

This I Know for Sure
God Comes to You Disguised as Your Life
Matthew 4:18-19

When I was practicing law, I did a lot of construction litigation—cases in which the original developer of a property was sued for a defect—an *alleged* defect—in design or construction that had caused some damage to whoever now owned the building. Like so much of civil litigation, the cases I worked on involved thousands of documents. By far the bulk of the lawyers' time was spent searching through those documents for something significant: numbers that didn't add up, or a sentence that contradicted something the other party was saying now. Not one bit like the courtroom drama that happens 27 times a week on *Law & Order*.

More than once, my opposing counsel in those cases was a guy from another law firm in the same tall office building in Oakland that my firm was in. His name was Rick Renton, and honestly, I didn't think much of him. He wasn't a very stylish guy; there wasn't much about him that would immediately impress a jury or other lawyers. But OMG, that guy was willing to slog through documents—patiently, persistently, sometimes finding something that everyone else had overlooked. I, on the other hand, was always impatient to get into that courtroom.

Even at that time I was restless in the practice of law, not sure I was in the career that was my calling for life. But still, I wanted to be known as a great lawyer—shiny, winning, successful. And with some disdain, I thought of Rick as someone who was content to just do his work; no great ambition, not a lot of drive.

Rick Renton flew one day in a small plane to a deposition somewhere in Northern California. His plane crashed, and Rick was killed. With a sort of perfunctory respect, I went to his memorial service at an Episcopal church in Orinda—with about 500 other people. Family members, friends, his law partners spoke about Rick that day. They said lovely things about him—how kind he was, thoughtful, honest. The kind of things you'd want people to say at *your* memorial service. Not one person talked about what a great lawyer he was; and to my surprise, it didn't seem to matter.

And then one of Rick's partners told a story that held the voice of God for me. One November, this lawyer had picked up the Wednesday newspaper and read that the day before, Rick Renton had lost the election for Town Council in Moraga, the town where they both lived. This partner found Rick in the office that day. "Rick!" he said. "Why didn't you tell me you were running for office? I would have helped you!" And this was Rick's answer: "I didn't do it to win. I ran for that Council seat so that I could go knock on doors with my 9-year-old son; so that he could watch me ask for people's votes and know that he lives in a country where anyone can do that."

I was blown away. It dawned on me that day at Rick's funeral that I had worked alongside someone with true greatness, and I had dismissed him because he wasn't polishing his resume the way I was. If I had stopped to listen to Rick's story, I might have heard earlier something that met a sort of rumbling dis-ease in my life.

Fortunately, God is not adverse to repeating himself. That day, I heard.
God comes to you.
God comes to you disguised.
God comes to you disguised as your own life.

Paula D’Arcy wrote those words after a drunk driver killed her husband and one-year-old child, when Paula was just 27, and three months pregnant.

I think sometimes we miss the presence of God in our lives because we think it’s supposed to come as something grander. A flash of lightning, a sudden epiphany. And so we look right past the unremarkable, not-so-holy-feeling things that happen to us all the time. But this I know for sure: God comes to us, speaks to us, in small ways, all the time. In the moments when someone else’s story wakes us up and alerts us to what we haven’t been able to see in our own. In people who show up every day and annoy us until our hearts either curl up or stretch out into compassion. Maybe even in our nagging feelings of incompleteness. Those twinges we are inclined to dismiss as chronic anxiety...or heartburn. All of these are internal nudges—easy to ignore. But maybe—just maybe—God saying ‘Look up! I have something for you here!’

I have always been intrigued by the story of Jesus that we read this morning—the story about Jesus calling Peter and Andrew to be his disciples. There they were, two fishermen, doing what fishermen do—catching fish, cleaning their nets—when Jesus found them. “Come with me, he said; and I’ll make you fishers of people.”

Well, that’s convenient. That’s what disciples of Jesus do—right? They gather up people instead of fish, and they bring them along—not to be consumed for dinner, but to join the banquet that is God’s love and hope and intention for the world. So did Jesus go out and have to find fishermen specifically, to make the metaphor work? What if Jesus had been walking around in Los Altos, where all the fish are imported? Where fishing is not a common occupation?

Let’s not miss the point. Jesus said, to the people who looked up that day, ‘Follow me, and I’ll show you how to do *whatever you are doing right now* differently. In a way that makes a difference. To you. To the world.’ Jesus didn’t remove Peter and Andrew from the lives they had lived; he re-oriented them. Showed them out to live *their lives*, but differently, facing the light, attentive to the voice of God. Jesus might just as readily say,

Follow me. We can put your skills in generating capital to use for a common good.

Follow me, and I will turn your engineering expertise toward building the kingdom of God on earth.

Follow me, and you will be a teacher who calls out of your students their connection to a larger story, a deeper truth.

Or this: *I see you working so hard at loving your family, your friends. Let me open your heart to hold a wider compassion.*

God comes to you and says, *Your* life matters. *Your* life is useful—essential—to my hopes for the world. You do not have to go to India and become Mother Teresa. That was *her* life. *Whatever it is you do*, God says, *I can work with that*.

One of those little slogans that is useful because I can remember it and keep it close by is this: **God loves adverbs.** Adverbs are words that don't so much describe what you do, but how you do it. Words like *kindly, hopefully, generously*. Words that can change *anything* we do into an act that demonstrates that inside of you lives a God who is loving and just, changing you from the inside out.

The invitations to us to turn toward God come every day, maybe a hundred times a day. They come to us disguised in the most mundane moments, the commonest of our experiences. When a face comes toward us on the street, or in the airport, or in a parking lot. Do you raise your eyes or keep them lowered, passing by as though you expect the world to be filled with dangerous strangers?

When we hear a comment—even about someone who is a public figure—a comment that's funny but also a little bit cruel. Do we laugh along, or do we dare to say out loud that *every* person is a child of God?

When a friend has hurt you. Do you rest in the reason for hating her back, or will you lay down the first plank on a new bridge?

Will I be patient and kind, or cold as ice when the person in front of me in the grocery store line slows me down because he can't seem to put the right card in the machine?

All those moments of our lives that are disguised to seem insignificant, barely-noticeable. The ones that happen just the way the sun comes up—every day. They don't grab our attention; they wait for it. These are the unremarkable, no-great-meaning moments when God comes and speaks—whispers, really—what will make us different: live bravely, mercifully, kindly, humbly. The same things that will make the world different.

But you know what keeps me from hearing God's voice, I think? I think I listen only for the voice that affirms me. The one that tells me I'm doing a good job, or that the position I've taken is right. That I'm headed in the right direction, or that yes, in fact it was someone else's fault that that interaction went badly. I know this about myself: I am endlessly capable of self-deception. I can interpret just about any voice I hear in my head—even the self-critical, judgmental one—as comfort.

And when I read the Gospels, it looks to me like everyone who encountered Jesus honestly came away changed in some way. Maybe the truth is that God's voice will always be urging me toward change, rather than simply affirming what I already am.

The Franciscan writer and priest Richard Rohr says, wisely, that maybe we should stop trying to figure out what is God's precise plan for us, and focus instead on learning what God's voice sounds like—so that we can recognize it, listen for it.

I don't know what God's plan is for my life, much less for yours. But here's what I know for sure: God is not absent. God comes. Most often in disguise, indistinguishable from the people and things that don't look anything like what we thought God was supposed to look like. But always, always in the life you are living right now.