

## When God Shows Up

A sermon by Pr. David Johnson

Sometimes God shows up in the most peculiar places and at the strangest times. I mean, we expect to meet God in the usual places like church, at Bible study, or maybe in the presence of a spiritual mentor. So when our souls experience that undeniable excitement, peace, or joy that comes with an honest-to-goodness encounter with God: we aren't surprised.

But once in a while, God challenges our expectations and shows Himself in the middle of an otherwise unspiritual situation: a Muslim man experiences Jesus in a vivid dream, an atheistic biology teacher encounters the truth of God through his evolutionary instruction (Dr. Don Bierle), a seasoned German theologian comes to understand a personal relationship with Christ through the discrimination and example of a black Baptist church in Harlem, NY (Bonheoffer).

Still others have witnessed the hand of God in the midst of tremendous hardships: Ruth found the faithfulness of God in the midst of famine and loss; Job experienced the sovereignty (and blessing) of God through great pain and devastation; Moses saw first-hand, the wonder of God's power and deliverance in the face of overwhelming opposition and oppression. And more recently, Corrie Ten Boom witnessed God's power at work within the horrors of a German WWII concentration camp.

We can never know exactly what God will do, or when He'll chose to do it. As Mr. Beaver warned the Kings and Queens in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, "He'll be coming and going...One day you'll see him and another you won't. He doesn't like being tied down--and of course he has other countries to attend to. It's quite all right. He'll often drop in. Only you mustn't press him. He's wild, you know. Not like a tame lion."

We even see Jesus use this language of mystery in His parables when describing the nature of God:

**Matt 25:15, 19** "To one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each according to his own ability; and he went on his journey...Now after a long time the master of those slaves \*came and \*settled accounts with them."

**Luke 20:9-10** "A man planted a vineyard and rented it out to vine-growers, and went on a journey for a long time. <sup>10</sup> At the harvest time he sent a slave to the vine-growers..."

You just never know how or when God will show up. That is part of the excitement, the awe, and the mystery of the Christian walk. God's sovereignty is the source of many wondrous surprises, but it is also the reason we must never become too complacent.

Our Old Testament lesson for today offers just such a lesson through the experience of Jacob, son of Isaac and brother to Esau. Jacob, with the help of his mother, had just tricked Isaac into giving him the blessing intended for Esau. Esau was now blood-thirsty for revenge. Both Rebekah and Isaac thought it would be a good time to run

for the hills. Isaac thought it might be a good time to take an extended trip to see the relatives and find himself a wife (why waste the trip on just a good escape).

Well, it was while on this journey that Jacob laid down for the night, using a rock as a pillow, and eventually had a dream.

**Gen 28:12** He had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. **13** And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. **14** "Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. **15** "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

Imagine the situation. You've just swindled your brother out of a fantastic future. You deceived your father; conning him into giving you your brother's blessing. You're now on the run to a far-off land, with the daunting assignment of finding a wife. Things aren't exactly moving in your favor at the moment.

But then something remarkable happens: GOD SHOWS UP. And though Jacob might deserve a real chiding, God doesn't go there. Instead, He meets Jacob at his points of need; fear, doubt, insecurity, and loneliness. God delivers to Jacob a message of hope, provision, protection, and companionship. Of course, later in Jacob's journey we see him and God wrestle out a few things. But at this moment, God simply meets Jacob where he's at.

And how does Jacob respond?

**Gen 28:16** Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." **17** 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."

I love Jacob's response here, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." How many times have I found myself in that same place? Circumstances or decisions take you in unexpected directions, you feel lost or confused; and God shows up. You may be facing some problem or decision and you're just about to throw up your hands in despair; when God shows up. "The LORD is in this place, and I didn't know it." You could probably list any number of times when God showed up in your desperation and led you to make one choice over another.

Vicki and I have experienced this many times in our lives as we've prayed through many calls to ministry; including this call and our move from Minnesota to Pennsylvania. You've heard me share my own experience how, in the midst of a simple sightseeing excursion up to the Reading Pagoda, God showed up. And in a manner very similar to that of Jacob, God brought comfort and encouragement. "I will be with you wherever you go, and wherever the sole of your foot shall tread, I will give it to

you.” He didn’t chastise my doubt or insecurities. Those things would be wrestled through as we continued walking with Jesus. But in the midst of an unexpected event, God showed up with what we needed at that moment.

The disciples experienced a similar event when God showed up as they were panicking over their limitations.

**Mark 8:1** In those days, when there was again a large crowd and they had nothing to eat, Jesus called His disciples and \*said to them, 2 "I feel compassion for the people because they have remained with Me now three days and have nothing to eat. 3 "If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way; and some of them have come from a great distance."

I can guess what the disciples were thinking about at that time, “There are lots of hungry people and they don’t have any resource. We’re just as sympathetic as the next guy. But what are we supposed to do about it?” We see their confusion and inactivity in their response.

**Mark 8:4** And His disciples answered Him, "Where will anyone be able {to find enough} bread here in {this} desolate place to satisfy these people?"

The disciples accurately identify several issues:

1. **This problem will take more people than our small group to remedy.**
2. **The amount of bread needed to feed this group would require a substantial supplier.**
3. **There isn’t a town for miles, and the land itself won’t offer any kind of refreshment.**
4. **The problem isn’t just about keeping this huge group alive, but also satisfying their nagging hunger.**

The need of the crowd was overwhelming. The lack of resource made their circumstances seem impossible. The potential consequence of illness or death brought an intensity to the situation that could have resulted in panic. But then, God showed up (*in Jesus Christ*).

**Mark 8:5** And He was asking them, "How many loaves do you have?" And they said, "Seven." 6 And He \*directed the people to sit down on the ground; and taking the seven loaves, He gave thanks and broke them, and started giving them to His disciples to serve to them, and they served them to the people. 7 They also had a few small fish; and after He had blessed them, He ordered these to be served as well. 8 And they ate and were satisfied; and they picked up seven large baskets full of what was left over of the broken pieces. 9 About four thousand were {there;} and He sent them away.

Like Moses centuries before, God told the disciples to consider what they had available at the moment. God used a common staff as a miraculous instrument of deliverance in Moses’ hand. Likewise, Jesus showed up in the midst of a desperate situation and used what was available (*7 loaves and a few small fish*) to touch the lives of thousands. In the end, all were satisfied, the disciples were taught an important lesson, and thousands made their way home with an awesome story to tell (*to say nothing of all the leftovers; 7 large baskets*).

Now, Mark doesn’t record the disciple’s reaction to Jesus’ miracle, but God does reveal Jacob’s reaction.

**Gen 28:18** So Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and

poured oil on its top. 19 He called the name of that place Bethel; however, previously the name of the city had been Luz. 20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, 21 and I return to my father's house in safety, then the LORD will be my God. 22 "This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You."

When we experience the presence and power of God in the midst of our everyday circumstances, it motivates us to worship and trust Him in other areas of our life. God has given His church great opportunities and a worldwide mission. He hasn’t told us to part the sea, or feed thousands. But if He did, God would simply ask the same question He asked Moses and the disciples, “What do you have in your hand?” And then He’d take it from there.

What circumstance are you facing right now? What challenge lies before you? What people need to be touched or rescued through you? What do you have in your hand to offer God? Who knows what miracle can be performed through you...when God shows up?