

# Sermon Series: Connecting With God

## Week 4: Reconnecting With the Journey

Genesis 12:1-9 Exodus 13:17-22  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Before I get into this sermon I want to begin with a shout out to Oral Roberts University! I know that many of you may now be thinking, "Who are you, and what have you done with our pastor?" Let me explain. Traditional Christianity – and evangelical Christianity, in particular – has historically taught that **the place we listen for the Word of God is in the Scriptures**. One of the hallmarks of **Celtic spirituality**, however, is that **the Word of God can also be heard in and through creation**. That leads to an understanding that the mystery of God is inseparably linked to the mystery of creation.

This is one of the areas that we've recently emphasized in this current sermon series dealing with the spirituality of connecting with God. 'Reconnecting with the Earth' was the theme of the first sermon in this series last month. We discussed how **we can connect and learn of God not by looking away from ourselves and away from creation, but by searching deep within all that has life**.

So you can imagine my excitement and shock when I read in the Religion section of yesterday's *Tulsa World*, "'Hearing God's Voice in Nature' will be the theme of the annual American Scientific Affiliation meeting at Oral Roberts University next weekend." Upon reflection, I have a confession to make. My surprise at ORU hosting this event has less to do with the actual work that goes on at ORU, and more with my preconceived notions of what goes on at ORU. So I apologize.

In recent weeks we've also explored connecting with God in and through reconnecting with compassion, and reconnecting with the Light, that Divine spark that dwells deep within all people. Today's focus is **reconnecting with the journey**.

Have you ever noticed the Bible is all about the journey? There are specific journeys, like the two we heard this morning from the Old Testament. We learn that Abraham and Sarah's faithfulness was not based on a set of particular religious beliefs, but rather on their trust in God, to follow where they discerned God was leading them. (Genesis 12). After being freed from captivity in Egypt, we learn that the wilderness journey of Moses and the Hebrew people included the continual presence of God, as poetically described as a "pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night." (Exodus 13).

**The entirety of the Scriptures testify to a journey toward God, away from God, and a return to God.**

- It's a journey from rebellion to faithfulness.
- It's a journey from captivity to freedom.
- It's a journey from oppression to justice.
- It's a journey from fear to peace.
- It's a journey from sin to redemption.

- It's a journey from the beginning of life to death to life beyond this life.

**You and I are part of that cosmic journey. And perhaps the greatest of all of God's promises found in scripture is that God is with us on that journey. And, nothing in all creation can ever separate us from the love of God.**

This was eloquently stated by the **Rev. Dr. Robert Ball**, a former pastor here in Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery at Bristow Presbyterian Church and at John Knox Presbyterian Church here in Tulsa. He happens to be present with us in our sanctuary this morning. In his very important book, which I highly recommend (and I say that not just because he's sitting right over there), entitled, ***Being With: Maybe This Is What Life Is All About***, published just last year, he writes:

After an extended examination of scripture, I'm convinced that **the promise to 'be with' us is the ultimate and most consistent promise the God of the Bible gives to human beings.**

Both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, from beginning to end, are filled with precisely this meaning and, in many instances, with these exact words, 'I will be with you.' I'm now convinced that 'being with' represents the essential core of God's ultimate promise to his people, as well as expressing God's eternal purpose for us.

Earlier in my own pastoral ministry I taught Confirmation Class to church middle schoolers. The curriculum I used, from the Presbyterian Church (USA), was entitled, *Journeys of Faith*. The overall approach is described as follows:

The journey of faith on which Christians embark is not a matter of following the tracks of those who have gone before. **The life of faith is better understood as a journey into new territory in a new time and among new circumstances**, yet one guided by the experiences of others who journeyed in particular times, places, and settings in the past."

