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Eyes Wide Open: Never Alone

Genesis 28:10-19

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Have you ever had a time in your life where you felt all alone? Maybe even felt as if God had abandoned you. I sure have. We are in a worship series entitled, “Eyes Wide Open.” We’re taking time to explore all the ways we see and experience God. Even when we feel all alone.

I remember feeling all alone when I was a freshman at Arizona State University. Before I left Minnesota for my first year of college I was so excited. I was going to a new part of the country. A place where Minnesota winters were nonexistent. Plus, I was attending the very same university where my parents met. I couldn’t wait to get there!

Once I arrived, I got all set up in my dorm room and then I sat there. I knew no one, my roommate had a boyfriend so she wasn’t there, ever. I was all alone. I kept praying to God, “Where are you? I am so alone. God, do you even know that I moved, that I’m in Arizona now?”

It turns out my thoughts and feelings have been felt by the people of God for thousands of years. I imagine Moses may have felt this same way. Moses was called to lead God’s people out of slavery in Egypt and he told the Pharaoh to let God’s people go. As incentive, the Nile River was turned to blood. Moses thought that ought to do it, surely the Pharaoh will let God’s people go. But it didn’t. In fact, it only made things worse for the Israelite slaves; they were forced to work harder! I am sure Moses thought, hey, God, where are you? Have you disappeared from me, from us? Moses wasn’t the only one wondering where God was in the midst of difficult times. Jacob had the same issue.

Our scripture for today is from the book of Genesis, chapter 28, verses 10-19 *The Message Bible*:

10-12 Jacob left Beersheba and went to Haran. He came to a certain place and camped for the night since the sun had set. He took one of the stones there, set it under his head and lay down to sleep. And he dreamed: A stairway was set on the ground and it reached all the way to the sky; angels of God were going up and going down on it.

13-15 Then GOD was right before him, saying, “I am GOD,

the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. I’m giving the ground on which you are sleeping to you and to your descendants. Your descendants will be as the dust of the Earth; they’ll stretch from west to east and from north to south. All the families of the Earth will bless themselves in you and your descendants. Yes. I’ll stay with you, I’ll protect you wherever you go, and I’ll bring you back to this very ground. I’ll stick with you until I’ve done everything I promised you.”

16-17 Jacob woke up from his sleep. He said, “GOD is in this place—truly. And I didn’t even know it!” He was terrified. He whispered in awe, “Incredible. Wonderful. Holy. This is God’s House. This is the Gate of Heaven.”

18-19 Jacob was up first thing in the morning. He took the stone he had used for his pillow and stood it up as a memorial pillar and poured oil over it. He christened the place Bethel (God’s House).

Here is what was going on in Jacob’s life. Jacob was younger than his twin brother, Esau. According to his culture, Esau, as the firstborn, should have all of his father Isaac’s inheritance. Everything should go to the older brother, Esau. Through a series of cruel and deceitful actions, Jacob had managed to trick his father into giving him everything that was to go to Esau – the inheritance, the land, and his father’s special blessing. Everything! Jacob deceived his brother on every front. Esau was understandably enraged and threatened to kill his brother. Jacob then had to flee for his life.

So that’s what he does. Jacob runs from home, he has to leave everything behind – his home, his land, and his parents, his life. Jacob is vulnerable, traveling alone, sleeping under the stars. He feels far from home, from family, and even more from the presence of God. He wondered where God was!

Have you ever wondered where God was? No matter how much you prayed or sought after God’s presence, you only experienced an absence of God?

If you are like me, there are times when you have struggled with feeling like God is nowhere to be found. We ask ourselves why doesn’t God show up in a way that we can see, or touch, or even hear God. With the pandemic of Covid 19 and the horrible sickness that goes with it, the question is asked, “Where is God in all of this?” And with racial inequality that so many have lived with for all of their lives, terrible injustice, they’ve been asking, “Where are you, God, in this?”

There are numerous times that we feel as if God is absent, even though we know that God is with us, it’s

hard to understand why God seems so hidden from us.

We are a lot more like Jacob than we would like to admit, and he is like us. That is why the story of Jacob is so important. While fleeing through a foreign land, Jacob beds down on rocky ground. He feels he has nowhere to turn. Things cannot possibly get any worse.

It is at that very point where God is revealed to him in a dream. In his dream Jacob sees a staircase going up to heaven. The angels are coming and going and doing the work of God. The voice of God is heard and Jacob awakes a changed man. God is in this place, truly! What surprised Jacob the most was that God was in that place and he did not even know it.

Sometimes it takes looking backwards to see the way that God meets us in our lives.

When we are broken, lost, and all alone, we feel like there is nowhere else to turn. We don't often experience God in the way we want, we may even doubt God's very presence. But as we look at how we go through life, God was part of it. God was part of Jacob's story and that reminds us that God is present with us. God is in this place, truly. It's just hard to believe sometimes. Even when we are feeling between a rock and a hard place God, through the Holy Spirit, intercedes for us with words too deep to express.

God's presence in our lives may look different than what we expect. Sometimes I have prayed, "God will you just give me a sign that you here." Sure, there have been times when I have seen something that God's presence is known. It could be a phone call or a cardinal in my window. But other times it is only after I look back at the silence that I realize that God was with me.

The Psalmist says, *"Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there"* (Psalm 139:7-8). Surely God inhabits every nook and cranny of our lives. When we don't sense God's presence, it's not because God is absent. It's because we don't always have an awareness of God's presence.

What are some ways we can experience God's presence in our lives? How can we look with eyes wide open? Here are a few ways I am going to share with you. Just three ways that you can experience God's presence through ordinary, everyday life.

ORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES

One of the ways is through ordinary circumstances. We can experience God in ordinary circumstances in our lives... in a stunning sunrise or a quiet bike ride. We can sense God's presence in creation as we walk through woods or neighborhoods. We can see God's handiwork

in the lakes and rivers. God is present in the sweet little bunnies and beautiful deer. And God is just as real and present in our struggles and our hurt. When we feel a peace that "transcends all understanding" in the midst of our tough circumstances, God is right there with us. God's presence invades grocery lines and football stadiums, cry rooms and cafeterias. And even in the silence of being at home. God is present in ways we expect and in ways we don't expect.

ORDINARY PEOPLE

Another way we can experience God's presence is through ordinary people. Though often people expect to experience God through spiritual leaders, we must recognize that we can receive God's presence in the care and love from anybody. That includes you. You can share God's presence when you are with someone else. Because God is in you and in all people. From the insightful words of a friend to even the kindness of a stranger, God can communicate God's presence through us and through those around us.

ORDINARY WORDS

And the last place that you can experience God is through ordinary words. I've often experienced God through the written word. God has been present to me in the words that other people have written, like Richard Rohr, Sue Monk Kidd, Brian McLaren, C. S. Lewis, and even Dr. Seuss. They have all written pieces where I've encountered the presence of God. Of course a great book to spend time in is the Bible. In all this, I see glimpses of the goodness and glory of God.

God promises to be present among all people. When we gather together to worship or simply to love and encourage one another, God is there. Jesus said, *"Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am with them."* Even if we are worshipping online! Imagine that! God is with us right now, online, and in our work, in our worship, in our celebrations, in our homes, and in all our circumstances.

God is present. God's presence became human in Jesus and continues to live with us through the Holy Spirit. All of life belongs to God, and God is everywhere in life.

This week, may you experience God's presence in a way you never did before. And when you do, share it with someone. Keep your eyes wide open and look and see and experience God's presence in your life and in others. Amen.