

Graduation Sunday Youth Sermons

July 26, 2020

Claudia Dare

If you listen to country music on the radio around here you know that there are three main stations 102.3, 94.7 and 93.9. For the sake of possibly getting a radio shout out I feel obligated to say that 94.7 is the best. Although I will admit I usually just skip between the three whenever they start playing commercials. While 102.3 is a bit further away from the others 94.7 and 93.9 are just one scan away. Or they were until a few years ago when 94.3 became a station. I remember discovering 94.3 very clearly because I found it so obnoxious — inconveniencing my quick station scan for optimal country music. Beyond the inconvenience was the fact that 94.3 was a contemporary gospel station. Nothing against the gospel station, but growing up here at FBC contemporary gospel was not in any way worshipful to me. This strong distaste likely started in sixth grade as I, and the rest of our middle school youth group, stared in disbelief at youth from other churches singing along to a song with lines like “jumping in the house of God jump up jump in the house jumping in the house of God”, led by a cartoon banana jumping side to side, on a projected screen ,at 5 o’clock in the morning, in Weaverville, North Carolina. It just wasn’t quite what I was looking for in a worship service. I felt that same disbelief listening to 94.3. At least for a while. I don’t know if it was the constant interruptions that wore me down or if one day I just didn’t notice the radio didn’t reach the other country station, but I fell in love with the gospel station. Something about it just drew me in and around the middle of my junior year I was hooked. It became a regular part of my radio rotation. It was still different than my typical Sunday morning hymns but a welcomed addition to my faith life. In Maren Morris’ song *My Church* she describes how singing every single verse of the highway FM brings her soul’s revival. Listening to the gospel station brings a very similar feeling to me — one I never thought I would have for contemporary gospel in sixth grade. Even though I constantly disregarded 94.3 and skipped past it hundreds of times, it never went away. The station didn’t stop existing just because I didn’t tune in, instead it waited patiently for when I was ready.

The fall of my senior year I began thinking about how listening to the gospel station could become a big part of my faith life in college, where I may not be attending a regular church service every week and while I could find on campus ministries they could certainly never be the same as my youth group experience here at FBC. In the fall, I didn't think about how listening to the gospel station would become my main connection to my faith life in the midst of a global pandemic. I don't know that application just seemed to slip my mind.

The radio quite literally gave me a way to worship but I also think it's just a good metaphor for how God works in our lives. If the radio has hundreds of channels, God has billions. He seeks us out, reaching all of us on a personal level so that we may make our own relationship with him. For example, God seeks out Saul directly in Acts Chapter Nine. Instead of working through the priests at the temples God reaches Saul where he is — on a dirt road to Damascus in the middle of the day with bright lights and a clear voice. You'll note how a radio also has lights and a generally clear voice. This whole interaction between God and Saul is surprising. God directly calls out Saul for his actions not only going against the current idea of God's not communicating with everyday people but also showing that even sinners are worthy of talking to God. Saul immediately questions the validity of God, saying "Who are you, Lord?". Saul is in awe of the situation and he is also in disbelief that God would really reach out to him. Saul knows what he has done and knows his actions do not qualify him to be in conversation with the Lord. By focusing on the validity of God and the worthiness of ourselves we can often miss the message God is trying to share. Saul thinks he knows his actions deem him unworthy, but God knows that everyone, regardless of their actions, deserves grace.

At the end of the encounter Saul is left blind and his friends help him the rest of his journey to town. In some commentaries this blindness is meant to show physically how Saul has been blind spiritually. I think this explanation of his blindness makes sense given the circumstance, but I also think it's more applicable than that. This is God telling us it's okay for all of us to feel blind in our faith journey, to get help from others and God, especially help from God. When you're listening to the radio you usually know what segments are coming next — traffic on the 8s or weather on the 5s — but you are also completely blind to what song is coming on next. I think that's part of why I love listening to the radio even though most of my friend's stream music while they're

driving. I love when the perfect song comes on completely by chance. Of course, this method has flaws. For example, the only song playing my first day of high school was *Two Pina Colodas* by Garth Brooks. This was not the song I would have chosen to kick off the next four years by any means, but I will also always remember it. We are blind when it comes to what comes next, both on the radio and in life, and that can be utterly terrifying, but after every break you know that another song is going to play. God seeks out Saul, stands up for Saul, and loves Saul, in spite of the fact that Saul spits in the face and the name of God repeatedly. God is consistent, showing him love, grace and mercy — putting on the next song. God does this with everyone all of the time and it is continually surprising.

