believe that God did create the universe and the laws of nature, and that God remains actively at work in the world. And often God's involvement is manifested in and through us. But not to the degree that God will find you a good parking space or strike your enemies dead. God is a big picture thinker. And so every single thing that happens in human life is not preordained by God, yet in everything that happens God's guidance and grace can be found.

In a nutshell Deism holds that virtually **nothing** is God ordained, while Determinism holds that **everything** is God or Satan ordained. The middle way says that it is all far more subtle and complicated than that, but if you have eyes to see, and a heart that is open, you can find God's purpose and intentions in every situations.

Here is an example: Let's say I go to the store late one night to get milk and I run into you. Was that foreordained by God? I would be thrilled to see any one of you in the grocery store late at night, but I really doubt if God set it up. Especially if I see you and you immediately duck into the frozen foods section because you haven't been to church since Easter, then no, I doubt if God put me there. However, if you say hello and I ask you how you are doing and you start to cry and tell me that your husband left you and you don't know how you will pay your bills, then I just might think that God put me there. But I have to be open to that.

You see what I am getting at? In each circumstance there might be opportunities in which God's purposes and will can be made manifest if we have the attention and awareness. God's purpose is always that we become more loving, more generous, more kind, that we help each other and improve the world God loves. In every circumstance in which we find ourselves we should ask how we might use it to better understand and experience God.

There have been so many times in my life when I have missed this very point.

I get locked into my agenda, and therefore I remain closed to new experiences which might offer a chance to be an instrument of God's grace. I remember a time when I was flying to a meeting in another state and really hoping to get some reading done on the plane. I didn't feel like talking to anybody, didn't want anyone to know I was a pastor. A young man sat down in the seat next to me, and I said "Hello" and then hoped that would be the extent of our conversation for that flight. After the plane was in the air, he pulled out his book which was The Case For Christ by Lee Strobel. It is a great book written by a jaded newspaper editor and journalist who was an atheist, who interviews a variety of experts and professors on the evidence in favor of Jesus. I loved that book, and I just had to tell him so, and that was all I was planning to say. But he proceeded to tell me about his sister's death and his spiritual search and how he was really feeling lost and how a friend gave him the book and he was very skeptical of Jesus and Christianity, although he had been raised a Christian.

So we talked and I tried to listen and share some things with him, and by the end of that flight I was completely convinced that God had somehow used me to help that young man. But I nearly missed it. I was so caught up in my own agenda that I easily could have missed it. Now it easily could have been a coincidence, a random event that just happened. But when it happened, it felt like a blessing, more for me than for him! My point is this: God is constantly trying to work in our lives, but we have to be open to it, we have to listen and learn, watch and wait.

The Scripture lesson that Cory read for us is just such an example. This account from First Kings tells about Elijah one of the greatest prophets the world has ever known. He lives during some very dark and challenging times. Elijah has done everything right, tried to serve God. The people of Israel have killed the prophets, abandoned the covenant, destroyed the temples. Elijah is about the only faithful person left, and now Ahab and Jezebel want to kill him. He flees into the wilderness and cries at God, "I want to die, I am ready to join my ancestors in the grave."

Then he goes into a cave, and falls asleep. Later he learns that if he stands upon a mountain before God, then God will pass by. So he does this, and soon a hurricane wind blows through the mountains and shatters the rocks, and he is waiting for God to speak in the wind. Nothing. God is not in the wind. Then there is a mighty earthquake, and he is waiting for God to speak in the earthquake. Again nothing. God was not in the earthquake. Then he notices a blazing fire—bushes burning, and he is ready for God to speak through the flames: Nothing, God is not in the flames. And then in the complete silence, Elijah heard the sound of an ever so gentle and quiet whisper. Only in the sheer silence does he hear the

voice of God.

This classic story from the Old Testament demonstrates how we experience God in subtle, quiet ways. And we can only hear God if we are quiet. Then God might prompt us to call somebody we have not spoken to for a long time, or do something generous or unselfish, or to be extra careful in certain situations. But we have to listen, and most of us are not very good at that. We get in the car and immediately turn on the radio, we get home and immediately turn on the TV, our minds are constantly so filled with so much noise and the incessant clamor of our own thoughts and ideas, that we are deaf to God. We don't have enough space and silence in our lives to hear what God is trying to say to us. God speaks in whispers, and you have to listen very carefully.

There is a book that I just love called The Practice of the Presence of God which was written by a man who became a lay brother in Carmelite monastery in 1666 in Paris, France. His conversion occurred at the age of 18, when on a midwinter day he saw a dead, leafless tree standing alone against the snow. It caused him to think of the changes that spring would bring, and the renewing and life-giving power of God. He resolved from that day on to always walk in God's presence. In the Carmelite monastery, this man known as Brother Lawrence took on the most humble jobs, cleaning, sweeping the floor, washing the dishes, and he did them with great grace and joy. Word spread of this saint of the "pots and pans," and people began to recognize in him a deep holiness. People came from all over Europe to see him and watch him. He died at the age of 80 honored by everyone who knew him.

All that remains of Brother Lawrence are 15 letters that he wrote to various people compiled into this tiny book. It is a testimony of one who experienced God amid the commonplace and mundane experiences of daily life. He suggests that the key to experiencing God is finding God in the simple, the modest, the ordinary moments of each day.

So will God come to you in the wind, fire, rain? Not too often. Will God send you visions and give you the gift of prophecy? Probably not. Will God speak through the Democrats meeting in our wonderful city this week? Who knows?

All I know is that when we open ourselves to the spiritual, when we listen and learn, and try to bless other people and this world, then we really do experience the Living God.

One of the tangible ways we experience God in this church is through the gift of each other. We model God's love and care in this community, and today I give thanks for some people who have experienced God's grace and love here and want

to become an official part of this congregation. So at this time I invite those who wish to join our church to come forward to be received into membership....