

Easter Day

April 24, 2011

Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Stephen's, San Jose

Acts 10:34-43

Peter testifies that faith in Jesus is available to everyone.

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

Colossians 3:1-4

You have been raised with Christ

John 20:1-18

Mary Magdalene first sees Jesus raised from the dead.

God is here - right now; and active in our lives, and wanting to be as close to us as we will make room for Him. Jesus came into this world because God wants a relationship with us that was not happening when God spoke through prophets. We have spent six weeks in small groups and Sunday sermons looking at different building our awareness of God being close, and how to hear God better. Jesus had a mission to come to earth and die for us, establishing a new covenant with God, a covenant that establishes us as God's beloved children. But death on the cross was only part of Jesus' mission. He also came to bring the reality of God's presence into our world, and into our lives. We celebrate both of these truths this Easter.

Let's look at some of what we have been studying over these last few weeks. These highlights are worth reviewing, especially since Easter celebrates the proof that God is closer than we think.

ONE. God wants more than anything to be near us. In the Garden of Eden, his desire was to simply be with Adam and Eve. There was no job for them, except to walk with God in the cool of the day. Many years later an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph to announce that Mary was pregnant with Jesus; and that he would be known as Immanuel, which means, 'God with us'. The statement from God that "I will be with you" appears in the Bible some 150 times.

TWO. We need to look for God in the ordinary-ness of our day; NOT expecting the parting of the Red Sea on our way to work in order to say "There God is". Scripture is filled with stories of God speaking in whispers. Elijah looked for God in the wind, the fire, and the earthquake. But he found God in the still small voice – the whisper. Where do you look for God?

THREE. We can learn to partner with God; having God's spirit flow IN us, but even more importantly, to flow THROUGH us, so we can resonate with God's presence. We can decide to recognize the 'sacrament of the present moment', which is where God is. We must not miss the opportunity to meet and hear from God right now. We should honor that each day and each moment is a gift – we must not forget to unwrap the gift. (I was guilty of that as a child; saving my birthday and Christmas gifts for 'another day'. This drove my mother crazy. She was so excited about gifts she had carefully chosen for me, but I would tuck them away and not use them for months. Sometimes I would lose track of them and discover them hidden in a dresser drawer a year later. Has God carefully chosen gifts for you that you have tucked away for 'another day'? Open each moment with God.

FOUR. God can and does guide us directly through our thoughts. There are things we can do to become more receptive to God's thoughts.

1. Believe God does speak to us.
2. Realize that we do not somehow have to earn God's speaking to us. Doing more is not the way: but probably our doing less, and creating quiet space is more the need. Realize that God's silence does not mean God is absent.
3. Do our best to say 'yes' to God when He does speak to us. If you get a word of intuition, it could be God. Pay closer attention to insights. Consider if you should act on them more than you do.
4. Verbally invite God to be present – and make your mind a suitable dwelling place of God.
5. Ask spiritual friends to help discern what God is saying to you.
6. Learn to listen to God; focusing on a phrase or thought.

FIVE. Learn what spiritual pathways work best for you; what actions make you feel close to God. Build time for that activity into your daily routine. Filter what thoughts you get, to confirm that they are from God. If you want to study some filters to use, check out the sermon for Lent 5 on our website.

SIX. Holy Week and Easter are the ultimate proof that God is close, here and now, and willing to do ANYTHING to be with you.

Genesis 28:12ff tells of a dream that Jacob had. He saw a ladder 'resting on the earth', with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.' Got said to Jacob: "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac... I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go..."

When Jacob woke from his sleep, he thought, 'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it... This is none other than the house of God, this is the gate of heaven.' We should note that his vision was NOT a ladder for human beings to climb up. It was a ladder for God to come down to where we live.

John 1:51, Jesus had asked Phillip to be one of his disciples. Phillip invited his friend Nathaniel to come meet Jesus. When Jesus met Nathaniel, he said, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." Jesus was telling Nathaniel that he had come as 'Jacob's ladder' that would now reach down to earth; to your life and mine. Through Jesus, God comes to be with us; right here, right now.

In Matthew 28:20, Jesus said, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." By his going to heaven, he could be with every one of us in every moment through his Holy Spirit. His last words on earth were a promise to be with you and me always.

The message of this Easter is this: Jesus came to teach how much God loves you, and to teach how to share that same self-giving love with each other. And through his death, resurrection, and ascension, he offers his spiritual presence to you.

Our challenge is to make space in our busy-ness and the noise around us, to hear him; to act in the present moment to invite him into our lives; learning to include God in every part of our day; discerning the thoughts that whirl through our minds, to learn when they are from God. Finally, look closely at Jesus' life, death and resurrection. God provided these events over 2,000 years ago as proof for us that Jesus is exactly who he said he is. Jesus' life and resurrection are the ultimate proof that God is very close to us; God deeply cares about communicating with us; and God is willing to do whatever is necessary to be with us. The answer is Jesus. The answer is Jesus with us; here and now. That is the Easter promise.

Alleluia, Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia. Amen.