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Hidden Things – Isaiah 40:26-31

If you watch TV, you've seen a commercial for GEICO, an insurance company. For many years now, one of their key slogans has been, "Give us fifteen minutes, and we could save you fifteen percent on car insurance."

Lately, they've turned that line into another cycle of commercials, gently poking fun at their own ads. The plot goes something like this: "Hey, look – in fifteen minutes you could save fifteen percent on car insurance." "Everybody knows that." "Well, did you know that Pinocchio was a really terrible motivational speaker?" Or something equally silly.

Of course, it's all about getting you to remember the company name, and the company mission. And it works.

Unless you're my wife, who is every advertising executive's nightmare. Long before someone figured out how to automatically cut the commercials out of TV recordings, Valerie developed and mastered the art of completely ignoring commercials.

I mean, completely. As in, never even sees them. Go ahead and ask her: unless I've managed to make her watch one for some reason or other, or they have a cute animal in them, she will not recognize what you're describing.

Now, that's exactly what advertising is supposed to overcome. That ad is supposed to grab your attention, your imagination, and wrestle it to the ground, so that every time you hear a phrase, or see a logo, or even grip the right shape bottle, you think of that brand.

It doesn't work perfectly, of course. But the creativity that goes into the process is so entertaining that, at least according to some experts, as many people tuned into the big volleyball match between the Pattys and the Seagulls last Sunday to watch the commercials as tuned in for the game, and some of those ads really were memorable.

But the question always comes up: how much of this memorable advertisement will translate into brand recognition and sales? As I said, for Valerie, zip. How often do you arrive at the end of the commercial and wonder what was being advertised?

Now, take that concept, and apply it to our experience of existence on this earth. We say, because we've learned it, that God is everywhere, intimately involved in everything.

Don't you know? Haven't you heard?

But are we consciously aware of that on a daily basis?

Is the sponsor's message getting through?

The answer, for most of us, is something that, deep in my pastor's heart, I think drives God nuts.

We never – that's an overstatement, but I'm trying to make a point – we never see God behind or in what's happening, first off. Two, we think that God doesn't see what we're doing. And third, even worse, we have a really tough time seeing God in what others are doing around us.

Which leads to an underlying, subconscious assumption that God's out taking a nap, when in fact nothing could be further from the truth.

We want to see God working where *we're* looking, doing what *we* want – like an athlete's premonition that they were about to do something great. But God has other ideas. That's one of the reasons why Jesus had such a hard time getting the simplest of messages across. Think about it. Here's God, in Jesus, right there in front of them, and people he encountered still managed not to see him. We like to flatter ourselves that we would, of course, do better – but I doubt it. In fact, some people thought he was evil or blasphemous, and I wouldn't be surprised if we agreed.

Have you not seen? Have you not heard?

Isaiah asks – or rather, Isaiah asks for God – whether the people of Israel realize that God is watching them. It’s often been said that the true mark of character is how you behave when no one’s looking – and, if God is who we say he is, then *there is never a time when someone isn’t looking*. So, how do you deal with that?

That’s the downside of God, especially for those who like to consider their private lives and thoughts private, or have it in for traffic cameras. Liberty is good, liberty is great – but God knows, and doesn’t buy the argument that no one’s looking.

Still, there is an important positive aspect to this: truly, there is nothing so small that it escapes God’s notice. And that, believe it or not, is very good indeed.

If you’re concerned about bad people and bad things, you need to know that God is, too, and is watching.

On the other hand, all those little things, the tiny details, the small touches of good – they don’t go unnoticed either.

A sarcastic comment I learned long ago is that “no good deed goes unpunished.” There are times when that certainly seems so – just the other day I got blasted for privately pointing out something that could have been embarrassing to someone. But I did it, and I did it just between the two of us, and it was the right thing to do.

Of course, I most certainly don't always do the right thing. I'm a human being, too – worse, a male human being. It's my job to be wrong. Still, we have the potential in us to do right, we can try our best – and there's a double benefit in trying to do simple, small, hidden good deeds: if you don't get it right, there's little damage, but if it works, God will multiply it, like going from walking to running to soaring on the wings of the Spirit. The reverse of Isaiah's order, but that's another sermon.

But there are other small things, hidden places out there where God is busy, little clues. It takes an eye or a heart tuned to God's ways to notice them, often; but sometimes they're just there, hidden in plain sight.

This one is a bit obvious, but beautiful: A Navy chaplain I went through basic training with was serving with the Marines, and was in that infamous barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, way back in '83. Anyone remember that? He'd been doing sick calls, and as some clergy do, he'd been wearing what's called a sick call stole. Not a big fancy thing like what I'm wearing now, but about an inch wide and three feet long. On one side, it's purple; on the other, white.

When the rescuers clambered over the rubble, one of them just happened to see a tiny patch of purple in a sea of concrete and debris. And that's how my friend's life was saved. A very small thing, that bit of purple silk – but not only had it been a comfort to those he'd been

visiting and praying with, it was the difference between life and death for him, and for the others who were found close by. A small thing, mostly hidden.

Another: there's a sister church up in Phoenix that had a problem with skateboarders. The campus has great sidewalks and slopes to its parking lot, and the kids just love it. Of course, the members and staff tried to run them off – liability, graffiti, vandalism: you know how kids are, right? Of course, their efforts were in vain, and expensive to boot.

So, one bright young fellow got a flash of inspiration one day, and when some skateboarders were sighted in a remote part of the church property, he grabbed a few bottles of water and went out to meet them. Struck up a conversation. Shared the water.

The pastor, when he heard about it, went out and bought a few cases of water, and told the staff whenever they saw a skateboarder to go out and offer some water and a few words.

You know what happened? The vandalism disappeared. The skateboarders started reporting suspicious activity they encountered. They even started – well, some of them did, anyway – coming to activities at the church. Because it's a really cool church.

And what my friend the pastor said is that “it's tiny acts of reconciliation like this that help remind me that God is always here.” Now there's a gift, an inspired eye: to see in the simple sharing of water

and a few words an act of reconciliation, a little piece of God working in the midst of ordinary people, bringing them together, living a tiny part of the peace of God which passes all understanding. Not just notice them, either, but build on those signs: that smile, that kind word or act.

Have you not seen? Have you not heard? Where have you seen God at work this week?