

“The Problem with an Invisible God”

Genesis 28:10-19a; *Psalm 139*; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

From the Morning Psalter comes the following prayer, “Search me, O God; know my heart and know my thoughts.” (Psalm 139) In the searching of my heart, the Lord knows that I am happy to be home as Kay and I have just returned from two special, week-long conferences at the Montreat Conference Center in NC, the Jerusalem for southern Presbyterians.

Our first trip was devoted to the task of helping to chaperone 22 children and teenagers participating in the popular Worship & Music Conference. With Jodie Linn cooking breakfast, the first challenge of the day was to get the kids up, dressed and to the breakfast table and then to their respective workshops a mile away by 8 o’clock. Lola Magliano, Lillian and Kay managed the girls while Charlie and I rode herd over the boys. Then it was back to the house for a quick bite of lunch in preparation for afternoon workshops that ran through the balance of the day.

In addition to the music, our kids enjoyed making new friends, rock-hopping, climbing the trail up Lookout Mountain, canoeing and fishing in Lake Susan, and visiting the infamous Huckleberry for delicious scoops of ice cream. Each day started with a reading of the Morning Psalter followed by Morning Prayer and each day ended with a reading from the Evening Psalter followed by Evening Prayer. Each day. Every day. Lights out at 11:00 and lights on at 6:30. Each day. Every day.

And then the magnificent crescendo. The choral concert on Friday night with Anderson Auditorium filled with twelve hundred children, youth and adults in various choirs ringing bells and raising voices in song to the Glory of God. Life can be difficult, unpredictable, and hard, but on the mountain at Montreat children, teenagers and adults were reminded by word and sacrament, music and song that the Lord is with us even when we may not know it.

And then there was the Montreat Youth Conference. Dan and Angela Durbin along with Kay and I escorted 9 of our young people up the mountain where they gathered with 1,142 other youth from around the southeast, some as far away as Rochester, New York and Seattle, Washington. For five days we focused on the following theme, “The Missing Peace.” Early mornings and late nights. Morning Psalter and Morning Prayer. Evening Psalter and Evening Prayer. Up the mountain. Down the mountain. In the midst of fellowship and laughter, the days were filled with worship and small group discussions as we explored the many disruptions in life today in the context of seeking and living in God’s peace, learning at the same time what it means to be a part of a Christian community of faith.

Sitting in a circle after lunch, I happened to mention to the group that one of the greatest challenges I face as a pastor is finding a good sermon title for the Sunday sermons. It was Luke Miller who entered the conversation and offered to help me with this particular task. Luke read the OT lesson on Tuesday, shared a title on Wednesday, and we’re using it today: “The Problem

with an Invisible God.” As Luke read the lesson from Genesis, I’m thinking that he envisioned the person of Jacob caught in the middle of a family feud, running for safety from an angry brother, and the God of Abraham and Isaac is absent and nowhere to be seen.

And yet, Jacob has been raised and nurtured in the faith. At the center of a nasty family fight is the blessing Isaac gave to his younger son Jacob instead of Esau, “Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed. May God give you the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. Blessed be everyone who blesses you.” Esau felt manipulated and robbed. (Genesis 27)

It’s in the tight, dangerous, lonely, uncertain places that we sometimes wonder if God is real, if the gospel is true, if God’s reign of justice and peace is really coming. When we feel threatened, when life overwhelms us, and we find ourselves in the valley of the shadow, I admit to Luke there are times and places when God can seem invisible. Our faith wanes, our hearts are filled with doubt, and the human spirit finds itself at a low ebb. Even the disciples of Jesus entertained moments of doubt and fear.

In quiet moments at Montreat, I re-acquainted myself with a book titled “The Pastor,” written by Eugene Peterson, a widely respected Presbyterian Pastor now retired and living in Montana. The book chronicles Peterson’s work in parish ministry and is filled with great advice and powerful wisdom for anyone called to the work of serving people of a congregation in the position of a pastor.

In the early portion of the narrative, Peterson writes about the experience of working alongside his father building a simple cabin that has remained in the family. Through the years the cabin has been offered to people who have been displaced or fallen on hard times. Missionaries suffering from fatigue and illness have recovered their health. A 50 year old stonemason who had the wind knocked out of him by the death of his wife from cancer, started breathing again. Peterson describes the cabin and surrounding property as sacred ground, a place of hospitality and healing. (The Pastor, page 10)

In the Old Testament lesson for today, Jacob has left home at the advice of his mother Rebekah and his father Isaac. Jacob seeks refuge at the home of a man by the name of Laban, the brother of Rebekah, his mother. In flight, on the run, unable to make the long trip in a day, night comes. Jacob stops, finds a stone, uses it to rest his head, falls asleep and dreams. In the dream the Lord assures Jacob that he is with him. The Lord promises to watch over Jacob and to bring him back home. When Jacob awakes from his sleep he is a new man. Filled with hope and a resilient spirit Jacob declares, “Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it!”

The community of Montreat, a cabin somewhere in the mountains of Montana, this sanctuary, and certain places known only to you that are special and unique represent what I believe to be sacred ground, places of hospitality and healing, places where God speaks to us and

reminds that he is not absent or invisible, that he is with us even when we may not know it. All of us grieve for the family of a 2 year old boy from California who drowned on a Sunday morning in a Bluffton pond. We have reflected on how fragile life can be when we learned that Arizona Senator John McCain has been diagnosed with an aggressive brain tumor, and we ponder our own issues and predicaments that disrupt the peace and comfort of one's soul. In the words of Paul, all of us know the experience of suffering.

In response to this apostolic witness, Philip Yancey writes that every person on earth lives out a unique script of hardship: singleness when marriage was always a goal, or a physical disability, poverty, child abuse, racial prejudice, chronic illness, family dysfunction, addiction, divorce. We often direct our frustration and anger at God, but the gospel tells us that God is at work in Christ redeeming the very things we resent most about life. (Reaching for the Invisible God, page 280) Like Jacob, night comes to us all. Night invites us to stop and rest, to welcome stillness and dreams, to hear God's voice and reassurance that in our efforts to run and escape the people or situations that threaten us, that make us wobble with anxiety and fear, the Lord is with us even when we may not know it.

As we prepare for a new week, may the seed that Jesus sows among us by way of the gospel find good soil both in our heart and soul. May the seed of the gospel take root and grow that we can be the wheat among the weeds. In the times and places of your life you feel alone, afraid, and abandoned, do not be afraid of the night. Embrace it for as the Psalmist declares, there will be times when darkness will cover us and the light around us will become night, but the darkness is not dark to the Lord. Even though the Lord may be hidden from us, we are not hidden from him. O Lord, if I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand will lead me and your right hand shall hold me fast. (Psalm 139)  
Amen.