

“Watch for God”

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For the last 20 years, this church has nurtured and cared for me in every way I can imagine, and this summer has been no exception. The staff has taken every opportunity to help me grow as a person and as a follower of Christ and have involved me in all the missions and workings of this church. Each of you has supported me as I spent some important time discerning what God might be calling me to do with my life and how I might best serve him, and for that, I cannot thank you enough.

It's no surprise that as a Children's Ministry intern I got my hands a little dirty in Vacation Bible School, one of my favorite weeks of the entire year. I spent most of my first month here making nametags, and crew bags, and memorizing skits and songs for the week. Names of kids registered and their team numbers literally ran through my head all day, everyday. Several times Kit and I laughed together because one of us would let slip a little lyric of VBS music while we worked. When the week got here, it was probably one of the top 10 busiest weeks of my life- truly PandaMania. And so, it wasn't really until the week was over that I sat down to think. Through all the skits, crafts, snacks, songs, and Bible stories, I was awed by one simple thing- a bracelet. Every year the kids are given a bracelet with the simple idea on it- Watch for God. Each day we ask the kids to tell about a God sighting they had, somewhere in the last 24 hours that they had seen God at work. And each day, eager hands shot up. We wrote the ideas down on stickers to decorate our room, and each sticker was filled with that child-like faith I have always loved. God sightings ranged from beautiful flowers to seeing smiles of friends as they entered the auditorium. A God- sighting, what a simple concept, and yet, how often do we, in our daily lives, forget to acknowledge that God is present.

And so after Vacation Bible School, I sat with a friend and for several minutes and stared at my bracelet. Awed, and silenced. I'd worn that bracelet everyday for a week. I'd sat through Party Time Sing and Play 5 times and listened to kids share where they had seen God, and yet, I hadn't stopped for 5 minutes to think...where did I see God. Until that very minute

that I was sitting at Yogurt Mountain. And then, I was embarrassed. I have been to my fair share of Bible studies, VBSs, church services. I believe that God is present and working in our daily lives, and yet, I had allowed myself to get so wrapped up in life that I had forgotten to acknowledge God in it at all. It took the crooked smile of a five year old who couldn't wait to tell me where they saw God, to remind me of that he is present.

From the mouths of children, that is not a new concept. Jesus repeatedly reminds us of the faith of children in the Gospel of Matthew, first in saying: "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children."²⁶ Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do." And then later:

"From the lips of children and infants
you, Lord, have called forth your praise^{[a]?}"

God was certainly being praised at Vacation Bible School. What God had hidden from those of us who were wrapped up in logistics, God had revealed through the mouths of children. The children were more than ready to watch for God, God was in every song, flower, puppy dog, best friend, piece of candy, grandparent visit, toy, and snack. It might seem simple and often even silly to identify God in those places, but is it wrong? Is God not in all those places?

He is. God is in every place, in every time. In the verses from our call to worship today we hear:

"In his hand are the depths of the earth,
and the mountain peaks belong to him.

⁵ The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land."

God is in everything. God created every plant, every person, even the day and night, and so, the question isn't **where is God**, but **where are we looking for God**. And not just where, but how. Are our eyes open and willing to see God, or are we allowing ourselves to walk through life, blinded by our own agenda, our own successes, our own disappointments, our own story.

We're often too caught up in the busyness of our lives to stop and "Watch for God." We have jobs that demand our attention, children who need to be taken to soccer, and ballet, and piano, we have yards that need mowing, checks that need cashed, dinners that need to be made, and even church services that need to be attended. And in our free time? We're all out investing our time in committees,

organizations, clubs, and teams we feel called to. And in the midst of that, who has time to “Watch for God”.

Let’s be honest with ourselves for a moment. Since you woke up this morning, you probably thought about... what to have for breakfast, what to wear to church, and then, if you’re like me, you thought about that a few more times. You thought about who you might see at church, or who you needed to see because of a committee you are on together or a job you needed them to do. You may have thought about by now, about where you would like to eat lunch, maybe you’ve even thought about how the weekend is almost over and how the hustle and bustle starts again tomorrow, or maybe how it never really stopped. I’m exhausted just naming all the things we’ve probably all thought about. But have we stopped to invite God to be a part of our day? Have we stopped to acknowledge how God is being revealed through the flowers in your front yard, or the sunshine out this morning? Or how God’s love is being shown to you by the person who is sitting next to you in the pew. On this, the day we set apart to worship the living God, have we even stopped to watch for his presence among us?

What if God was right next to you, and you didn’t even notice? That’s what happens in our New Testament lesson today. Two men are walking along the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. As they walk, they are wrestling with the story of Jesus. They are trying to figure things out. They know the facts of his life and his death. And they don’t just know about it, they are friends of his. They loved Jesus. And they have heard from Mary and Mary Magdalene that when they went to the tomb that morning, Jesus’ body wasn’t there. And so, knowing where they are, and what they know, we meet up with them on their walk to Emmaus. We are not told why they are going there. Perhaps they were running away. The man they thought was going to redeem Israel had, they thought, let them down. They were leaving Jerusalem, leaving, disappointed, their fellow believers. And so, when “Jesus himself” joins them on their walk, they are too buried in their disappointments and failed hopes to recognize him. They are too caught up in being upset, too caught up in their own lives to see God. They know his story, they love him, and yet when he enters their midst, they are kept from seeing him.

