

THE DESERT

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Before the Presbyterian Church came into being, we shared about 1,500 years of our history with the Roman Catholic church. We still have more in common than what separates us, so from time to time it seems appropriate to tell a Catholic story.

The Society of Jesus, or Jesuits, are the order responsible for Xavier University and who claim Pope Francis as one of their own. The Jesuits trace their history back to a 15th century priest and theologian named Ignatius of Loyola. Ignatius wasn't always a holy man. He was born into a wealthy Spanish family, and was a knight in the most storied sense of the word. His early life was full of fighting and chasing beautiful women. But as is often the case with such a lifestyle, he eventually wound up on the wrong end of a sword, and found himself recuperating for an extended period of time in his family's castle.

This was long before Netflix or Kindle Books. In fact, the castle didn't even have much of a library, so he found himself confined to a very short reading list: there was a story of the life of Christ and a collection of lives of the saints. Out of pure boredom Ignatius started to read, and he made a surprising discovery. Ignatius had an active imagination and loved to daydream, and while he would sometimes think fondly about the exciting life of a knight that he had been living, when the dream ended, he found himself feeling empty and alone, longing for some kind of meaning and purpose and feeling quite unsatisfied. The Bible and the lives of the saints had an unexpected effect, as well. Even confined to a bed in a castle tower, it was those stories that inspired him and began to fill the empty space in his heart.

By the time his physical wounds healed, Ignatius had begun to discover who God had really called him to be, and he spent the rest of his life exploring God's presence his own life, and becoming arguably the greatest of spiritual guides. To this day, Catholics and Protestants alike engage in Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises; in fact Associate Pastor Jana Reister is spending part of her sabbatical at a Jesuit retreat center. People go there to follow the path set by Ignatius, centuries ago.

Those months Ignatius spent in the castle tower profoundly changed the course of his life and of countless other Christians who have followed the same path, and it all started because Ignatius chose to go on a spiritual journey, to discover more deeply

and richly who God was and who God had created him to be. It's a journey that many of us consider, but fewer of us actually take it on. For those who do, the rewards are great—a real understanding of the purpose and meaning of this one special life that God has given you to live. And yet it's hard to make a change—the habits and trappings of life as we are used to it are hard to escape. So often something significant has to happen in order to start one on a spiritual journey.

In the pages of the Bible, we meet many people who underwent some occasion of discovering God in their lives. Some of them, like Ignatius, went searching. But many others came to know God quite by accident.

There are literary cues in the Bible that tell us what kind of a story we are reading, and one of them is the setting where the story takes place. When you are reading a Bible story that takes place in the desert, the meaning is clear: someone is about to undergo a spiritual discovery. The desert is where people seem to be when God makes an important move in their lives. Deserts are dry and spare. In the desert, life is stripped down to its bare essentials. Life exists in the desert, but not easily. If you're going to survive in the desert, you've got to want it. So when someone in the Bible is in the desert, it usually means that basic, essential priorities about life are about to be explored.

A desert is not a temple or a formal holy site; more often, it's a road in the middle of nowhere. In the desert, people don't have a planned spiritual encounter, they see God out of desperation because they're at the end of their rope. There are deserts in our own lives. People in the desert pump dollars into the slot machine, or move money from one credit card to another hoping to pay a debt. People in the desert sit alone staring into the bottom of a glass afraid to go home or too restless to get in bed. In the desert you find overwhelmed parents who stop the car alone at the entrance to the neighborhood and think about what might happen if they just drove off into the night. In the desert you find frustrated professionals who fantasizes about quitting their jobs. In the desert you find people who dread a daily routine that keeps them constantly busy with things that don't seem to matter. In the desert, people wonder if God has forgotten about them, or quite often, have stopped wondering about God at all. These are the desert places of our lives, and you will notice that they are normal places—most of us have been in one or more of them. The Bible suggests that it is in just these places that God will find you. In the ordinary places where life has dried up and left you thirsty, where you think that holy water could never be found. That's where God shows up.

Today's Scripture is about someone who undergoes such an experience. This story finds Jacob in the desert, and he doesn't go by choice. Those of you who were here last week will remember that Jacob, and his brother Esau, are part of a very messy family. Following a couple of acts of betrayal that cause his brother Esau to want to kill

him, Jacob finds himself on the run, headed to live with his uncle Laban, and on the way, he spends an important night in the desert.

