



# First Baptist Pulpit

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Preached by Pastor David Saylor

## Where Is He?

### Genesis 6:5-6

[Think back on all the scenes of your life yesterday....

Who found something to be thankful for in the previous day? [hands]

Something that it now seems clear that God had a hand in? [hands]

LAST TIME - I showed this masterpiece by Michelangelo. I said it showed that "God is Closer than We Think" and all Adam has to do is lift a finger and he can touch the hand of God. God is that close. This is the teaching of Scripture. This is the faith I have committed myself to.

Yet it's not that simple, is it? After all, He's invisible, inaudible, and untouchable.

- None of my other friends possess these qualities, and it would make relating to them much harder if they did.

Sometimes I wish God would show himself more plainly - maybe come down every once in a while and part the CT River so I could see for myself.

And honestly, sometimes I lift a finger; sometimes I really do try, but not much seems to happen. Which leads me to some questions:

- "Why do I sometimes feel God's presence stronger than other times?"
- "When it is so easy to 'see' God all around me (in trees, in birds, in nature), why is it so hard to feel his presence—especially when I need him most?"
- "When I seek God and I get no response, am I asking amiss? How can I know?"

When I think about this subject, these are the questions I most frequently ask myself.

So today I introduce another masterpiece - maybe you've seen it.... It's entitled "Where's Waldo?" [That's Waldo] No, Waldo will never make it to the Sistine Chapel. He looks nothing like the majestic deity of Michelangelo. He is a geeky-looking, nerd with a striped shirt and goofy hat. But more than 40 million "Where's Waldo" books have been sold in twenty-eight countries.

This guy *Waldo* is on every page. The author assures us that it is so -- but you couldn't prove it by me! He is often hidden to the untrained eye. You have to be willing to look for him.

In the initial pages of the books, his presence is more obvious. He's hidden, but the other occupants of the page are giants and sea monsters, so Waldo still stands out. Then eventually we come to the last and hardest pages. By the end he's in a room full of Waldos, virtually identical to himself, the only distinction being that one detail is different, such as a missing shoe. You can be looking right at him without even knowing it. But He IS on every page!

In fact, developing the capacity to track him down is part of the point of the book. If it were too easy— if every page consisted just of a giant picture of Waldo's face—no one would even bother.

*If you think you see what I'm getting at, raise your hand?* Yes, every moment, of your life is another page --and God is there, the Scriptures tell us — on every one of them. But the ease with which he may be found varies from one page to the next. [Brother Lawrence wrote, "*God has various ways of drawing us to him, but sometimes he hides himself.*"] Some people are better at finding Waldo than others. Some people just give up. That's a big mistake.

So today we explore the *Waldo factor*.

**RAINBOW DAYS - Gen. 6:5-8; 9:12-13**

God is easy to find on some of the pages of our lives. I want to call them "Rainbow Days" (let me show you why).

In Gen. 6, we saw that God become grieved and was about to judge the wickedness in the world. But in v.8 we read that Noah had caught the Lord's eye" *<sup>8</sup>But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.*

Yes, Noah and his family were to be spared from coming destruction, to be the hope of the world.

Now turn to chapter 9 and we hear God speaking to Noah once again.

**Genesis 9:8-13** *<sup>8</sup>Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: <sup>9</sup>"I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you <sup>10</sup>and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. <sup>11</sup>I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth." <sup>12</sup>And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: <sup>13</sup>I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth.*

And Noah said, "Wow!" At least I'm guessing that he did. And every time he saw a rainbow in the sky, Noah remembered that he had God's promise. Every time he saw a rainbow, he knew he was not alone.

God must have been very clear that day. God must have been very present to Noah on rainbow days.

On rainbow days God's presence is hard to miss. On rainbow days the veil that separates the natural from the supernatural gets pretty thin.

I have never had an experience like Noah's. I haven't witnessed a physical visitation. I've never had an experience of God that involved heaven's special effects department. But I have had some "thin places" at the fabric of my life.

When each of my three children was born, I was seized by the conviction that something more than just a blob of tissue had entered the world. I knew I had been invited to witness the supernatural. When I watched my children enter the world, I could not *not* believe. It was as if God himself were in the room. (Which I am sure is why my Nina said his name a lot during labor.) The births of my children were rainbow days.

On rainbow days your life is filled with too much goodness and meaning for you to believe it is simply by chance. On rainbow days you find yourself *wanting* to pray, open to receiving and acting on his response. On rainbow days God seems to speak personally to you through Scripture. You find yourself believing that it is a good thing to be alive, and each good thing you see fills you with gratitude toward the God who made it. Sin doesn't even look tempting.

- When you're in this zone, the kids can spill gallons of red Kool-Aid on your new white carpet and you laugh and remind them that you often spilled things yourself when you were a kid.
- In the words of the old song, it's: *Summertime, and the livin' is easy; Fish are jumpin' and the cotton is high. Your daddy's rich and your mama's good lookin'.* . . .