There is a part of the story though, while the men are talking to Jesus, that strikes me about “Watching for God,” another idea I was reminded of in my time at VBS. You know, when you ask a group of 3-8 year olds what they prayed for and how God is answering their prayers, you will be surprised what you hear. But you will also be surprised at how your heart breaks when you hear children say that they prayed for a broken relationship or home and that God hasn’t answered their

prayer yet. And so, I was reminded of the sometimes , painful truth that even when we are “Watching for God,” we don’t seem him. We don’t see God, because we have a very small idea of what God is allowed to look like. We are too bound by the truths and answers we were looking for to see the way God might be present. We find that in verse 21 of our scripture today. Our two men are walking along the road talking with Jesus and they say : “we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all of this took place.” We HAD HOPED, the past tense. The men walking on the road away from Jerusalem had lost hope. God hadn’t been shown to them in the way they were expecting. Before this, they had been open and “Watching for God” but God had, in their minds let them down. But we know the rest of the story, the resurrected savior is walking right there next to them! What, in reality God had done, was better then what they had hoped for. Jesus wasn’t the military or political savior they had been watching for. He wasn’t going to free Israel from is enemies, but he was going to free all believers from the chains of sin. God hadn’t appeared the way the men had hoped, but God had definitely appeared.

As we continue on reading this story, we as the reader are given an advantage. The scripture tells us “Jesus himself came up and walked along with them.” We are in the know! Thank goodness! We don’t have to spend the whole story wondering what’s going on before Jesus is revealed to us the way the two men do. Wouldn’t it be nice to think that was always the way it was - That we were, 100% of the time aware of Jesus’ presence in our story. Wouldn’t it be nice to pretend that what these two men are experiencing is impossible for us to understand and has no relevance to our lives because if God was in my midst we would recognize him. But we can’t, or at least I can’t. Just like these men, most of us know the story of Christ. We could relay its details, we know about his work, about his death, about the empty tomb, but too often we are caught up in the hustle and bustle of our own lives, we are wrapped up in discouragement or fear, and we can’t see God right in our midst. Maybe that is part of why Luke tells this story. For many of us, this is a familiar story. We have heard plenty of times, and yet, let’s look together at the details of the story we really know... Two men, walking along the road, one nameless and one named Cleopas. If you are thinking that name doesn’t really ring a bell, it is because this is the only time we hear his name in the New Testament. He is, we are told a friend of Jesus, but he isn’t one of the 12. Not to say he isn’t significant, just to say that Luke seems to tell us that the two men in the story aren’t the important part of what is happening here. The characters are left open, as an invitation, as a reminder, that too often, we are those characters. We are the ones walking on the road, with all the knowledge of God and his glory

who are wrapped up in our own business, or the “business of faith” too much to see the resurrected Savior in our midst.

Lucky for us, and for the men, the story doesn't end there. They don't just walk along blindly the whole story, that wouldn't make for a very good story at all. No, Jesus is there with them, pursuing them, questioning them, informing them. He “explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself.” He had the opportunity to just open their eyes and reveal his presence to them, but he doesn't. Because, who Jesus is, our knowledge of his presence, is directly connected to our knowledge of scripture. I think parents call this, a teaching moment. The opportunity to teach these men about the scriptures is right there. And so, Jesus tells about himself through the scriptures, to those men, and to us. But he doesn't stop there. Jesus doesn't tell the men a good story and then just leave them. He stays the night with them, he sits down to meal with them, and he breaks bread with them. He makes his presence known to them, he makes the undeniable grace of the father known to these two men through the sacrament. And God continues to make himself known to us in those ways. Each time we turn to God's word we find the story, that reminds us that he is present, that everything on this Earth was created by God and that God is still present and working. We find the knowledge of God's love and grace and the story of his son who died for us for the forgiveness of our sins. And every time we sit together at this table, and break bread, we are able to see God's working presence in our lives. We aren't merely aware of the story of the crucified Christ, but we are in the presence of the resurrected Christ. God is meeting us through the sacrament of communion. God is revealing his presence among us once again through the breaking of bread.

How else is God making himself known to us, where are the moments in our lives where the bread is broken and we are fully aware of the presence of God? Since vacation bible school, I have worn my watch for God bracelet everyday, because it is a reminder to me to always be open to those broken bread moments. To always be watching for the ways in which the love of God is being conveyed. And I have found, that when I am watching, it is undeniable. God was in the friendly way our church staff greeted me each morning, in the laughter of kids running around at the church softball games, in the relationships that have formed for me this summer, in the way the sun hits those stained glass windows. And so, like our two travelers, when we are blessed with the knowledge of the presence of Christ. When we are fully aware of the living God, we are called to leave Emmaus.

“Then they got up at once and returned to Jerusalem.” And when they got back to Jerusalem, they told the disciples and people gathered with them that it was

true! And that Jesus was risen! The people they told didn't see Jesus right that minute, resurrected. Jesus hadn't met them on the road and opened their eyes, but they believed. Just like the men, we might be the people who share the love of the resurrected Christ with others! Wouldn't it be wonderful if when others were watching for God, they saw God in us? That our experience with the risen Christ might be so powerful that IMMEDIATELY, we got back on the road to tell others, to share with them the good news! That is completely possible! Everyday is an opportunity to see God, and to share God's love. Everyday is a Vacation Bible School day. Everyday is a day to fill stickers with "God sightings." We're never too old, or too young to see God working in our lives. God doesn't always work in monumental ways, sometimes he appears to us in the smile of a friend, or as the kids reminded me, a flower, or the sunshine. God doesn't always work in the ways we expect. But God is always at work in our lives. He is always pursuing us on the path, begging us to read his word, and break bread together so that we might truly see him. And when we do, may we be so excited that we immediately run to tell others, because God's grace, no matter how we experience it, really is too amazing to leave in Emmaus.