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Finding God in Unexpected Places (Jeremiah 1: 4-10; Luke 13: 10-17)

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My story begins on a strip of land along the south west coast of India called Kerala. Located on the spice route, Kerala attracted many visitors to its shores over the centuries and evidence of those interactions are still visible. Chinese fishing nets can still be found in Kochi, there is a Jew Town where Jewish refugees fleeing persecution were given land by a Maharajah, and it is also home to India's largest community of Christians. A fifth of the state is officially Christian, in contrast to India as a whole where Christians make up barely 2% of the population.

According to tradition, Thomas the disciple came to Kerala in about 52 AD and planted seven churches, and this is the line of Christianity that I come from, where life was centred around church, family prayers and prayer meetings. At age two, my family moved to the opposite end of India when my father got a job in a Christian boarding school in Darjeeling in the foothills of the Himalayas. But here again, we were surrounded by Christianity with morning chapel, Scripture classes and Sunday worship. So even though I grew up in India, I was cocooned in a Christian world within a Hindu majority nation. We interacted with Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims, but we had nothing to do with their religion apart from receiving sweets during their festivals, enjoying fireworks at Diwali and getting holidays during Puja season.

Once I reached my teens however, I had a faith crisis. Firstly, I didn't know how historically accurate the Bible was and secondly, I had never personally experienced any of the miracles or answers to prayer described in the Bible. I wanted to believe, but belief proved elusive.

The historical accuracy of the Bible was addressed when I came across a book describing the findings of a group of researchers who went on a fact finding mission to determine the historical truth behind a range of events in the Bible. One story described excavations proving the truth of a huge flood covering the known world at

about the time of Noah; another study followed the route taken by the Israelites during their 40 years in the desert. They did find something resembling manna at one point and at another point they found an explanation for the quail story. At a certain time of year, migrating flocks of quail flying across the desert, would land in large numbers at a particular point. They were so exhausted they could be picked up off the desert floor without offering any resistance. This and other stories provided enough historical evidence for me to be convinced.

The second need to actually experience the reality of God in my life was addressed by the arrival of a new librarian. Something was worrying me at the time and when I chatted to her about it, she asked if I would like her to pray for me – I immediately cringed, imagining some embarrassing charismatic style exhortation, but I agreed and she prayed a short, simple prayer. That wasn't too bad. After that, if I ever mentioned being worried about that problem, she would look at me and ask *'Didn't I pray for you? And I will keep praying for you every day until it is answered'*. Well, that prayer WAS answered, as were a few other prayers she prayed for me. I had never experienced anything like this before, and I returned to her every time I thought I needed some prayer in my life. I didn't trust my own faith, but I could definitely see the results of hers!

Soon after that I went to Tasmania for four years, and it was there, that I experienced the most profound sense of God looking after my every need. Every prayer was answered, and each time He made it very clear that it was no coincidence. For example:

The campus I was studying at was located on Mount Nelson. A very limited number of buses went there and in fact stopped for the day at about 4:30pm. Classes however, continued further into the evening, so the Campus Administration set up a Thumbing Station where we could stand and thumb lifts down to the city.

One day, I rushed to the Thumbing Station after a class, realising I had to get a lift by 6pm if I were to catch the last bus home from the city. All I could do was pray, and in my prayer I gave a deadline of 6pm. Then I waited – 5:40, 5:50, 5:55 passed.

It did not look promising, but then on the dot of 6pm, someone I knew swung past, stopped and drove me ALL THE WAY HOME. So not only was my prayer answered, but it was made very clear in timing and generosity, that this was an answer to prayer.

This kept happening throughout my four years in Hobart – not just sometimes or regularly, but every single time - and when I left Hobart, it stopped. Just like that. I really have no explanation for this, except that maybe I didn't need that kind of help anymore after that - but I can say this, that after an experience like that, there was no way that I could ever **not** believe in God again.

So I believed in God, but somehow I still couldn't give my WHOLE life over to Him. I was fearful of what He might ask me to do and whether I'd be willing to do it, which resulted in me making fear-based decisions which are never good decisions. So life carried on until my comfortable sense of who God was, started to get gently but insistently shaken.

It started with being faced with a couple of challenging ideas, but this became almost a bombardment when I went to PNG for one and a half years. Different books, people and things just kept dropping into my life, challenging my fairly set way of thinking. For example, I was surrounded by Reiki masters – literally! Stephen's boss's wife was a Reiki master, the woman who lived above me in our building was a Reiki master and the woman who lived below me was a Reiki master. I got lent books by one of them, and another was keen to offer lessons on what she described as the non-religious healing practice of Reiki. I agreed and passed the first of three levels towards becoming a Reiki master. Similarly, I had brushings with other religions and spiritual traditions which left a mark on me too.

None of this was Christianity per se, but none of it was saying anything that was actually opposed to anything in the Bible either. In fact, it was saying what was in the Bible, but in a different language. If any of you speak more than one language, you may recognise that truths can be spoken in different languages that are basically the same truth but which are culturally specific; there are nuances of truth that

become more evident in one culture than in another. In India we often experienced this. When expressions couldn't be translated into English without losing some of the original flavour, we would just insert it into our English, so availing ourselves of the riches of 2 cultures rather than one.

So now, when I was presented with the same basic truth from a different angle, I found it was actually enriching my understanding of the Bible, rather than taking away from it. Somehow, I was able to own it more and make it a more integral part of my life. What were mere words before, were suddenly injected with new life, new meaning and new authenticity. I was developing a greater sense of God's presence in my actual life and daily activities. It suddenly felt obvious that my **whole** life had to be lived in relationship with Him and it no longer felt threatening anymore. Words such as 'If only I had more faith', didn't seem to apply anymore. Theologians talk about the 3 virtues of faith, hope and love, but as Mark Macintosh explains, faith will no longer be needed when we come face to face with truth and hope won't be necessary when we taste the abundance of goodness which is the source of all good in our lives... so only love remains.

In our first Bible reading, Jeremiah thought he was too young and that he did not know how to speak. God replied,

⁷ "Do not say, 'I am too young.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. ⁸ Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," ...

⁹ Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "I have put my words in your mouth.

In the second passage, the synagogue leader thought he knew God's laws. He was indignant that Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, when He had 6 other days to do it in. That synagogue leader had forgotten the one essential truth about God and the whole reason behind all His laws - that God is Love.

To me, both of today's Bible passages tie in with the journey that I have been travelling. They speak of tearing down set ways of thinking about God and ourselves; they highlight how easy it is to limit ourselves and God by pre-conceived notions, and how often these pre-conceptions are quite opposed to who God really is, and who WE really are.

Being open to the truth, especially when it is found in unexpected places, frees us to be all that God envisioned for us as individuals and as a human race and frees us to the wonder of finding God Himself. According to the WCCM website, John Main, while working with the British Diplomatic Corps in Malaya, met an Indian monk, Swami Satyananda. It says "*From him he learned how to meditate and took up the discipline of silence, stillness and simplicity as part of his Christian faith and daily prayer*". This was the beginning of his and our journey back into the Christian contemplative practice. He was open to finding God in unexpected places. Where else might we find God? How might Aboriginal spirituality enrich us?

So in summary - I was born into a long tradition of Christianity which was nurtured at home and at school. I was then pushed out of that warm nest to discover the reality of that God I had learned about for myself, and now I am learning to stretch those wings and find out more about the wonders and beauty of who God really is.