

Where Isn't God?

Today's lessons could easily be summed up in a simple bullet point or two. "God is in the least-expected of all places. God is in the littlest of things; the tiniest of whispers." We see this very clearly in the Old Testament text. We also see it plain as day in the Gospel lesson. It's in the craziest, least-expected of places that Peter and the boys are brought to recognize the almighty God and Lord sitting in their over-filled and now-sinking boat. "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" And I'm quite positive that all of you can already make the connection to how our Lord *continues* to make Himself known to us and draw us unto Him. He continues to point us to and call us to the simplest, least-expected of places in order that we see and hear and receive His bountiful blessings of mercy, grace, and everlasting life. Through faith the connection is easy. You can't miss it—Word and Sacrament. But...more on this later.

For now, let's come at this a different way. Where isn't God? Now, I know that this question can be taken a couple different ways. Through faith, we fully understand and believe that God is omnipresent; that is, He's everywhere. You can go to the deepest, darkest places in human existence, and God is right there. There's never a long and rduous trek required to get back to God; to find God. Turn around! He's right there. "I am with you always." He said it, and He meant it. "Where isn't God?" *That's a dumb question! God is everywhere!*

Okay...but where isn't God? God Himself, in the course of teaching the great Elijah a much-needed lesson, very clearly demonstrates where He is **NOT**. He's *not* in the mighty things that man looks to. He's *not* in the mighty rock-shattering winds. He's *not* in the terrifying earthquake. He's *not* in the fire. No. He's in the lowest of deep whispers; a whisper that, as the text tells us, comes from inside the cave where Elijah had just been throwing a pity party for himself.

And this is important for us to understand. If you recall, Elijah had just finished triumphing over 450 prophets of Baal in a huge **God vs. Baal showdown**; an all-consuming, fire-from-heaven display that made abundantly clear that God was completely in charge and Lord of all. The problem, though, was that even after such a HUGE display of power and might, some people *still* refused to believe. In fact, wicked queen Jezebel sent word to Elijah, letting him know that by this time tomorrow he would suffer the same deadly fate as that of those 450 Baal prophets he had just slaughtered.

This is just too much for Elijah to bear! If fire from heaven and the slaughter of 450 false prophets won't convince people to turn from evil and turn back to God, then what hope does he have for any kind of evangelistic success in

this foul and wicked place? So Elijah does what comes *natural* to all children of Adam. He tucks tail and heads for the hills, eventually hiding in a cave and feeling sorry for himself. In his depression and sorrow he cries out to God and asks that God just end it now and take him home to heaven. *“I quit. I can’t win. Just take me home to heaven.”* But Elijah’s plans were not God’s plans.

It’s when Elijah finally settles down in his little cave hiding spot that the very Word of God Himself comes to Elijah and asks him, *“Elijah, what are you doing here? Why are you here?”* Basically, *“why are you not where I’ve called you to be, doing what I’ve called you to do?”* God framed this question in such a way so that Elijah might repent. But Elijah didn’t repent. ***He wasn’t sorry for running away.*** Elijah was bent on being in control and having his way, and when he didn’t get his way and things didn’t go the way he had planned or thought they should go, he lost it. *“God, I’ve been very jealous for You. I’ve been an outstanding and faithful Christian, and yet it’s been to no avail. Israel has rejected me and rejected You. They’ve torn down the altars and killed all your faithful prophets and are now worshipping false gods. There’s no hope! There’s no point!”*

This is when God tells Elijah to go stand outside on top of the mountain so that God can show him something. God then proceeds to bring forth a boulder-crushing wind, a mighty earthquake, and a raging fire. And yet...***God wasn’t in any of those HUGE and awe-inspiring, terrifying things.*** Instead, God whispers to Elijah in the faintest, lowest little whisper; that little whisper coming from inside the very cave that Elijah had just left. Elijah has to move back to the entrance of the cave in order to hear. How’s that for *“I am with you always”*? *“I’ve been here all along. You’re the one who has left!”*

