

**“God Sightings” (Luke 1:39-45)
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Many years ago, some folks were applying for a job with Western Union. In the background, of course, they could hear the tap-tap-tap of the telegraph machine, but they didn't let it bother them; they just focused on filling out their forms. Then, all of a sudden, this guy stood up and walked into the manager's office. A few minutes later, the manager came out and announced, "This man gets the job!" The other applicants were shocked. "How can you do this?" one asked, "We didn't even get a chance to take the test." "Actually, you did," the manager replied. "You see, we need someone who really knows Morse Code, so the test has been coming from those telegraph machines. Over and over, we've been tapping out the message: '*Whoever comes into the office first gets the job.*'"

There is an important lesson here. When you think about it, what really gave that one guy the edge? It wasn't *just* knowledge, was it? Or rather, it wasn't just *intellectual* knowledge. I'm sure all the applicants knew Morse Code. But there is knowledge and then there is *knowledge*. That is, there's intellectual knowledge, and then there's a way of knowing something so deeply, so personally, so experientially that you just automatically pick up on it – as that one guy did. *That's* what gave him the edge.

I think we call that being *sensitized* – not in the touchy-feely sense, but in the sense of heightened awareness. Like when a builder or a realtor looks at a house and automatically picks up on things the rest of us might not notice. Or when a doctor discovers something significant just by poking and prodding a bit. Or when a mother can tell from the way her baby cries whether it's hungry, hurting, frightened, or frustrated. That comes from being sensitized. Intellectual knowledge is one component, but experience, attentiveness, personal connection – these develop knowledge much, much further. When you're sensitized, you know something so well that you just automatically pick up on it.

The same can be true in our spiritual lives. In fact, I suspect we've all seen it. On the one hand, there are people who know the *contents* of the Bible, know the teachings of the church, know the rules and rituals – maybe even know them quite well – but it's kind of a head thing. That's not to say they don't believe. They do, but their faith is more of a head thing. At least, it is compared to other folks we know, who live and breathe faith, who are deeply connected with God, and are so sensitized to God's presence in and around them that they pick up on things – spiritual things – kind of automatically, things that other folks might miss.

For example, compare John the Baptist's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth. Scripture tells us that **“both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.”** But even so, what a difference between the two! On the one hand, there was Zechariah. He had plenty of intellectual knowledge. He was a priest, so he

knew his Bible well. All the rules and rituals, too. But was he sensitized to God? Not really! Remember his reaction when Gabriel appeared to him in the temple? Not his finest hour! I mean, there he was in the presence of an archangel! And this archangel brought him amazing news! At last, Zechariah's prayers had been answered! After all these years, Elizabeth would bear a child! And what a child! He would grow up to be the last great prophet, John the Baptist! He would prepare the way for the Messiah! What an honor! What a miracle! So what was Zechariah's reaction? **"How will I know that this is true?"** That was best he could come up with! Cool, skeptical, intellectual: **"How will I know that this is true?"** You see? All his intellectual knowledge didn't get him very far!

On the other hand, look at his wife, Elizabeth. She could have been just as cool as her husband. She could have been just as skeptical about miracles. Even after conceiving a child when all realistic hope had vanished, she could have explained it away – could have said, *"Such things have been known to happen."* But she didn't, and reading between the lines, there was a good reason why she didn't. I take her to be much more sensitized to God. I mean, when Mary appeared on her doorstep, look how Elizabeth reacted! Without a moment's hesitation, she cried out, **"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?"** Now, she may have already known that Mary claimed to have miraculously conceived God's Son. Nothing in the text suggests that, but she may have known this. Even so, there was no reason why she had to believe Mary – much less believe her so enthusiastically – aside from being sensitized to the presence and working of God. Sure, baby John leaped in her womb. But babies do that all the time – some so much that one of my friends thought her baby would grow up to be an acrobat! And sure, there was the work of the Holy Spirit. But that was no guarantee. People ignore the Holy Spirit all the time! Oh, but wait! That was it, wasn't it? Elizabeth *didn't* ignore the Holy Spirit. She was open to God, attentive to God, connected to God in a deeply personal way. So much so, that far from expressing any doubts, she praised *Mary's* faith: **"Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."** Somehow, Elizabeth picked up on a lot that one would not know by logical deduction. Somehow she had been sensitized to the presence and working of God.

So how did that happen? And more to the point, how does that happen? This is the question we are going to explore today – *and all next year* – with our focus on **"God Sightings."**

So how does it happen? To become sensitized to the presence and working of God, we must begin by *immersing ourselves in Scripture*. That is why, later in this service, each household will receive the **"God Sightings Devotional Bible."** It is set up with daily selections from the Old and New Testaments, so that we can read through the entire Bible in one year. Now, many of us have never done this before. And some days it will be easier than others. So let's be clear why

this daily Bible reading is important. It's because this is the way God speaks to us – through His Word. Scripture is the God's textbook. It is the means God uses for “**teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness,**” so that we can become spiritually “**proficient**” – sensitized! – and “**equipped for every good work.**” There is no way around this. God won't just zap us with insight apart from Scripture, and He won't reveal anything that is contrary to Scripture. So for us to become sensitized to God, we must know Scripture. We must be immersed in Scripture, and that is where “**God Sightings**” will begin.

