

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Laura A. Tisher, minister of youth and young adults, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, on July 20, 2008, and dedicated to the glory of God!

“Surely the Lord is in This Place, and I Did Not Know It”

Genesis, 28:10-19a

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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“Sidlala Sisi!” (“Let’s Play!”) Nelsiwe, one of my favorite youngsters in Swaziland, used to always say this to me as soon as she saw me.

Nelsiwe, just 5 years old when I first met her, loved to play! We played tag; we kicked the soccer ball around; we even had some really fun water gun fights with each other!

But Nelsiwe’s all-time favorite game was hide-and-seek. Even though Nelsiwe’s English was about as good as my SiSwati (in other words not very good!), somehow we always found a way to communicate through these games that are known all over the world! She would start

counting: one one thousand, two one thousand ... and pretty soon she'd be yelling, "Ready or not, here I come!"

Sometimes it would be easy to find each other. There would be a little foot sticking out from behind a large rock, a shoulder popping out from behind a tree, or a little giggle coming from across the field. Others times it was much harder to find each other. And eventually the seeker would have to yell, "Come out, Come out wherever you are!"

I was reminded of these fun games when I read the scripture passage from Genesis this week. It's almost as if Jacob and God are playing their own version of hide-and-seek! Jacob is sleeping and then God pops up and says, "Here I am!" Jacob wakes up and says, "Surely God is in this place and I did not even know it!" It's just like when the seeker in the hide-and-seek game opens that chest that sits in the corner of the room and finds the one hiding, when no one would have guessed that you might find her in there!

"Surely God is in this place and I did not even know it!" One of the questions we were asked over and over again – almost to the point of *ad nauseam* – on our recent youth mission trip to Atlanta was, "Where did you see God today?" It's really a great question, because sometimes the answer is obvious, and sometimes it's a lot less obvious.

We can discover God in the presence of other people, in nature, in so many different places and so many ways throughout our lives. Where have *you* seen God recently? Sometimes, like the seeker in hide-and-seek or like Jacob in the biblical story, we just need to open our eyes, and we

will discover that God is in this place (or in this place – our hearts) and we did not even know it.

One of my favorite songs is called *You Move Me* by Susan Drake. The lyrics say, “Whenever there’s a need for justice, we can count on you [God] to move us.” But God doesn’t just “*move us*,” at specific moments (like when there is a need for justice), God is present everywhere – all the time – even when we do not know it!

For years, missionaries from the U.S. and Europe traveled the world spreading the good news of Christ, thinking that they were bringing God to people’s lives and to places where God had never before been present.

The Poisonwood Bible is a fictional book about Baptist missionaries from Georgia who go to the Congo, in Africa. Nathan, the father of this American family, vehemently believes himself to be an instrument of God, who has been called to tame the uncivilized heathens of the Congo. In this story, Nathan ultimately symbolizes the Western exploitation of Africa through the use of religion and colonization throughout history.

People of faith are finally starting to realize today that things may actually be a bit different from these long-held missionary presumptions. The United Church of Christ Global Ministries now talks about *partnerships* around the world, in which we learn and grow from those with whom we work throughout the world, as much as they benefit from what we have to offer them.

Contextual theology is gaining more and more popularity and weight throughout the world as well.

African (and other) theologians are finally speaking up and talking about God's presence from a uniquely African perspective, rather than always interpreting everything from a Western perspective.

In many African churches, but not all, of course, Good Friday, for example, is *the* most important day of the year, (with Christmas and other annual Christian celebrations getting much less attention). This particular emphasis on Good Friday takes place in large part because these African people, who experience so much suffering in their own lives today, can identify so clearly with the suffering of Christ, which took place when he was hung on the cross on Good Friday.

The church in Africa is thriving today, much more than in other places around the world, including the United States. It is the African indigenous churches, which were started by Africans instead of missionaries, in fact, that are growing the fastest today. These churches were not only started by Africans, but they also often continue to embrace contextual ideologies and theologies that truly hold meaning in unique ways for local folks.

Making theology contextual and relevant to our own settings seems to be the key to successful church growth that Africans and others have discovering around the world today. God is indeed present in many different ways and forms throughout the world, as has been the case for a very long time, even when some of us may not have recognized God's particular presence.