Skip down a few generations (Gen 17). One day God came to a man named Abraham. In a world filled with violence, he let Abraham know that *he* had also caught the Lord's eye, that Abraham would become a blessing to the nations. Abraham would have to leave his home and everything familiar and go to a place that he did not know. But he would not have to do it alone. God said, **Genesis 17:11** *<sup>11</sup>You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.*

Now I can imagine Abraham replying, "Lord, Noah got the rainbow. Couldn't we use a decoder ring or a secret handshake or something?"

Abraham's day was a little more painful than Noah's. But it was still a *rainbow day*. God's presence was unmistakable. God must have been very clear that day.

And sometimes it is in the painful moments of our lives that God speaks loudest and clearest, doesn't he? .. their hard, but their still *rainbow days*.

## RAINBOW DAYS ARE GIFTS

It can be easy to take rainbow days for granted or assume they will go on forever. But that's a big mistake.

People who are wise learn to treasure rainbow days as gifts. They store them up to remember on days when God seems more elusive.

As we have seen, the title character in Waldo books is generally easiest to find on the earliest pages. The farther you get into the book, the harder he is to locate. Something like that often goes on in spiritual life.

St. John of the Cross wrote that often when someone first becomes a Christian God fills them with a *desire* to seek him: They *want* to read Scripture, they are *eager* to pray, they are filled with a desire to serve. These characteristics are, in a sense, *gifts from God* to get them moving; a kind of spiritual *starter kit*. After a while, John of the Cross said, this initial eagerness wears off. "God takes away the props so that we can begin to grow true devotion that is strong enough to carry on even when unaided by emotions."

## ORDINARY DAYS

But if there are "Rainbow Days" then there are also what we might call "Ordinary Days." During some eras of spiritual life we fall into a kind of *maintenance mode*. Life becomes routine. At this time there is not a major crisis, no obvious problems, but no major gains either. We feel somewhat comfortable.

There is a fascinating line in 1 Samuel that describes the condition of Israel in the waning days of the era of the judges. *Many of the challenges that made the people aware of their dependence on God are behind them.* Pharaoh is long since defeated, the Ten Commandments and Mount Sinai are old news, and manna is a collector's item. The miracle of the Exodus is complete. The people have settled into the land God had promised them. And the writer describes the spiritual climate with these words: *"In those days, the word of the LORD was rare and there were not many visions."*

Rare, but not nonexistent. The people are not in a state of major rebellion. The tabernacle is still open for worship, prayers are still offered, and sacrifices are still made. But this is not a time of great spiritual adventure.

- God may be present, but people aren't thinking of him quite as often as they did when the Jordan was being parted.
- The heavens may still be declaring the glory of God, but the people are *channel surfing*.

Sometimes it is rare for us, too.

Sometimes involvement with God becomes kind of *mechanical*. We may feel as if we're in a spiritual rut. If we're honest about it, we're even a little bored. We do not experience being in the flow with God.

- When problems crop up, our instinctive response is to *worry* rather than *pray*.
- When we wake up, our first thoughts are more apt to go toward the burden of all we have to do

today rather than the excitement of God's promise to partner with us.

- **When the kids spill Kool-Aid on the white carpet**, well...we won't go there.

Waldo is still present on these pages of our lives. We can find him, if we remember to look. But we're apt not to notice him. Our attention is elsewhere.

## SPIRITUAL HABIT-U-ATION

Scientists who deal with the study of perception refer to a phenomenon called "*habituation*." The idea is that when a new object or stimulus is introduced to our environment, we are intensely aware of it, but the awareness fades over time.

We have all experienced it. So, for instance, when we first begin to wear a new wristwatch, we feel it on our wrist constantly, but after a while we don't even notice that it's there. A new home, a new chair - it happens all the time.

One of the greatest dangers of your Christian life is what might be called *spiritual habituation*. We simply drift into *spiritual maintenance mode*.

We rationalize it because we think, "I'm not involved in major sin. I haven't done anything to jeopardize getting into heaven. I'm doing okay." And we forget that Jesus never said, "*I have come that you might do okay*." Okay is not okay. We have a kind of spiritual *attention deficit disorder* that God will have to break through.

Spiritual habituation is in some ways more dangerous than *spiritual depravity* because it can be so subtle, so gradual.

We saw last time that God sent Jacob a dream at Bethel. So why doesn't he send us all dreams every night? Why doesn't he make every day a *rainbow day* and send epiphanies twenty-four-seven? **Maybe it's because God wants us to learn to see him in the ordinary, rather than be dependent on the extraordinary.** Maybe it's because if God regularly satisfied our demand for special effects it would be like a mother who inadvertently trains her children to pay attention only when she raises her voice.

Have you ever noticed that parents who frequently raise their voice to their children get very little response from them? Parents, learn this lesson early if you can. When we constantly raise the volume level to get our children's attention, they pretty quickly tune us out. It stops working.

