

Living and Breathing God

Romans 8.5-8 (The Message)

Bible School Celebration Sunday

July 17, 2011

“Those who trust God's action in them
find that God's Spirit is in them—
living and breathing God!”

- Paul of Tarsus

Those who think they can do it on their own end up obsessed with measuring their own moral muscle but never get around to exercising it in real life. Those who trust God's action in them find that God's Spirit is in them—living and breathing God! Obsession with self in these matters is a dead end; attention to God leads us out into the open, into a spacious, free life. Focusing on the self is the opposite of focusing on God. Anyone completely absorbed in self ignores God, ends up thinking more about self than God. That person ignores who God is and what he is doing. And God isn't pleased at being ignored.

I have wonderful memories of Vacation Bible School from my childhood. Things have changed, to be sure. Watching our kids this morning reminded me that back in the day we weren't as high tech – no videos to sing with or choreographed steps to dance to – but we still had a wonderful time. There was always magic in the air at Bible School time. On the Saturday before it began we decorated trucks and cars and paraded through the community announcing the arrival of something special. And our Bible School lasted a full two weeks! We had plenty of time for crafts, bible stories, treats – always Kool-Aid and cookies - and of course girls.

I should probably explain. When I was eight or so, I had a crush on an older woman. I'm just guessin' but I would say she must have been ten or eleven. This meant, however, that I normally had to admire her from a distance. She was in a Sunday School department for older kids, which rarely if ever mixed and mingled with us youngsters. But not at Bible School! For those two short weeks we opened the day together in general assembly, and shared many classes and activities during the day. I would walk into Bible School each day and there she would be; Jennifer Posey, the girl of my dreams.

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I don't remember what happened with Jennifer; she either broke my heart or grew up completely unaware of my romantic agony. But I do remember what happened in Bible School. We kids were touched by the love of God in many, many ways, and responded with an unbridled exuberance of which kids alone were capable. Or perhaps I should say, of which kids alone are capable. Only kids, you see, are possessed of that natural awareness of God's presence and grace. They tend to soak it up like sunshine and let it inspire their laughter and natural trusting attitude. They know they can invest themselves in the day without restraint because God has invested in them.

Perhaps this is what Paul meant when he said those who trust God's actions find the Spirit within them, "Living and breathing God." Look at our kids, our lucky kids who are raised without privation and embraced by a community that loves them. They are naturally exuberant about life. They laugh, sing, jump, and dance; they always have a wonderful time because they recognize the Spirit of God within them.

When do we forget this? When do we forget that God is in our heart? God's not close to us, peering over our shoulder trying to catch us in a mistake so we can be punished. God's not sitting off in some remote corner of the sky watching everything that goes on among God's children; watching but showing little interest. God as Spirit is within each heart. I sometimes think that beginning the life of faith is not so much about finding God as it is about remembering, plain ol' remembering that God abides within. With this awareness we too can laugh, sing, jump, and dance. We too can be children; for as Paul says, "...all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God" (8.14). What are we waiting for?

Another Old Saw Bites the Dust

Genesis 28.10-19a (The Message)

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. 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." 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." 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).

I completed my college work at the University of Montevallo, and I wouldn't be surprised if you are asking yourself as I speak where that is. Everyone does; everyone always has. Even in Birmingham, the city in which I grew up, if you mention to someone that you go to the University of Montevallo, chances are their first response will be, "Where's that?" The answer is simple, "About thirty-five miles south of Birmingham." So common is this question, in fact, that the university produced a t-shirt in its honor. The school's logo is of course emblazoned on the front, but on the back you read, "About thirty-five miles south of Birmingham." Scout's honor, it does.

Reading the account of Jacob at Bethel, it occurs to me that he easily could have worn a shirt that read, "About sixty miles north of Beersheba." And that's the point; Jacob was in the middle of nowhere. He had no idea where he was and yet here in the middle of nowhere with no temple, no altar, no priest, he had a remarkable experience of the presence of God. Although he had not expected it and was, in fact, blissfully unaware of it, he was forced to acknowledge that God was in that place.

One of my favorite sayings comes from Carl Jung, "Bidden or not bidden, God is present." Invited or not invited, God is present; recognized or not recognized, God is present. Jacob found this to be true. He was so impressed that he named the place; not "About sixty miles north of Beersheba," but rather Bethel, God's house.

In a flash Jacob went from being blissfully ignorant of God's presence to being humbly aware that God was with him. I think the kind of ignorance Jacob revealed in this experience is proof positive that the old saw - ignorance is bliss – needs to bite the dust. In this instance – and I think Jacob would agree - ignorance is not bliss. Being ignorant of God's presence yearning to heal and inspire is certainly not bliss. Think, for example, of a time in your life when you were going

through a significant crisis. Which would be more meaningful to you, to be blissfully ignorant of God's presence with you, yearning to embrace you in loving arms, be a part of your experience, and bring you courage and wholeness; or to be humbly aware that wherever you were, God was there, God was with you?

There is no reason to follow that old saw in this instance; ignorance of God's presence is not bliss, it is deprivation. We deprive ourselves of God's loving presence in our life when all we have to do, like Jacob, is open our eyes and recognize that wherever we are - gathered together in worship, singing songs in Bible School, dropping kids off at soccer practice, driving to the lake house - wherever we happen to be at any given time, "God is in this place... This is God's House."