So...I’ll ask you again in light of all this. **Where isn’t God?** We understand what God is saying here with Elijah, but where *isn’t* God in our day-to-day lives? Is the peace and assurance of God’s presence and favor to be sought in ***overflowing bank accounts and beautiful houses and manicured lawns and the best wardrobes and gadgets?*** Is God’s free gift of everlasting life recognized in perfect health and well-being? Does God not love people; is God not with those who suffer and languish in brokenness, sickness, and despair? I know all of you know the right answer, and yet when life gets a bit sideways and things don’t go according to plan, we do begin to doubt and lament and wonder if God is angry with us or punishing us...if God has forgotten about us or abandoned us. I’m not even talking about the big things, such as an unexpected death in the family or terminal sickness diagnosis. I’m talking about the equivalence of a “hang nail.” The checkbook gets a bit tight, the hours get cut back at work, the AC breaks, Walmart runs out of our favorite ice cream, the WiFi connection is slow... *“my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!”*

Is the love and righteousness and peace of God **only** recognized in what our world deems “success”? Even many who fancy themselves “Christian” would have you believe this. ***How many times was St. Paul beaten and whipped and shipwrecked?*** I don’t think anyone is foolish enough to say that God hated Paul. *“Blessed are you when you are persecuted for My name’s sake.” “Take up your cross and follow Me.” “You will be hated for My name’s sake.” “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for My sake.”* Not exactly comforting portraits of success, are they? And yet this is how God Himself defines success: trust in Him, ***even in the midst of tragedy and turmoil and tribulation.*** Look no further than right here [the crucifix] as perfect proof.

Closer to home and more to the point: ***Where isn’t God?*** God isn’t in the bed on Sunday morning. He’s not on the golf course or in the fishing boat or at the lake. ***Believe it or not, but God is here even when it rains!*** *“But pastor, I don’t need to be in church. He knows I love Him, and besides: God is everywhere. You choose to worship God in a stuffy little man-made building. I worship my god and commune with my god in the great cathedral of nature. I can worship my god and commune with my god while lounging in the pool.”* Well...you are correct in one sense. You **do** worship and commune with your god. But your god is **not** the God of Scripture. Your god is a god of convenience and selfishness. Your god is a god of your own making. There is no righteousness (except self-righteousness) to be found in the idol that is the god of your choosing/making.

God is **not** found in all these places. As I said at the beginning of this sermon, I know you already know the Word-and-Sacrament reality that God is found in the lowest, simplest, and most unexpected, over-looked places. I know you already get the connection, ***but it bears repeating.*** We need to hear it. ***Here is where your God and Lord is!*** He’s right where He calls you to be! He’s right where He Himself promises to be. He’s right where He points you and directs you; ***He drawing near to you in order that you would draw near unto Him.*** Here is where His free gifts of mercy, grace, and undeserved righteousness are freely given. He comes to you in this lowly and simple place, bringing to you the gift of Himself—His Word; the same all-creating and all-powerful Word that was made flesh and hung on a cross to die for you.

And think about that for a moment. Here [the crucifix] is almighty God in the flesh, right? This is the **LAST** place you’d look for the Almighty! Yet here He is! And yet...at the same time, ***God wasn’t here***...and thank God He wasn’t. *“My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?”* The Son of God was abandoned by His God and Father on this bloody cross—if only for an instant—all so that you would **never** be abandoned or forsaken or forgotten. Here is God...and here

wasn't God...for you. *O, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of the God of our salvation!*

Now, we may not understand how this mystery of the Trinity works, but through faith we do understand that this triune God is working for us and our salvation. It's "hiding" in plain sight. Ordinary and unassuming words. Ordinary men; nothing special. Ordinary water. Ordinary little morsels of bread and wine. By all worldly standards *so puny, so seemingly ineffective...so "not enough."* Faith sees and hears differently though. *"Take and eat; take and drink. This is My body. This is My blood, given and shed for you for your forgiveness, for your assurance, for your peace that surpasses all understanding."* Folks: You're **not** going to get this anywhere else! Where the Word is rightly taught and the Sacraments rightly administered, **there is Christ.**

May this real presence peace of Christ be your desire, your assurance, and your peace all your remaining days, and may this same peace of Christ guard you and keep you in the one true faith so that you may *ever and always* walk in the marvelous light that is Christ, right where He is and right where He promises to be, now and into all eternity.

In His holy name...**AMEN**