But Nina and I also discovered that when we lowered our voices to speak about something private with each other (birthday presents, maybe, or modes of punishment), our kids become instantly attentive. Words we try to whisper will be heard three rooms and two closed doors away. It is

as if our children have an inner instinct for when we are trying to keep information from them, and suddenly develop abilities that CIA operatives would pay for.

I think the reason God lowers his voice is so we will learn to pay attention.

**Ordinary days aren't "ordinary" at all, but we don't see all there is to see.** Remember the Questions I asked you about earlier???

William Barry writes, "*Whether we are aware of it or not, at every moment of our existence we are encountering God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who is trying to catch our attention, trying to draw us into a reciprocal conscious relationship.*"

Perhaps our capacity to recognize God presence—like the capacity to lift weights or speak Spanish—only gets stronger when it gets exercised.

Two men are seated across from each other in a dark room. Outside a thunderstorm rages in the night, shaking the old house. It is a secret meeting. It is the first time these men have ever met. One of them, a tall black man, carries the aura of a Spiritual Master; the younger man is trying his best to conceal the fact that he is frightened and uncertain.

Morpheus asks, "I imagine right now you're feeling a bit like Alice, tumbling down the rabbit hole," and Neo says "You could say that." Morpheus, "I can see it in your eyes, you have the look of a man who accepts what he sees because he's expecting to wake up. Ironically this is not far from the truth. Do you believe in fate, Neo?" "No." "Why not?" "Because I don't like the idea that I'm not in control of my own life." "I knew exactly what mean." "Let me tell you why you are here. You're here because you know something. What you know, you can't explain. You feel it. You know it all your entire life. There's something wrong with the world, but you don't know what it is. It is this feeling that is brought you here. Do you know what I'm talking about?" Neo says, "The Matrix." "Do you want to know what it is?" Hesitantly Neo nods. "The matrix is everywhere, is all around us even now in this very room, you can see it when you look out your window or when you turn on your television, you can feel it when you go to work when you go to church, when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth." "What truth?" "The truth that you are a slave, Neo, like everyone else, you were born into bondage, into a prison that you cannot taste or smell, a prison for your mind... Unfortunately no one can be told what the matrix is you must see it for your self." In each of his open palms, Morpheus held a capsule; one red, the other blue. He is offering the younger man a chance at the truth. "This is your last chance. After this there is no turning back. You take the blue pill and the story ends. You wake up in your bed and you believe whatever you want to. But if you take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes." Neo takes the red pill.

The film, *The Matrix*, at least the first one, is a parable, a metaphor. And the question Morpheus asked of Neo is a question the scriptures ask each of us. "Do you want to see, know?"

Elisha prayed for the eyes of his servant to be opened. Peter, James, and John followed Jesus up on the mountain of Transfiguration. Lucy stepped through the wardrobe into the land of Narnia. And like Neo all of them discover **that there is far more going on here than meets the eye.**

What Neo will see is that the world he has always known, everything around him, is not what's really real. In the story, advanced machines years before had taken over the human race, and humans, the real humans, are now part of the machine itself. The life that Neo knows, is a dream world, a sort of narcotic designed to anesthetize humans to the fact that they are prisoners. They can't see what's real.

Have you ever considered the Bible tells us that we also live in two worlds? The world that is seen, the physical world, the reality that we live in, is really not the whole story. **John 18:36** *Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world.* There is *another world*, and unseen world, a world that is, in fact, more real than this one that we have become so accustomed to. *The spiritual world. For this world in its present form is passing away. 1 Cor 7:31*

*The Spiritual World*, it's all around us. It's here in this room. But, like Neo, we can hardly sense that it is there. We also have been drugged, anesthetized.

But that is where God is! And that is where we can experience him. We too, like Neo, are in a battle. A battle to find reality.

There is another spiritual master, a real one, and he too was trying to help us see. His name is the Apostle Paul. He writes, **2 Corinthians 4:18.** *<sup>18</sup>So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*

Paul, this wise old master is saying that there is a way of looking at life, and that those who discover it, are able to see God in it and live fully.

**ASSIGNMENT:** We need to exercise our capacity to see with spiritual eyes if we are going to break through the matrix to experience God in our daily living, in the *more real world* of the Spirit.

Rainbow days - they're easy. But it's learning to see that the Ordinary Days are not so ordinary, and that God is on every page....

You see, this moment is as God-filled as any we have ever lived. Where's Waldo? He's right here, right now.

Here is our assignment this week. I want you to do something like what we did the beginning of today's message. Each day, maybe when you go to bed at night, or the first thing you do when you wake up in the morning, review the scenes of your life for the day that has just passed and stop and ask yourself couple questions.

- What am I thankful for in the previous day? [thank him]
- Can you identify an event, a conversation, a moment where it now seems clear that God had a hand in? [thank him again]

The first step to knowing God's presence is to enter into a relationship with Him. That comes through Jesus Christ his Son. He opens the door to a full relationship that will get better and better. But deny him and this world is all you get. And it's passing away.