Throughout the scriptures, God seems to be constantly reminding the people that God is indeed present

in all places and in all times. In the good times, God is present; in the bad times, God is present; when we're on the mountaintops, God is present; when we're walking through the valleys of the shadow of death, God is present. Remember that God says to Jacob, "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go. I will not leave you!"

Sometimes it is hard for us to understand how God can be present in places like Darfur, Sudan, where so much destruction has taken place recently. The violence in Sudan started to get really severe in the spring of 2003 when rebels attacked a government air base. In response, the government released the militia, which attacked villages in Darfur, looting and burning them, killing the men and raping the women. The ongoing violence since has resulted in more than 200,000 deaths and more than 200 million people fleeing to refugee camps.

In reality, there are many varied and complicated underlying causes to the continual violence in the Sudan, including battles over land and other natural resources, lingering issues from political decisions made long ago, ethnic divisions, religious differences, complications from years of civil war and political instability, hunger, and disease, mixed, of course, with an unforgiving desert climate.

Recently there has been much less fighting than a few years ago, in no small part because up to 90% of the villages have already been destroyed – there simply are no longer any easy targets. Even with somewhat less violence today, millions of Sudanese civilians still continue to suffer harassment, beatings, rape, murder and displacement on a

daily basis. The latest U.N. reports estimate that one-third of Darfur's 6.4 million residents are now displaced – four times the population of Boston.

One of those displaced women is named Mariam, a 40-year-old mother of five and grandmother of one. Mariam looks a good decade, or even two, older than she actually is, and she has only been in a refugee camp for a few months.

Like many other women in camps throughout Darfur, Mariam is no stranger to the terrors of the region: she had been displaced after attacks, which she said were perpetrated by the government and militia. Among those killed were Mariam's husband and her son-in-law.

“It's a difficult life,” Mariam says. “We don't have anything.”

Over and over again Mariam is forced to try to resolve disputes with other refugees over food rations, all while acting as the family's sole breadwinner, selling okra and watermelon in a local market. Mariam also faces the very real threat of sexual assault that so many refugee women encounter, even as they try to accomplish simple tasks like gathering firewood outside of the camp's perimeters.

Yet, even with all of these ongoing struggles, Mariam has no plans to leave the camp. Her resoluteness is not only due to finding a small measure of safety in a camp. It is also because Mariam is no longer convinced her home village will ever be fully safe again.

God says, “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go. I will not leave you!” That phrase not only was true for Jacob in the book of Genesis, but for all people, of all times.

How can that be? Surely if God is in the Sudan today, a place of such severe devastation, then the mere presence of our all-powerful God could prevent this country from being so down trodden with tragedy. Don’t you think? That is what we would like to think, at least.

Some would say, “God can not be present in the midst of such destruction. There is just no way!” And they lose all hope. But we *cannot* forget what God has promised us through God’s words to Jacob: “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go. I will not leave you!”

God is indeed present, even in places of extreme suffering like Darfur. And God uses us, God’s own people, to show and to share God’s persistent compassion and justice.

- By praying for Mariam and all of the other innocent civilians who are suffering in war-torn areas around the world everyday, we can extend God’s healing heart of compassion to places where it is so desperately needed.
- By giving our offerings today to Church World Service, which will help with relief in Darfur, we are acting as God’s hands in the lives of those who are struggling so far away, on the other side of the world.

- By getting to know the refugees who have come to live in our own neighborhoods, right here in Columbus, we can extend the peace of Christ, even to those who may not call themselves Christians.
- By contacting our legislators and urging them to increase aid to Darfur and other war-torn areas around the world, we *can* bring about God's justice in this world in which so many have already given up all hope.

Most of us cannot even imagine the levels of suffering that individuals, like the Sudanese, experience. Yet that does not mean that our own lives are completely without trials and tribulations, or that we never have moments when we doubt God's presence in our midst. Jacob was all alone, without family or friends, or so he thought. We all have felt like this at one time or another, I am sure.

Loneliness can set in at any time or in any place. But remember: you are not alone! Not only have all of us been in that same lonely place at one time or another, but God is also with you, right here and right now, even in the midst of your struggle.

Never forget, my friends, the good news of the scriptures – God tells us: “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go. I will not leave you!” Amen.