It may be weird to say that finding God in the Gospel Station of the Radio was surprising to me but that's exactly what it was. It made me recognize the depth of God's consistency. God reaches out to people like Saul in the Bible just as much as he reaches out to each and every one of us. God's doing this should never be unexpected. We describe the guy as omnipresent after all, which literally means he is everywhere. And yet finding him anywhere and coming to the realization that I am cared for and looked after and loved always leaves me in awe. In Gregory Boyle's book *Tattoos on the Heart* he says, "We want to be seized by that same tenderness; we want to bear the largeness of God." When I can recognize the depth of saying God loves everyone it causes me to want to spread that message. God is so large, so consistent and ever-present because God is in each and every one of us.

Jacob Poteat

A couple of weeks ago Trey talked to us about the power and uses of images in our faith. What images come to mind when you think about God? Think about that for a moment. I'm sure we could come up with a long list, and many of us would share a lot of the same answers. But I wonder if the image that comes to my mind would be on your list. When thinking about how I see God, the first image that comes to mind is a horseshoe. Let me explain. If I were to list all the characteristics of God and stories I've learned in Sunday School, I'd end up with a really long litany of things that don't seem to go together, and sometimes seem to be in conflict with one another. And that can get messy. That's where the horseshoe comes in. The idea of dichotomies was originally

presented to me in youth during my junior year and It has really helped me to make sense of God. I often see God as both ends of a horseshoe, two sides that are completely separate but are closer than originally believed. This is true for both the places and ways in which I see God. I know of God's presence in Small and Quiet places. I feel God working in Big and Chaotic places. I view God through this dichotomy, both loud and quiet, small and large all at once.

God is present in Big and Chaotic Places where sometimes it's hard to block out all distractions and focus. I think of the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They refused to bow down to the statue as King Nebuchadnezzar commanded. They made the decision to stand up for what they knew was right and they had the courage to accept the consequences of their actions. Imagine it. It had to be a chaotic scene. Servants feverishly building a raging inferno, black smoke and intense heat engulfing all who were near, the king growing more and more enraged by their defiance, and the three men, locked into a course of action that they knew must be taken. They had to be terrified. But God was there. It was in God that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego found their strength. I see God in the courage that they possessed when facing the consequences of staying true to their beliefs.

I see similar scenes unfolding today. I have been following coverage of the Black Lives Matter protests. I am confronted with the hard truths of how far we still have to go as a society, of how much work still needs to be done to address systemic racism, and of understanding where I fit in to all this. I wrestle with the knowledge that I have privileges that some of my best friends don't just because of the color of my skin. Everywhere you look, there are videos of the protests. I'm sure you've seen them. Some are images of peaceful civil disobedience. Others look a lot like the scene I described to you a moment ago. Emotions running high, people running and jostling about, smoke, heat, rage, fear. Chaos. However, I feel the presence of God everywhere. I see God in both of these scenes. I see him in the peaceful protesters who have decided to stand up for what's right despite the consequences that they may face. I think God was present when protestors protected a police officer. I remember watching footage of the marches and this event in particular. During that protest in Louisville, as events began to turn violent, the police were called in. While making his way through a turbulent crowd, one officer became separated from the rest of his unit. The video shows the police officer isolated and alone, surrounded by an

increasingly volatile crowd, clearly concerned for his safety. In that same moment, the very same people who were protesting created a circle around him making sure that he was safe. It was a powerful image. Strangers locked arm in arm, facing other protesters, protecting this officer. This is what the presence of God looks like in the midst of chaos. God was present in the courage and compassion of their actions. These are the big moments where I see God. When people of conscience stand firm. When the strong stand for the weak. When the privileged speak for the disenfranchised. When compassion and strength and courage and love are called forth to stand against injustice and oppression.

I see God in the little things as well— where sometimes they get lost in our daily routines. My Grandma struggled with COPD for all of my life, but through all her challenges and struggles, her generosity and faith never wavered. She was always excited to share something with the people around her. Her kindness, generosity, and unwavering faith inspired me to be the person I am today. She was by far the most generous person that I have ever known. Few things gave her more pleasure than giving to others. I remember coming home from school and having her call me into her room. She always made sure she had something for us to share together. Sometimes it was food, other times an excellent story. She was the best storyteller — and she loved sharing her life stories with me. I remember this one time, when she had to be hospitalized. Confined to bed with a broken leg, she was determined to show kindness and generosity to the people around her. She would have us bring those little snack size candy bars to her so she could share them with anyone and everyone who came into her room. When those ran out, she would save the fruit and cookies from her food trays so she would have something to offer. I can't count the number of bananas and cookies that she gave me during that week. She found joy in the giving. It reminds me of the story in Mark, of the widow's offering. Remember, the widow was poor and had little to give, but she gave generously of what she had, thus making what she gave more important than all the offerings given by the rich. My Grandma gave selflessly like that. And I saw God in those countless small moments. Kindness and generosity, God in the small act of sharing.

