

Communion Meditation Bringing Home Their God-Moments

Genesis 28: 12-17

Luke 24:28-35

Focus: "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!"—Genesis 28:16

So locked are they [i.e., the Biblical characters] into their usual ways of perception, sight and sound, that they miss even the most obvious clues as to His real identity—they are in a fog. But then, suddenly, the truth dawns on them, and they realize that God is right there in front of them. This is the true God of much of the book of Genesis—indeed, of much of the Bible as a whole.—James L. Kugel, How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now.

It will not be "Who are you?" but "So it was you all the time." The dim consciousness of friends about us which has haunted our solitudes from infancy will at last be explained; that central music in every pure experience which has always just evaded memory will at last be recovered.—C.S. Lewis, The Screwtape Letters (adapted) on seeing God face to face.

First Scripture Lesson: Genesis 28: 12-17

When it comes to God and God's presence with us, we are, according to Old Testament scholar, James Kugel, "in a fog." It's not that God is remote, distant, or impossibly far away. Not at all. Often times, at least for the characters of the Old Testament, God is right there with them, as promised. But they can't see it, they don't recognize God as God—they are in a fog.

But then, on occasion, the fog lifts, if only for a moment. This is what happens to Jacob: he's running for his life, feeling utterly abandoned, exhausted, but when he finally stops to sleep, he has a dream, and in that dream, for a moment, the fog lifts. Listen now for God's word to us. Genesis Chapter 28 verses 12-17:

And Jacob dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

And the LORD stood beside him and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring.

Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!” And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

Second Scripture Lesson: Luke 24:28-35

It happens in the New Testament too—the fog lifting, I mean, if only for a moment.

It’s Easter Sunday, the first Easter Sunday, and two of Jesus’ disciples, exhausted and scared, having heard, second-hand, a strange story that Jesus is somehow alive, decide it’s best to skedaddle, to leave Jerusalem and walk to the town of Emmaus, some eight miles away.

But as they walk, they are joined by a mysterious stranger, and this stranger begins to talk with them, to teach them, to open up the Scriptures for them, showing them that it was all meant to be—that the Messiah had to be betrayed, suffer and die, and on the third day be raised from the dead.

The mysterious stranger, of course, is Jesus, and he’s talking about himself. But all the while, the two disciples don’t recognize him. They are in a fog. Until the end, that is. And then, in a moment, in the breaking of the bread, the fog lifts. Listen now for God’s Word, Luke 24 verses 28-35:

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Communion Meditation: Bringing Home Their God-Moments

You know, don’t you, that they’re going to come back home with their God-moments? I mean all those who were just up front here; those who are going on the choir trip to Scotland or on the mission trip to Kentucky, or to Kirkmont or General Assembly or volunteering for MADD camp—they’re all going to come back home with their God-moments.

On the choir trips, at the end of every day, all the youth and all the adult youth advisors gather together—Nancy always asks in advance if the hotel has a meeting room we can use—and after going over the logistics of the next day’s schedule—“The bus leaves at 8:00 am sharp, you need to have your luggage packed and underneath, but don’t forget to bring your rain jackets and music folders onto the bus with you!”—after that, the most important thing happens: we go around the circle and everyone tells about their God-moments for that day, a God-moment being one in which you become aware of the presence of God.

You may remember, some time back, I spoke about *thin places*.

A thin place is a place where the barrier between the physical and spiritual worlds becomes permeable. A thin place is a place where you come to see, to feel, to know the goodness and beauty, the very reality, of yourself, of others, of this world, of God. A thin place is a place where heaven and earth touch, a place where the grace of God is experienced, and the deepest reality of things is known.

Or to put it simply, a thin place is where God-moments tend to happen.

Nothing is guaranteed of course, and certainly we can't put restrictions on God, spatial or otherwise. The Spirit will blow where the Spirit will: A God moment can happen anywhere, anytime; our God is a God of infinite surprise.

But through time, certain places have come to be associated with God-moments, with the fog lifting, with our experiencing the presence of God. That place where Jacob had his dream, for example. Jacob set up a stone there, the same stone he used as a pillow, and he consecrated it, and called the place Beth-El or House of God, and it became a thin place ever after.

As a matter of fact, tradition has it that that very same stone that Jacob slept on, that very same stone Jacob consecrated, *that* stone was brought to Scotland—no one's quite sure how—way back in the sixth century, landing where else but at Iona, where it was used in the coronation of Aedan Mac Gabrain King of Dál Riata in the year 574 CE. The Scots call it “the Stone of Destiny.”

And it was that same stone that was used some 70 years ago in the Coronation of Elizabeth II. Our choir trip will be able to see the Stone of Destiny when they visit Edinburgh Castle.

