

Storybooks and Scriptures Series: Hiding in Plain Sight

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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Psalm 19, I John 4:16b, John 4:16-24

One of the factors in picking the different story books for our series this summer was the importance of addressing some discernibly different themes. The short little board book that Susan read this morning, written by a rabbi and his spouse, takes on an age-old theological question. *Where is God?* I love the different ways the book answers that query. I would pair the book with the following scriptures, each of which provides a window into how scripture says we encounter God. Let's begin with Psalm 19, in which the psalmist gives us two ways to encounter God—through observing the natural world and through obeying God's law, the commandments. Listen now for God's word:

*The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.*

*In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,
which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.
Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them;
and nothing is hidden from its heat.
The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the Lord are sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the Lord are true
and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.*

*Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.*

*But who can detect their errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.
Keep back your servant also from the insolent;
do not let them have dominion over me.
Then I shall be blameless,
and innocent of great transgression.*

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.*

Our second passage is a short snippet from the first letter of John to his early Christian community. It gets to the very heart, I think, of how we come to know God.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

Finally, our Gospel lesson is a portion of the story of Jesus encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well in the 4th chapter of John's Gospel. Note how the woman tries to engage Jesus in a theological argument about where the right place to worship God is—and how Jesus responds by saying that God can't be tied down to one place, because God is Spirit.

Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

One of the dear departed saints of this congregation, Helen Preston, used to love to tell the story of playing hide and go seek one time with her young grandsons. Kevin and Clay were maybe two or three at the time. Helen turned around and put her hands up over her eyes and counted to ten, and the boys simply climbed up on the couch and sat perfectly still. When she turned back again, she pretended she could not see them. She peered behind and underneath the couch, looked up and down all around the room, checked behind the curtains, and kept muttering, "Where are those boys? Where did they go?" Meanwhile, Kevin and Clay sitting there on the couch, were giggling, delighted that they had pulled the wool over their GraGras eyes. Finally, Helen ended the ruse by "discovering" them, those two little boys, hiding right there in plain sight.

That story stuck with me. It comes to mind whenever people or circumstances or, like today, children's books, raise the question, "Where is God?" I like to think of God, the One who fashioned heaven and earth, whose loving presence was embodied in Jesus the Christ, and who dwells in and around us as Holy Spirit, I like to think that God is amused at our efforts to try to find Her—right there in plain sight. The difference, of course, is—that unlike Helen, the people who are searching for God are far too often not in on the secret.

The secret of which I speak is the one that Rabbi Lawrence Kushner and his spouse end their children's book with: *God is everywhere. God is wherever we look.*

The trouble is that we are all too often either not really looking or not looking for the right things in the right way. The words of the great poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and I've quoted them before, continue to resonate with me: *Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God. But only he who sees takes off his shoes. The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.* If we're not being intentional about our search, if we're not going in with our eyes and our ears and our hearts open to look for God at work in the world, we'll blithely go on our blackberry-picking way and miss evidence of the Divine all around us, wherever we really and truly look.

Likewise, if we are looking for the wrong things, we'll miss signs of God's presence, too. If am looking for a genie who grants me my every wish, a vending machine that delivers my selection if I just put the right number of tokens in or say the right words in the right way or hold my mouth right when I pray, a being that will make sure that I am never uncomfortable, that nothing untoward or unkind ever happens to me and nothing terrible ever happens in the world, then I'm going to miss God all over the place.

The rabbi who wrote the children's book Susan read is not the one who is famous for the book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. That's Harold, this is Lawrence Kushner. Nevertheless, Lawrence is often mistaken for Harold and asked about why bad things happen to good people. Here is how he answered that in an interview: *The same question comes up even more powerfully when you think about the Holocaust. But here, too, the question isn't, "Where was God?" The real question is: "Why do human beings do terrible things?" To ask why God allowed these things to happen assumes that God occasionally intervenes in human affairs **without** human agency. But countless events remind us that God simply doesn't work like that. God didn't die in the Holocaust, only the Deuteronomic idea of an intervening God who rewards and punishes people.*

Now, if that gave you pause, it gave me pause, too. I don't entirely want to give up on the idea of a God who intervenes and rewards and punishes, in part because human beings **do** do terrible things and in part because I want to protect God's sovereignty. But I have become more and more convinced over the years of God's vulnerability—seen most powerfully in a Christ who gave and gave and gave of himself even unto death.