Have you ever been on a retreat or a mission trip? Many of you can probably say yes, lots of them. Remember the debriefing sessions where you sit down with everyone else and reflect on the experience. More often than not, your group leader eventually got around to asking the question, “Where did you see God this week

or weekend?” It’s not that it’s not a genuine question, but you were on a church trip... You knew this was coming. Right? And if you’re like me, you did see God living and working in the world. After all, you were looking. Remember? ...It’s a church trip. I’ve had those experiences too. And they were genuine and meaningful. And I did see the love of God and the face of Jesus expressed in so many ways. I saw because I was in a place in my heart that I let myself see in that way. Was I seeing the small or the big, or both?

Remember that horseshoe? I’ve said that I see God in different places. But sometimes the way I see God is different. I see Him acting in big ways in some cases and small ways in others. Sometimes I’m frustrated that the small ways I perceive aren’t bigger. I know that sounds awfully close to me second-guessing God and how He’s working in the world. I’m not. I’m just human. Not only that, I’m an American, and a Gen Z’er. I can’t help it. I want BIG! I wrestle with why God works in such small ways when he undoubtedly has the power to act in big parting-the-Red-Sea kinds of ways. But then I think back to the widow’s mite, that her gift was deemed so great. I think of all the simple moments with my Grandmother, her joy in giving the smallest of treasures. And the smallness of those acts is transformed, their impact magnified. I recall an otherwise ordinary day when three men stood resolute in their faith and trust in God. God gave Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego the courage to stand. They had no way of knowing that God would use that small act to make a big statement moments later. And today, centuries later...God is still working in small ways. Men and women across the world are making small acts of faith and courage to stand against injustice. And they’re joined by others...another, and another, and another, until those small individual moments number in the thousands. And the moment transforms into a movement. And the small becomes big. And the big changes the world. And I wonder, if the small and the big were ever really that different. And the ends of the horseshoe, the ways that God moves and works in the world are very close.

Anna Yerxa

I first started rock climbing at about the age of 5 at a family summer camp and instantly fell in love. The staff came up with challenges for me at the rock wall because just getting to the top wasn't hard enough. Years later, my sister Mattie had a birthday party at the gym and then joined the climbing team, which made me want to join the team too. I love rock climbing because it has endless challenges, both physical and mental. There will always be some moves and routes that are hard for me and I must have the mental strength to keep trying even when I fail. I also love rock climbing because of the supportive community it has. I can always count on other climbers to cheer me on, even if I do not know them well.

In the summer before 9th grade I considered starting a new sport. I was growing tired of rock climbing. I felt I was not seeing the improvements that I was working so hard to make. I went to Lake Johnson for a day to see what rowing was like. Rowing seemed new and interesting because I had never really committed myself to a sport besides rock climbing. It presented a new set of challenges such as teamwork and being on the water, which intrigued me. However, rowing practices would conflict with climbing practice, so it would be impractical to do both sports at one time. I knew I needed to choose. Either rock climbing or rowing.

I did not know what to do. It would be hard for me to leave my climbing team because I had been a part of the community for such a long time. But it would also be hard to stay and feel like I was stuck and would never improve. I was scared to put myself into an entirely new group of people with rowing, but I also did not want to pass up on a sport that I might excel at.

Navigating difficult decisions is tricky, especially when both choices are good. Oftentimes I first turn to friends or family for guidance and may forget that I have God by my side. Although I did not think to pray at the moment, God understood my dilemma.

This understanding is why God seems like the wind to me. When Jesus speaks to Nicodemus, he says, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." Like the wind, we know God exists although we cannot see him. God is also like the wind in that he is mysterious. We will never fully understand God — similarly to how we

won't know where the wind has come from and where it is going. Wind pushes things like God pushes us in different directions in our lives. Wind can be strong and mighty, or it can be light and peaceful. God can be angry, but also peaceful.

When I was struggling with the decision to choose rock climbing or rowing, God was like the wind, giving me a little push in the right direction. The night I was trying to decide, I received news that I was invited to join the elite climbing team. The promotion to the elite team encouraged me to believe that I was growing in rock climbing and that rock climbing was that sport meant for me. Looking back on the event, I think God had a hand in my promotion. I can't imagine my life without rock climbing. God knew that rock climbing was a part of me that I needed to keep. He understood me even when I was questioning a big part of myself. I am grateful that I decided to stick with rock climbing. Not only has it given me a comforting community, but has also helped me learn about how to train and be healthy. Taking the time to look for God when his presence is not clear to us can give us comfort in any situation. My decision is relatively small compared to bigger decisions I will have to face later in life; however, if God is here guiding me through small decisions, I know that he will definitely be there guiding me through bigger, tougher decisions throughout my life.