That night, Jacob has a dream, a dream in which he sees a ladder going from earth to heaven, with the angels of God moving up and down the ladder. God is standing next to Jacob in the dream, and God speaks directly to Jacob, to tell him that he is about to become the father of a great nation. God has chosen him to be a blessing to the people around him. And when Jacob wakes up, he knows something big has happened, something he did not expect, for he looks around and says, "Surely, the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!"

It's an amazing thing that Jacob goes to bed one night and has this dream about God. Many desert experiences aren't so obvious. But to us, the readers, what makes this story even more strange is that Jacob is an awful person. In the previous few chapters, every story that is told about Jacob's life is about treachery and deceit, cunning and greed. Jacob is the kind of person you would not want to trust with anything that was important to you, and when we read this story in which God entrusts the future of the Hebrew people to such a man, we are supposed to be blown away. We are supposed to ask, "How can this be?"

To make matters worse, this encounter with God, and the amazing promise given to Jacob, does not seem to change him for the better. After he wakes up and Jacob says, "surely God was in this place." The story then says Jacob made a vow, he said, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you." Jacob has been given an incredible blessing, an amazing direct experience with God, and he has the audacity to tell God that he's going to name the terms under which he will accept it. This is not spiritual maturity.

There are a couple of observations that should be made about this story and what it means for us. First of all, there is apparently nothing that you can do, and nothing you can have done in the past, that makes you ineligible for a spiritual experience with God. This had to have occurred to Jacob, shifty cheater that he was. When Jacob stops for the night, on the run for his life, he has no reason to believe he is the kind of person who is going to see God—he never pays any attention to God. But it seems that God pays attention to all of us. Spiritual experiences are not reserved for holy, righteous people.

The other thing Jacob's story suggests is that these desert experiences rarely transform us into a totally different person. Jacob doesn't respond to his dream with a lot of spiritual maturity—he immediately starts bargaining with God, and if you haven't noticed, that never works. Following this story, Jacob will continue to his uncle's home

where he will engage in another 14 years of work while he figures out who God wants him to be. Much of his behavior will continue to be less than exemplary, and only after a long series of fits and starts and an act of forgiveness by his estranged brother will Jacob finally get on track to becoming the man God always knew he could be.

It's easy to forget the extended timing of the desert. You can read Jacob's whole Bible story in half an hour, so we mistakenly expect that God should act quickly and decisively to transform our lives, but often that isn't the way it happens. So if you find yourself in a sort of desert in life, in a dry place where it seems like God couldn't possibly find you; if out of the blue something gives you the sense that God is there on the roadside, in the bar, in your neighborhood or behind your desk, pay attention. God may be trying to start something new in your life too. And as a first step, God may simply be hoping for you to say, like Jacob did: "Surely, the Lord was in this place, and I did not know it!"

It's at times like these, when you think you might be in the desert, that you may want to talk about it with someone who cares about you. Speak to a friend or a pastor. Often we need a conversation partner when we sense that God is moving into our lives.

Ignatius gave guidance to people on spiritual journeys because we often need help finding God in the desert. or we need help eliminating some of the roadblocks that make God harder to find. The fact is, while many of us would like to know God better, most of us are pretty good at keeping that from happening. We know we should spend time with God in prayer, but we are expert at finding other things to do instead. Our schedules are full of artificially important things that "absolutely have to get done." TV shows and Facebook feeds take the place of time for prayer, and then we wonder why we don't have a closer relationship with God. Our addictions, whether substance abuse, or shopping, are often there because we're hoping to keep ourselves from feeling something difficult—the shame or guilt of a bad choice, or grief from a loss we've experienced. Even other people can keep us from our spiritual lives. Socrates is famous for saying, "the unexamined life is not worth living," but we often forget that he said those words in the midst of a trial that led to his death. He was on trial because parents in Athens did not want a philosopher talking to young people about the purpose of their lives. Spiritual conversation tends to stir things up, and often people we know would rather that didn't happen to us.

It's a bold step people take when they begin to ask questions about the purpose and meaning of their lives. It happens in all kinds of unexpected times and places. It could be that God is trying to start a conversation with you. It took some time, but it worked with Jacob. Next week we'll explore what happened to Jacob once his journey finally got underway. And today, for those of you who may need it, here is prayer written by another spiritual guide who has known something of what it means to be in the desert.

*"My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always though
I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."*

(Thomas Merton, 1958)

Amen.