A vulnerable God gives us a deity who is there even when our fervent prayers aren't answered, or at least not as we'd like. A vulnerable God gives us a god who is there in the pain of heartbreak and in the unfolding drama of nature, including the fly caught in the spider's web and wildfires in California and Greece. A vulnerable God gives us a God who is there in the plight of the immigrant and in the calls for racial justice and for loving people as they are, not as we wish they would be.

That's not a God who is removed and coldly unconcerned—but a God whose heart can break. A God who can long for what is best for us and ache for us to live up to doing the work of love and justice and mercy and reconciliation because we have responsibility—the ability to respond. And God needs us just like we need God. The true power of God, I believe, is the power of love, love which beckons us to take part in its sacrifice and in its joy. So where is God?

Our scripture passages for today join the children's book in providing us with several answers to the question. The first part of Psalm 19 says that we can see God in nature—that the starry skies themselves are like show and tell for God's glory—and glory simply means God's weighty presence.

Indeed, as the writer of the hymn *"This is My Father's World"* would attest, *all nature sings and round us rings the beauty of God's spheres.*

Few, if any of you, here today would deny that being out in nature can be a deeply spiritual experience leading you into an encounter with transcendence. You know what that feels like, being out in nature. Some of my most special times with God have happened out under the stars, or walking on the Camino de Santiago in Spain and beholding the beauty all around me, or strolling along the beach and watching the sun rise in all of its splendor. The psalmist is right that the heavens show God's glory and so does the rest of nature.

But nature can also be a fearsome thing. Nature is great, isn't it? Until there is a fire tornado that blows into a wildfire that triples in size or a category 4 hurricane destroys an island or a tree, seemingly at random, falls on someone.

To put it another way, it's one thing to say that, as Kushner did, that *God is in the fly caught in the spider web.* The spider has to eat, too. It's the circle of life. It's the way things go. It's the food chain. Our children know that. But what about when you are the fly? As a country music song put it, "Sometimes you're the windshield and sometimes you're the bug." What if you're the bug as the circle of life unfolds, including in nature red in tooth and claw? Can God be found even then? Even in the tragic?

Judith was gone all last week. She was down in Harrisonburg, where she was preaching at the Massanetta Springs Bible Conference. So she's beginning to become famous. Doesn't bother me. It's not a competition.

She came home yesterday, and on her way back, she stopped in the Shenandoah National Park and went on a hike. She was so excited last night at dinner to show me pictures on her phone of a bear and her two cubs. Judith told me, "We got so close to the bear and her two cubs!"

I said, "I don't want to hear that story." Sometimes bad things happen when you get close to a bear, or otherwise caught up in nature.

How can we best know and feel God's presence when **bad** things happen? I love what Mr. Rogers, who we mentioned last week, had to say about that. He said to look for God in the helpers. *"When bad things happen, look for God in the helpers, the ones who respond in love and kindness. There are always helpers."* Better than that, I would add, be a helper.

The fact of the matter is that none of us, not one of us, is going to get out of this world alive. We all die in one way or another, and sometimes people die in natural disasters. Rather than pointing a finger of blame at God or anyone else for that, perhaps we can seek to be part of a team of people that addresses the pain, that works in ways to help those who are affected by natural disasters or other traumas or may in the future be affected by natural disasters or other traumas.

The second half of Psalm 19 offers that God can be found in the observance of the Law. When we hear things like that we tend to get a little antsy. Because we are not a real legalistic or doctrinaire lot. But what Psalm 19 says is that God can be found in the observance of the law—the commandments—which Jesus then boiled down to two—*Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind and love your neighbor as you love yourself.*

This is a way people have found God--through living the dictates of God's law. Psalm 19 says it is perfect and revives the soul. Living in tune with loving God and loving neighbor, living a life that gets outside of self and cares for others, this is a way into encounter with God. My predecessor was

fond of saying, “If you feel like you are down in the dumps, then get out and do something for someone else.”

A person showing compassion to an immigrant—that’s living by the law. Someone living with integrity, telling the truth and living a decent life—that’s living the law. Someone showing respect to another person—that’s living the law. When you feed the hungry, and give clothing to the ones who need clothes, when you visit the sick and the imprisoned and protect the vulnerable, that’s living the law—and that’s where you encounter—that’s where we—encounter God.