In my future, I will have to make big decisions. I might have to decide between different job offers, make important choices for my family, or decide where to make a home. God may be a gentle breeze in these moments, but it may not be enough to push me towards a decision. Sometimes God may need to act like a violent, rushing wind. When the day of Pentecost came, "Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting." It would have been very frightening and impactful to be in that room. When God acts like a violent wind, it is impossible to ignore, or still be unsure.

We don't get to choose how God appears to us, but we have to trust that he knows whether we need a gentle breeze, or a violent wind. A big part about having faith is believing despite the confusion and mystery that surrounds God. Even though we may not see or hear the wind, God is always guiding us whether we know it or not. It is up to us to open ourselves up to his guidance and to ask for help when we don't know what to do.

Catherine Carter

Similar to Anna, for as long as I can remember, I've pictured God as a gust of wind. It originated with the *Prince of Egypt* animated movie I watched during my childhood which depicts the scene during the Exodus plagues where the spirit of God travels to each Egyptian house but passes over the houses of the Israelites. God's spirit is shown as a gust of wind, a white gale through the air. That's how I see God in my mind: a gust of wind moving serenely through the world, everywhere surrounding us, an invisible but undeniable presence; something we can't see, but can absolutely feel and know that it's there.

I've always been someone who feels things deeply. If you know me, that shouldn't surprise you. When I find something that I feel passionately about — a quote or a song or a book — I feel it *strongly*, often to the point of a physical reaction. This typically means whenever I find something beautiful in the world, I get chills. When I read a particularly emotional quote for the first time, I get chills. When I hear a gorgeous piece of music, I get chills.

Because in my head, God is a gust of wind. I always felt like chills were God's way of tapping me on the shoulder, saying "hey, notice this," — a physical sign of what should be important to me. It's always felt like God wanted me to notice the beautiful things. It seemed important to God for me to focus on the beauty of all that has been created.

All of this is tied up together — God as the wind giving me chills when I see beautiful things. Because of this, in my mind and in my faith, the beautiful things became God's presence. That became how I see God in the world. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "beauty is God's handwriting," which has always resonated with me.

When God is viewed this way, God's boundaries become much less definitive. God is no longer simply a being in the sanctuary on Sunday morning — God is in people and their actions, and music and making it, and nature and its vastness. In the choir room upstairs, there's a framed quote that says,

“Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.” I love that — that God can be found simply in the sound of stunning music rather than an explicitly stated message. God can be found anywhere. I actually wrote an article on this idea for the church magazine, *First Foundations*, a few months ago. I talked about finding God in our sanctuary on Sunday morning, yes, but also on our youth trips to the beach, on mission trips, and at church basketball games. It doesn’t have to be in a specific place deemed holy, but anywhere that you find beauty in the world.

I’ve thought a lot about this idea of God as less definable, more of a presence than a being, and it always brings me back to God as the Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. While of course each representation of God is important, in my faith, I’ve found the Holy Ghost to be the easiest to understand and find in the world. That gust of wind, that chill that I’ve talked about feeling — I believe that’s the Holy Spirit. *Every time I experience something moving, that presence is there, pointing out the beauty, inhabiting it. The Holy Spirit makes beautiful things known and dwells in them.*

The Holy Spirit isn’t just something we see or a feeling out in the world: it is in each of us as well. 1 Corinthians 3:16 says, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s spirit dwells in you?” The Holy Spirit dwells in each of us. Follow me here: *If we believe that the Spirit is in each of us and look to find God in the beautiful things, that makes each and every one of us a beautiful thing, too.* Genesis 1:27 says, “God made humankind in his own image.” Since we were made in the image of God, that beauty can shine through us. God can be found in the eyes of every other person. Someone’s kindness, someone’s patience, someone’s goodness. Each of those things is God through them.

The best way I’ve found to articulate this thinking is from one of my favorite books, *The Sun is Also a Star*, by Nicola Yoon. The main character states, “I think all the good parts of us are connected on some level. The part that shares the last chocolate chip cookie or donates to charity or gives a dollar

to a street musician or becomes a candy striper or cries at Apple commercials or says I love you or I forgive you. I think that's God. God is the connection to the very best, most beautiful parts of us."

This belief that each of us is beautiful and therefore sacred means that each of us can find God in the beauty of others, as well as be God to others. Like I said earlier, God can be found in someone's goodness — just as much, you can be God's goodness to someone else. *If we strive to look for God in beauty and look to demonstrate God through beauty, we're likely to find a lot more godliness in the world.*

I used to get chills solely when I witnessed something beautiful for the sake of the beauty alone, the simple evocation of emotion. Now, I get chills much more often — and when I do, I recognize that I'm comprehending God in a distinctive way. I'm seeing godliness in places where I wasn't before. I'd like to picture a world where we all might get chills a little more often through seeing the beauty of God in every place we can, because it's present in so many ways — we just have to make sure our eyes are open to see it.