Thin places are places where God-moments tend to happen.

Like Iona, for example. Iona, that small, remote island off the western coast of Scotland where Christianity, under the leadership of St. Columba, first came to Scotland. The abbey has been rebuilt there; it's been made into a retreat center, and in the past 100 years it's become a thin place again for many, many people as it was for centuries.

And yet even here the Spirit will blow where the Spirit will.

For several of our students, when we went to Scotland back in 2016, their God-moments on Iona were not in the cool, shadow-filled sanctity of the Abbey's thick stone walls, nor were they in the sun-warmed shadow of the eighteen-foot-high St John's cross standing outside—no, it was in climbing up and slipping down, clambering up and rolling down one of the little hills on the far side of the island. In the rain. In the mud. *“Oh it was just so much fun: we were soaked and just covered in mud and all we could do was laugh and laugh—and oh, it was just so much fun.”*

Our God is a God of infinite surprise.

And it's not just at Iona—one of the God-moments that the students talk about the most is seeing the appreciation, the love and the joy, on the faces of the people in the churches when they sing. In fact, in a few minutes, right after worship, the Knox Choir will be back up here—they're downstairs getting ready now—to sing for us, to give us a send-off concert before they leave for Scotland on Tuesday morning.

And when they get back from Scotland, we can hear about their God-moments—on Sunday, July 17, for example, after worship, when they make a presentation about their trip. But I don't think that will be the last time we'll hear about their God-moments.

I'll bet you—I'll lay you odds even—that come Youth Sunday, for the next however many years, when our seniors are up here talking about their faith journeys, they will talk about their God-moments, especially on choir trips, including Scotland. That's what happened on this past Youth Sunday and on every youth Sunday I can remember. I'll lay you whatever odds you want—you name 'em—and I'll still win . . . all proceeds of course going to benefit the Westminster Music Fund in Honor of John W. Neely, which helps make those trips possible.

Yes, they're going to come back home with their God-moments. And that's wonderful and that's a gift—for them and for us. But as important and as life-defining as God-moments are, life isn't made up entirely of God-moments.

Think of those two disciples walking to Emmaus: yes, they had their God moment when they recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread. That's what they talked about—understandably that's all they could talk about—when they first came back home. But that moment of recognition would not have happened but for Jesus' teaching them, opening up the Scriptures for them, during that long walk, when they were still in a fog. That's when their cold hearts began to burn and their broken hearts began to heal.

Or think of them in the weeks, months and years ahead after they come back from Emmaus to Jerusalem. They're going to need that God-moment—the memory of that God moment—as a touchstone, a bulwark, a surety to help them face the darkness that await them: darkness that Jesus warns them about: “See, I am sending you out like sheep among wolves, you will be hated and persecuted because of me . . . so believe in the light, that you may become children of light.”

God-moments are a wonderful gift, but life isn't made up entirely of God-moments. One of our jobs as the church is to create conditions for the possibility of God-moments and for continued growth from them, even when we are not in those moments themselves, even, yes, when we're in in a fog and everything seems dark. That's how we can help them bring home their God's moments so we will hear about them for Youth Sundays to come.

And just so communion. For the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, the breaking of the bread *was* their God moment—that moment when their eyes were opened, when they suddenly became aware of God with them. And that can happen to us too; communion can be a thin place for us: I have a friend who during communion had a vision of the great cloud of witnesses—all the saints that have gone before us—filling this sanctuary surrounding us, loving us all. That's beautiful: a God-moment and a wonderful gift.

But for me, more often, communion is strength for the journey ahead, a light in the darkness—laying the groundwork for those God moments to come, building on those I've already had.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.”

That's what communion most often says to me: Even when we're in a fog, even we're not aware of God's presence—and, this side of heaven, we're never fully aware of God's presence—nonetheless God is with us. God is preparing us for those moments.

So even those of us who aren't going on these trips this summer, maybe who aren't even traveling much at all this summer, let's nonetheless be alive for our own God-moments because they will come, perhaps when we least expect them, because our God is a God of infinite surprise.

And as for those going on the trips, those we've just now commissioned—they're going to come back home—safe, sound, and on time: they are in good hands, because they are in God's hands.

But yes, parents, I worry too. Prayer is the best antidote I have found for parental anxiety, and so I recommend it to you all, although I'll confess that, in my case, it's only ever been at best a partial remedy. So please: Let's all keep all our summer travelers in our prayers.

They're going to come back home, and they're going to come back home with their God-moments. And that's wonderful and that's a gift—for them and for us.

And one day, God will bring us all back home with our God-moments. That's what those God-moments—that's what this table—means: that God is with us; that, in life and in death, we belong to God; and that, one day, we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever and our joy will be complete.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.