

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, January 29, 2017
Mike Ruggi
Revelation 5:11-14; Psalm 30; John 21:1-19
“Where God Meets Us”

I woke up early that morning. The anticipation of the day that might lie ahead, kept me from sleeping any further. I looked out the bedroom window and was filled with joy at what I saw. The sun was shining; the sky was a brilliant blue and not a cloud in the sky. The weather was perfect. I quickly got ready, opened the garage door and went outside. I was almost overcome with excitement. Today was going to be the day I would be able to go on my first real ride on my new motorcycle. I got it started, hopped on and away I went. It took me quite a bit a time to get used to the new bike; it was a lot bigger than the one I rode as a teenager. Eventually, when I did get comfortable, I was able to notice the country side going by and marveled at the beauty of God’s creation. And I was right in the middle of it. I began to feel the pressures of life fading away, being replaced with a complete sense of peace. That’s when it hit me. I was one on one with God. He was right there on the motorcycle with me. In the solitude of the moment, I found a new way I could meet and be with God.

I’m sure most of us have had that same feeling. When we are in our special place to meet God and be with Him. We go there, usually by ourselves, to be in silence and let our bodies relax and our minds drift. Most of us have felt specially blessed when we have been able to spend time away from the hustle and bustle of daily life and go to that special place.

For some it’s to go up on a mountain side and look around. To see nothing for miles and miles but clouds passing by; the hills and valleys receding into the distance.

For some it's the beach, where the waves roll in one after another, pushing and pulling the gravel and sand. It's whispering rattling sounds punctuated by the noise of the waves crashing and breaking on the shore.

For others, it's to go deep into the woods where they can hear nothing but birds singing in the trees and the sound of their own breathing.

Yet others it's a room at home they can go to meditate. Or working in the garden taking care of the flowers and plants, completely in tune with nature. Perhaps, it's just going for a quiet walk around the block or in the park. For me, it's in the stream fishing, riding my motorcycle, getting ready for Bible study, and of course, here, on Sunday morning. In these places, I can retreat into my mind and concentrate on meeting and being with God.

All of us have our places of refuge, our places where we go to meet God and to allow him to minister to us. We have a great sense of peace in these places. We can let go of thinking, and just sense the wonder and beauty of the moment. Then, sometime later, we return to our normal world, feeling more refreshed and stronger than we were.

The interesting thing about all these encounters with God is that we are the ones seeking Him out. We do something special. We make effort. We set aside time. We go somewhere that is out of the ordinary. We seek out privacy, and we go searching to be with God. Whether we are aware of it or not, whether we have a fantastic emotional experience or simply come away feeling slightly better, God is there for us.

But what about God? Where does God search for us? Where does God go to meet us? How does God initiate the encounter?

Yes, He's there for us in our special places but the problem is that we can't always go to those places; our everyday lives get in the way. Whether we are at home, at work, in a hospital, visiting with a friend, driving in our cars, or just sitting reading or watching TV, we expend more and more effort thinking of our everyday routines and obligations.

Sometimes we are so busy with the routine of ordinary things to even think about God. I'm sad to admit that these everyday obligations are so overwhelming that they continuously creep into my head, even while I'm here at church.

What about those everyday times, those times when we are trying just to get on living and are not taking time to be with God? What happens then? Well - those are the times and the places where God meets us and blesses us.

God meets and blesses the poor in Spirit and ensures them the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

God meets and blesses those that mourn and they will be comforted.

God meets and blesses the meek and they will inherit the earth.

God meets and blesses those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and they will be filled.

God meets and blesses the merciful and they will be shown mercy.

God meets and blesses the pure in heart and they will see God.

God meets and blesses the peacemakers and they will be called children of God.

God meets and blesses those who are persecuted because of righteousness and theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The beatitudes. Statements concerning who is blessed or who will be blessed, are not about what we have to do to meet God, but what God does to meet us and what He does when He finds us. We all want blessedness, happiness, comfort, and God promises these things. Some in this world, some in the world to come. All we have to do, as Micah tells us, is to "Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God."

