

Date Preached

20-Dec-2020

Date Initiated

08-Dec-2020

Where Preached

SAK

Appointed Readings

Adv 4, Yr B

"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is ~with you~."



"Where is Jesus with you?" It was a question that stopped me in my tracks ... and probably changed the course of my life.

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It was the spring before I was to head off to seminary. All the diocesan paperwork toward the priesthood had been completed ... the company I was working for knew of my plans ... I was in the middle of an internship at a dear parish across the state ... and shortly I'd receive my acceptance letter from seminary. I'm a planner and an organizer ... a list-maker and list-crosser-offer ... and I thought I had this whole process under control. There'd be no surprises: I'd just coast from corporation to classroom without missing a beat.

And then came the question—well, actually, the *first* question, which then *led* to the second question—the one that I began with. The first question was, "Have you ever had spiritual direction?" It was a question I had, in truth, been avoiding, for back then I was a bit leery of the whole idea of spirituality. I was a word-guy ... an idea-man ... who experienced God through reading and writing; through learning and listening and even singing. Whatever took place in me that one might call *spiritual* was rather peripheral ... unnoticed.

As it turned out, however, spiritual direction saved my spiritual life ... by letting me find it! Direction was a free-and-open invitation ... a gift, really ... to talk and share and reflect ... to speculate and dream and cry ... as I discovered and explored an entirely new dimension of my faith. Spiritual direction wasn't talking about the Bible or theology or even ministry. No, my director Maria told me, our sessions would be given over to my *experience* of God ... to my personal *relationship* with Jesus ... to my inward sense of how or when or why the Holy Spirit was active *in my life*. Although I don't think my director put it quite this way, spiritual direction would get me out of my head and into my heart ... indeed, into my very soul ... so that I could 'learn' Jesus—see Him, hear Him, touch Him, know Him—in intimate, silent and deeply profound ways that, I now understand, my brain was distrustful and disdainful of but my heart was ready for ... craving, even.

So, there I was: in only my second or third session with Maria. I was nattering on about the three persons of the Trinity—I now can only imagine how hard she must resisted rolling her eyes—when she blurted out, "Where is Jesus with you?" [*pause*] I didn't have a *clue* what Maria was asking me ... but that rarely stops a lawyer who's been asked a pointed question, so I blundered into something about feeling Jesus with me when I was leading a youth retreat or sometimes when singing in church. No, she said, not when: *Where* is Jesus with you? I pivoted: Oh ... well, I often see Jesus in nature—usually where land meets both sky and water ... and in beautiful cathedrals, especially in the waning hours of daylight.

No, no, no, Maria jumped in again: "Where is Jesus **with you** – in relation to you? How do you see yourself and Him? Is [**unbalanced gesture**] He up here and you down here, like this ... or are you more friends—equals, like this [**balanced gesture**]?"

Like this [**balanced gesture**]?! Good heavens, no! He's God: I wasn't *worthy* ... I could never get that close! I stumbled through the rest of our session, intrigued but also deflated. For Maria told me that unless I saw and spoke and prayed to Jesus like this [**balanced gesture; & hold**] ... unless I laughed and cried with Him and raged at Him and became exasperated with Him just like this [**balanced gesture**], I didn't really know Jesus at all. She was, I now can see, wisely guiding someone whose faith was almost entirely in his head ... into his heart ... into his soul: out of the safe-but-distant space of words and ideas and doing-things ... and into the squishy, up-close realm of the spiritual. It was exactly where I'd dreaded she would take me ... and exactly where I needed to go.

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I didn't intend this sermon to be a page out of my own spiritual autobiography or a confession of how much I needed—and still need!—to work on the full dimensionality of my faith. No, all of this came to me ... and more or less poured out of me ... as I pondered today's readings. For in King David I see the relationship with God I used to have ... still have, in part; and in the Virgin Mary, the relationship I have been blessed with these last several years ... and still strive for.

David is the man-of-action, the doer-of-deeds, no less so in the experience of his faith than in leading his army or governing his people or penning his sheaf of psalms. He has, for the last chapter or so of Second Samuel, been slowly dragging the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem—famously (or infamously) dancing with wild abandon and practically naked, as it gets carted along. Far from just a fancy box, the Ark is, for the Israelites, "a direct manifestation of God's presence"; indeed, we hear God tell David that since the days of the Exodus, God has been "moving about" with God's people in an ark kept "in a tent and a tabernacle." Now king of a united Israel, David is the new keeper of the Ark, and he's decided to erect fixed boundaries around this presence-of-God: to build a splendid, solid stone temple ... an immovable home in which to 'keep' God.

For decades now, David has witnessed, first-hand, God's glory and power ... has received God's love and mercy. David's response, however, isn't to *embrace* God's bountiful presence in his life – to wade into it, float quietly and be overtaken by it – but to do something with ... or *to* ... God's presence: to build a house to worship God, and to honor God and – let us not miss it – to *cabin* God. David wants to establish a little distance: to put God where, he thinks, his relationship with God will be safe and secure; stable and well-ordered. A vaunted, ethereal God of altars and glittering gold and billowing incense: a God up here [**half of unbalanced gesture**] Whom we—down here [**other half of gesture**]—are barely, if at all, worthy to raise our heads and squint up at.

But God tells David no. Being fenced in and preened over and peered at, and all from a safe distance, is at cross-purposes with God's intense desire to be in active ... pulsing ... flexing ... unbounded ... intertwining ... intimate *relationship* with us. And here ... *here* ... is the miracle of Mary at the Annunciation: When an angel of the Lord bends low to address an anonymous young woman of no earthly import in the backwater of Nazareth, she doesn't flinch or flee. She doesn't try to set a limit for God ... to mark God into some safe zone that preserves her own autonomy.

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\* Harper-Collins Bible Dictionary, s.v. ark.

Mary responds to God's presence not with distance but with complete embrace. She does not pursue head-calculated safety *from* God but heart-piercing, soul-penetrating intimacy *with* God. If God wishes to be wholly present in her, then she wishes to be wholly present in God. Overcoming, no doubt, extreme emotional overload and having exactly *no* idea of why God has sought her out ... or how totally her life will change ... or how God, through her, is bringing about a new and final covenant of salvation for all ... Mary just says yes to being like this [***balanced gesture***] with God. Before Jesus ever *is* ... and simply because God *asks* ... Mary throws wide the doors of her heart and invites God in, forever. She offers her very soul to God and bids God overtake it, so that her every whim may be God's will ... her every impulse be God's desire ... her very body be God's body. "Here I am," [***unbalanced gesture***] she says. [***raise low hand as say:***] "Might it be for me ... *in* me ... exactly as You wish."

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We stand on the threshold of Christmas—of welcoming the Emmanuel—in a year we've never more wanted or desperately needed God-with-us. We ache to tiptoe to the manger, behold the Infant Jesus asleep on the hay and kiss Him as tenderly as we can. We surely need that.

But Mary also beckons us to more—to *so* much more: God bids us, with Mary, to dare to be as intimate with Jesus as a parent: to pick up the Child ... to nurse Him and cradle Him ... to wash and dress Him ... to pray for Him ... to let Him gladden our hearts and also break them ... and to let His being fill our hours ... our days ... our bodies and our lives. For when God asks us, "Where is Jesus with you?" it delights God to hear us say, [***hold out balanced gesture***] "May He be as close as my heart and as inward as my soul."



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