But, of course, Zechariah knew Scripture as well as Elizabeth, maybe even better. So that tells us that for Scripture to really have its full impact on us, something more is needed. Our reading needs to be accompanied by reflection, application, and prayer. To help us with this, each adult and teenager will also receive a “**God Sightings Companion Guide.**” You don't *have* to use it, of course. And working through it won't “do the job.” It's just meant to “prime the pump.” Hopefully, it will help.

However we go about it, what's important is that we not *just read* Scripture but that we let God speak to us through it. Otherwise, we just get stuck in the past: “This was what God *did*, this was what God *said* way back when.” The goal is hearing what God says to us *today* and seeing what God is *doing* today – in our lives and all around us. Scripture can be the springboard for that, but it takes more than just reading. It takes *listening* – listening to what God has to say. It takes *reflection* – really pondering what we hear God say. It takes *application* – asking again and again: *What does this Word mean for me?* And let's be honest. We all know we're not going to get very far with listening, reflection, or application if we don't begin it and immerse it in *prayer*. So these four elements are all important. Together, they deepen our connection with God, open us up to God, and over time, that's how we will be sensitized to God's presence and working. I emphasize “over time.” But it does happen! And it is a goal worth pursuing!

In fact, over the centuries this practice has made a huge difference in Christians' lives. It still can today, and it doesn't matter where you fall on the theological spectrum. Mother Teresa practiced this discipline of prayerfully reading, pondering, and applying God's Word each day. So did Martin Luther. Likewise, Billy Graham. It's really just treating God's Word as *God's Word* – God speaking to us. As the old prayer puts it, we want to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the Word. That will make it a part of us and let it shape how we look at life...

...Which brings me to a question you may have been wondering about: *Why do we call it “God Sightings”?* I'm sure we've all read articles about people who claim to see Jesus in a forkful of spaghetti or on a soybean oil tank. Be assured, that's not what I have in mind! I'm also not pushing conveniently timed “*messages from God*” that some claim to get right when they need back-up for their opinions. No, what I have in mind is a very subtle, sophisticated *awareness*

of God being at work – and insight as to *how* God is at work – that can't really be explained, only described. To do that, let me share an example.

In my seminary fieldwork church, there was a dear old saint named Irene. Outwardly, she didn't look very impressive, but inwardly, what a rich spiritual life she had – thanks to the very discipline we've been talking about: prayerfully reading, pondering, and applying God's Word each day! Well, she and my landlady, Catherine, were friends, and one Sunday, after she met another of Catherine's tenants at church, she remarked, "God really has His hand on that young man!" Catherine laughed. You see, unbeknownst to Irene, this other student had been raised by staunch atheists, and far from being religious, he was, shall we say, kind of a free spirit, which was why his wife had kicked him out. Truth be told, the only reason he came to church was because I was preaching there for the first time, and it was mainly to see how the sermon turned out – I had had some trouble pulling it together. So you see why Catherine laughed. But Irene didn't back down. "All that may be true on the surface," she admitted, "but from the way he spoke and acted, I could just see that God has his hand on that young man." This was in October. So fast-forward to early January. Just as I was getting ready to leave for school, Greg came into the kitchen and told Catherine and me, "The strangest thing has happened. When I got up this morning, I realized I've become a Christian...and I'm not quite sure what to do about it." Well, I knew what to do about it! Greg was instructed, then baptized the first Sunday of March. Catherine and I were the sponsors. And Irene was there, too. To her credit, she didn't say, "Told you so!" But she could have, for she had seen something the rest of us hadn't – not even Greg. That was a "**God Sighting**" – maybe not on the same level as Elizabeth, but a "**God Sighting**" nonetheless. And it was the direct result of being sensitized over the years by prayerfully reading, pondering, and applying God's Word each day!

So where is God in your life? How is God working? What might God want to do in you and through you? These questions are not as unanswerable as some would have us think! God is busy all around us, and He is more willing to tip us off than we might guess, but as I said a moment ago, He's not going to just zap us with insight. That is why He gave us His Word. As we prayerfully listen to His Word, God develops our spiritual hearing. As we prayerfully ponder and apply His Word, God sharpens our spiritual vision. In time, we too can become so sensitized to God's presence in and around us that we'll pick up on things – spiritual things – kind of automatically, things that we might otherwise miss. God's Word can have that effect. It did on Elizabeth. It can on us. And this coming year, that will be our goal with "**God Sightings.**" Amen.