In the beatitudes, Jesus is not saying God wants those things for us. Jesus is saying that although our current situation is dire, our afflictions will not last forever; God will vindicate us in the future. Jesus telling his disciples and the crowd that they were blessed because their broken spirits would one day be healed. God loved then and He loves us. They and we, can find comfort in Him

We will be blessed, we will be made happy, we will inherit the kingdom of God - not because we sought out persecution, not because we attempted to become poor in spirit, not because we willingly handed over our loved ones to death, not even because we worked to show mercy to those who so obviously don't deserve mercy - but because we are open to the love of God, and God wants us to have what the world has not given us, and cannot give us.

The blessed are not the ones who are motivated by blessings and who win blessings by the strength of their hands, by the wisdom of their minds, by the luck of their birth or by the chance of the lottery. The blessed are the ones who seek out God and who want God seek them out.

So when Jesus says “blessed are they,” he is not only describing them as being filled with an inner sense of joy and peace because they are right with God, but he is praising them for their character and their pledge to the Divine Spirit.

By following Jesus, we become blessed members of God’s kingdom. Individually we might fail to fulfill the characteristics of some or all of the blessings. But we are blessed nonetheless by the character of the entire community around us.

As we hear Jesus’ words and consider the beatitudes, it’s easy to look at ourselves and say, “That’s not me. That’s not the world. That’s not even the church.” You’re right, it’s not. However, God focuses on what we can become, not who we are. He looks at who we are called to be.

God has chosen us – we, with our worries and anxieties - we, with our grade school education - we, with our bad back and our aching neck and feet - we, with our private thoughts - and our secret past - we, with our desperate needs and our hidden fears. He chose us just as he chose his disciples so long ago.

He chose Peter, with his bullheaded stubbornness and boldness. Matthew with his unsavoury background as a tax-collector, the worst of the worst. Simon, with his reputation as a Zealot, a paid assign. James and John, two fishermen with a strange ambition to somehow be first in the Kingdom they thought Jesus was going to establish.

Jesus chose these people with all their faults to be the first to know his teaching. The first to witness his miracles, and the first to spread the good news - the good news of the message of the cross. The good news that God has acted to bring salvation to the world and that all we have to do is to believe and trust in him. Now, today, God has chosen us with, all our faults, to be the ones in the know and to spread the good news that is changing and will change the world.

The beatitudes are about letting go, surrendering and living with a vulnerable and open heart. That does not mean we run away or isolate ourselves from the realities of our life and world. It means we engage them in a different way, Jesus' way. The beatitudes teach us to trust God more than the external circumstances of our lives. They invite dependence on God rather than self-reliance.

In the strains and setbacks of life, we discover that we cannot live life by ourselves. As we admit our need for God we find purity of heart. The thought of self-sufficiency gives way to meekness. We realize that all that we are and have is from God and we begin to know ourselves as poor in spirit. Our own misfortunes awaken and connect us to the pain of the world for which we cannot help but mourn. We think less about ourselves and become merciful to others. We have nowhere else to go and so we turn our gaze back to God. The longer we gaze at God the

more we hunger and thirst for righteousness. We become peacemakers reconciling ourselves to God and our neighbour. This is the life for which Christ's disciples were willing to be persecuted, a life of righteousness; the life for which Christ died and rose again.

The beatitudes are not so much about what we do but how we do it. They are less about actions and more about relationships. To live the beatitudes is to live a life of self-abandonment to God and our neighbor. We live the beatitudes as a response to God blessing us. That is the way of Christ. That's not just the way forward through this life; it's the way to life itself.

God meets us in ways we do not expect, even those of us who think in the way of the world, rather in the way of God. God meets us when we are living out our lives in faith. When we go about seeking to do what is right. When we are trying to show mercy. When we seek to make peace. When we are walking humbly before Him. God also meets us in our weakness, in our grief, in our hunger for salvation, in our pain and suffering when we are persecuted, and He meets us at the cross that we share with Jesus

God encounters us, God inhabits us, God strengthens us, and God rewards us. We do not have reach out to God in some special manner. God comes to us, and meets us where we are.

The proof that God meets us is ultimately found in us. It is found in our growth, in our understanding, in our increase in love, in our acceptance and faith in the midst of continual tribulation, in our doing justice, in our kindness, and in our humble walking,

We can go to meet God in many special ways and places; but know and celebrate this: God comes to meet us in all ways and in all places. And all he asks us of us, is that we trust and believe in his name. So, can you? Can you trust and believe in his name? Praise be to God, now and forevermore. AMEN.