

Text: Matthew 4: 12-23  
Title: Jesus in the Dark  
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Where do you expect to encounter God?

*That question presupposes that you believe there is a God and that a human/divine encounter is not only possible but recognizable.*

*But, given all that...*

Where do you expect to encounter God?

Maybe you have sat in church hoping that God would be heard, only to have that hope deadened by the dull droning of the preacher. Maybe you have longed for God to break through in some private prayer pleading, "God be present. God help. God...." Maybe hiking in the mountains you expect God to show up over the crest of hill as the sun rises out of a morning mist. Maybe you thought God would speak softly and gently in the quiet of study and the stillness of imagination. Maybe you expect God to show up when the light is bright and you are at your best. Maybe you have stood graveside wishing, believing, trusting, hoping that God would be present only to be distracted by the cold, and the workers digging a new hole just beyond the tree, and the weariness of loss and longing and....

Where do you expect to encounter God?

Do you expect to meet God in scripture and sacrament?

Do you expect to find God in people?

Do you expect to embrace God in nature?

Do you expect to be moved by God in a mystical moment?

Do you expect to feel God?

Where do you expect to encounter God?

Well, the Jews living under Roman rule, during the reign of Herod Antipas, expected God to show up in Jerusalem to reclaim the temple or appear on the steps of the palace to overthrow the oppressor. They expected some expression of God to come down from a high holy mountain or to rise up from a valley of dry bones. The first century Hebrews expected God to throw a wrench in the political machine, throw out the powers that be, and establish a God-blessed kingdom. They expected the Anointed One of God to make a splash center stage in Palestine....

But, Jesus does the unexpected.

We expect to meet God and Jesus does the unexpected.

While Jesus was born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth, and baptized in the Jordan River, our text this morning notes that when he heard that John had been imprisoned Jesus "withdrew." He hightailed it, he retreated, he leisurely sauntered.... Jesus left the center of the "holy land" and journeyed to the region of Galilee, to the town of Capernaum.

*And here is the morning when I wish for screens with colorful maps and a laser pointer...*

If Jesus went to Capernaum, following his baptism and forty days in the wilderness, this withdrawal was something like 80 miles up the Jordan River ~ no easy journey at a donkey's pace. Now, there is no way to tell when he left or how long he took. And, there is no reason to

believe that he was running, for even in retreating to Capernaum he was still under the rule of Herod Antipas.

But, Jesus was certainly moving to a place out of the way. He skirts the center and heads for the boonies. He doesn't even settle in his own home town, but he makes his way to the margins,

to the edges,

to the north side of the Sea of Galilee,

to the base of the northern most mountainous region of Israel.

He went to a place that historically had been

exposed to foreign invasions,

suffered severely from wars with Syria and Assyria,

and was vulnerable to pagan influences.

Thus, it was "Galilee of the Gentiles."

As one wordy scholar puts it:

*In his sovereign grace God did the wholly unexpected. Not mainly to the Jerusalem aristocracy, but especially to the despised, sorely afflicted, and largely ignorant masses of Galilee, a mixed Gentile-Jewish population did he send his Son.*

Now, it doesn't strike me as incidental or simply some part of a plan to insure that he doesn't get into trouble too fast, but Jesus sets up shop where he was least expected. He goes to where people are

*sitting in darkness,...*

*sitting in the land of the shadow of death.*

Maybe Jesus was clearly aligning himself with the desperate, the forgotten, and the refugee. Maybe he was already casting his lot with those on the outside of power.

Or, maybe Jesus was clearly demonstrating that God's activity in human history pushes beyond the boundaries of the Jews. And, so Matthew ~ this most Jewish of the Gospels ~ who includes women in the genealogy, and astrologers at the birth, is again highlighting

that God keeps reaching out,

that light keeps pushing back darkness,

that God keeps going where God isn't expected.

And, it is in this dark-out-of-the-way-place that Jesus calls his disciples. He doesn't find them in the halls of learning; he doesn't meet them in the synagogue or the seminary; he finds them in the dark.

Dear friends, is it possible that we encounter God when it is the darkest?

When we are at our weakest?

When we are stretched our farthest?

When we are at a loss?

When we out of the way, out of comfort, out of confidence, out of control, out of answers?

Is it possible that we encounter God when it is darkest?

Despite my protests, my parents raised me on hymns, the music of Bach, Vivaldi, Handel, and the musical romances of “The King and I,” “My Fair Lady,” “West Side Story,” and “The Sound of Music.”

Well, there is a beautiful scene in “The Sound of Music” where Maria and the Capitan are in the garden gazebo acknowledging their love for one another, and Maria sings....

*Perhaps I had a wicked childhood  
Perhaps I had a miserable youth  
But somewhere in my wicked, miserable past  
There must have been a moment of truth*

*For here you are, standing there, loving me  
Whether or not you should  
So somewhere in my youth or childhood  
I must have done something good*

*Nothing comes from nothing  
Nothing ever could  
So somewhere in my youth or childhood  
I must have done something good*

Beautiful song ~ terrible theology.

I think our presupposition is that we encounter God in the light and the bright and the truth; and that somehow when we’ve been good enough and tried hard enough and been right enough, that then God will appear. But, God keeps showing up when we least expect it, in ways and places that surprise us. And deserve has nothing to do with it.

I know that stretches this text to a kind of shaky moralism, but isn’t it true that we often encounter God in surprising and unexpected ways?

Even when it is darkest,  
even when we don’t deserve it,  
even when we aren’t looking for it.  
And there is no darkness that light doesn’t push back.

Ed Searcy puts it this way:

*In the darkest places, the gospel comes first among the last and least. To our continuing surprise, the kingdom of heaven is closest to those who face the fact that they are not capable of lighting the darkness. Jesus does not begin his ministry with a church that is confident in its capabilities but with a people who know that they are in trouble.*

Now, Andrew, Simon Peter, James, and John were just going about their business, fumbling around in the dark trying to make a living, and God shows up and calls. And while there is a different account of this encounter in the Gospel of John ~ at a different place ~ Matthew offers no set up.

There is no journey,

no psychological or spiritual preparation,  
no story of previous encounter....

It is simply Jesus tracking them down, intrusive and impractical and incongruous as it may be,  
and calling them to follow.

One way to characterize the Bible is as a record of humanities long search for God ~ the  
expectation to encounter God. But, it is better understood that scripture is the story of God's  
search for humanity. Over and over in the Bible God seeks after us.

God goes looking for Adam and Eve.

God calls Abraham.

God tracks down Jacob.

God picks Moses.

God interrupts Jeremiah.

God chooses David.

God intrudes on Mary.

God shows up as a baby.

God gathers a band of disciples.

God goes to the cross.

God busts through death.

God goes where it is darkest.

God calls you and me.

I don't know where you expect to encounter God,  
but whether you are a rascal or recluse,  
whether you're impulsive or timid,  
whether you think we've got it buttoned down or its all coming apart,  
whether you're stumbling in the dark or marching in the light,  
God seeks after you and calls you to follow.

And, maybe someday when you're cleaning nets,  
or looking for your brother,  
or waiting for your lover,  
or doing your best to make ends meet,  
or burying the dead,  
or buying the bread,  
Jesus will show up and call you to follow.  
Even when you least expect it.  
Even in the dark.

May we have the ears to hear, and the courage to drop what we're doing,  
and the hearts to follow whenever we encounter God.  
Amen.