I look at the sort of life John Toups led, for instance. Yesterday we memorialized him. As part of the conversation about John’s life it came up that there were a number of times that he could have lost his life and there were many ways that he might have turned out differently, given the way his life unfolded. He was born in the Depression. His family was poor. His Dad died when he was 12 and he and his siblings were raised by a single mother. They had to scrape by selling popcorn and newspapers in the streets, among other things. John managed to make it through that not being bitter but being better. He signed up for a special Army scholarship, which meant that he was going to have to head off to serve in WW II when he came of age. He was one day short of being old enough to go with the first group—and the vast majority of the people who went in with that group were killed in combat at the Battle of the Bulge. He didn’t go with that group. When the time came and he was old enough, he went to serve, and received a silver star and a purple heart because he was wounded. John was fond of saying he might not have survived that. But here’s the thing about all of that. The thing about all of that is not that God somehow intervened and miraculously lifted John out of difficult situations. That’s wonderful and I think that may in fact be true. But what is an even more powerful testimony to the power of God is what John Toups did with the life he was given. He lived in love and service and gratitude.

If you want to ask me where I encounter God, how I know God exists, it is through people who live their lives in love and service, and rise above circumstance, and stay centered in gratitude. People like John. People like you. That’s proof of God’s existence. That’s where I encounter God.

Which brings me to our New Testament texts. The passage from the first letter of John, one I read at every wedding I conduct, that says, “God is love and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them.” Now bear in mind, this is a New Testament figure. And what he says is that if you want to encounter God, if you want to live in God, if you want to know God, then live in Love. Because God is love.

And what Jesus tells the Samaritan woman at the well, whom he meets and loves just as she is, having had five husbands and all, the Samaritan woman who can’t believe that he’s talking to her, the Samaritan woman who want to get him involved in a debate about where the right place to worship God is—either on a mountain in Samaria or a temple in Jerusalem—what Jesus tells the Samaritan woman is that God is Spirit, and that those who worship God must worship in Spirit and in truth.

God is everywhere, we only have to open our eyes and our ears and our hearts to see the Divine. So as I close, let me give us all a few disciplines, a few practices that we might engage to help us see and hear and receive the divine presence that is all around us.

First, look for God in beginnings, like the birth of a baby, or a baptism, or a new commitment taken on.

Second, look for God in endings. Look for God in the last years of life or in the celebration of a life well lived.

Look for God in the vast middle between beginnings and endings.

Look for God in the way people come together, especially the way they come together to support each other.

And yes, look for God in nature. Just don't get too close to the bears.

And look every day. I mean, seriously, every day.

There is a spiritual practice called the Examen. E X A M E N. That practice invites people every day to write down where they encountered God through the day. When you know that you have to write out your Examen at the end of the day, I guarantee that throughout the day you are looking for examples of where you might just have run across the Divine.

There is a riff on that practice called the Gratitude Journal. There are all sorts of apps that you can download to your phone that will give you an opportunity to type in what you are grateful for at the end of the day.

I love the one that Judith recently acquired. It prompts her every day to take a picture with her phone and to insert that in her gratitude journal for the day.

If I were going to take a picture today. I would take a picture of you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Text of the children's book for the day:

Where is God? by Lawrence and Karen Kushner

Where is God?

God is in the beginning. In the first red tomato and in cookies fresh from the oven. In the first day of summer and in the tiny hands of a baby.

Where is God? God is in the end. In the last bite of birthday cake, and in your worn, torn baby blanket. In the last wave good bye and in the last years of life.

Where is God? God is in the way people come together. In the sharing of a morning and in the Band-Aid fix up after a fall. In homemade gifts and in morning hugs and goodnight kisses.

Where is God? God is in the world. In birdchirp, frogsong and chattering squirrels and in the fly caught in the spider's web. In caterpillars chewing daisies and in worms turning leaves into earth.

Where is God? God is everywhere. God is wherever we look.

Kushner, Lawrence Rabbi, Kushner, Karen. *Where is God?*. illustrated by Dawn W. Majewski, Skylight Paths, 2000. Print

Kushner, Lawrence Rabbi. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Random House Inc. New York, 1981. Book