I wholeheartedly agree with this approach. For are we not always being nudged to move on to new horizons, often into the unknown? We, no less than Abraham and Sarah, are often called to leave behind certain comfortable old ways and understandings. Abraham and Sarah never knew where the road of life would take them but they believed that God was present and active in their lives. Their story reveals to us that **a life of faith is grounded in the journey itself, not in the arrival at a particular destination.**

Precisely because our destination in this life is unknown, we have faith – the assurance that God is *with* us and *for* us as we travel along this often unpredictable journey. I like the analogy that life is like being on a journey without maps. There's a fancy word for all of this: **peregrination**. In his 2014 book, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*, **John Philip Newell**, a former Dean of Iona Abbey in Scotland writes:

The practice of peregrination was strong in the Celtic world. It often involved setting sail from one's homeland as a pilgrim, from what was

known and comfortable into what was unknown and challenging... leaving the familiar in order to experience new birth, dying to the boundaries and securities of home to be alive to what one had never imagined before.

We, too, are pilgrims. I find this to be an apt description of the **journey from traditional Christianity to progressive Christianity**. Who among us here at College Hill hasn't been on an inward pilgrimage and journey, where we have left the familiarity and security of what the Church has traditionally taught, and sometimes told us to believe, to new understandings of God and ourselves?

English Benedictine monk, **Father Bede Griffiths** (1906-1993), talked about the **fossilization of Western Christianity**. As Newell explains, "[He believed] it had become hardened, stuck both doctrinally and ritually. It was not living and unfolding like the universe, forever seeking new expression and embodiment through relationship." **Christianity does indeed get trapped by some in a sense of infallibility and unchangeable dogma.**

"One of the laws of the universe," writes Newell, "is that if something is not unfolding, it is dying. If it is not sprouting in new directions, it is decaying." Perhaps that is becoming true of the religious practices and beliefs in which many of us were raised. Yes, traditional Christianity has had a tendency to absolutize our religion. Without evolving, many no longer view organized religion as a road sign that points beyond itself toward God, but as a stop sign. It has become the destination, the end, in and of itself. This isn't healthy.

A lifelong journey, however, inherently involves picking up new things along the way while leaving some old things behind. Last month, upon the return from my faith-energizing 6-week sabbatical, I shared with you the **pilgrimage** I took around the small ancient Celtic island of **Iona**, Scotland. One of the stops along the way might relate directly to your own journey of life and faith – a journey of connection with God. You may remember me telling you about **St. Columba's Bay**, where tradition says Irish monk Columba landed after his journey from Ireland to Scotland in 563 CE. It was at this location, before heading back to our own homeland, that we were asked to consider the turning points in our own life. Let me share again the **guided meditation** at St. Columba's Bay. I encourage you to personalize it in connection with your own journey of faith. You may, if you wish, close your eyes.

Picture yourself standing at the rocky shoreline of a beautiful isolated bay. You are not alone, as others have journeyed with you.

As you listen to the crashing surf, reflect upon the things that you feel may be holding you back from making a fresh start, or that weigh you down as you try to journey onward in life.

Now pick up one of the smooth rounded stones on the beach and walk to the water line. This stone is symbolic of that which you would wish to let go of – **something you need to leave behind and not take home with you.**

It could be a particular unhealthy behavior or attitude in your life;  
it could be an old hurt, grudge or resentment;  
it could be a regret or failure;

it could be a particular unhelpful belief or understanding of the nature and character of God;  
it could be anything.

Now with all your might cast this rock into the sea. Say to yourself, "**No more will this prevent my journey into well-being.**"

As you turn away, pick up a second stone to keep as a sign of a new direction, new beginnings, or new commitment that you hope to move towards.

Together, let us begin our return journey home.

I shared with you a few weeks ago that I keep the second stone that I picked up on St. Columba's Bay here on the pulpit. I do so for a very important, and personal reason. It reminds me of the new sense of direction in my own life and ministry. One of the things I decided to leave behind was fear, including the fear of not knowing enough, of not measuring up as your pastor. It may seem like a silly fear, but it's one that many (if not most) pastors have. But as we have been learning recently, we must trust that we are loved and accepted as we are, which this congregation does a remarkable job doing. It makes all the difference. And you, too, are part of this rock – as a remembrance to me.

As you and I seek to connect with God, remember that God is always with us as we reconnect with our journey through life and faith. And thank goodness, that's often together.

Amen.

*Resources:*

John Philip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*, Skylight Paths Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont, 2014