



August 2, 2015
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I Spy God On the Move: Directing Acts 18:9-11

Kids Sermon:

Introduce theme of sermon series: I Spy.

- All month we are spying where we can see God on the move

Ask kids if they have ever seen a play at the theater?

- What are some things you might spy at a theater?
- Who might we spy on the stage? Actors
- Are they in charge of the play?

Who is really in charge of the play? The director

- Can you see the director when you watch a play? Not really, but you can spy him!
- What does a director do? He is in charge of the whole play. He tells the actors what to do, he tells the people with lights where to shine them, he tells the people in charge of music when to play.
- So we may not see the director in person, but we can spy all the work that he has done.

One of the ways the Bible describes our lives is like they are one big play where we are the actors and God is the director.

- Proverbs 16:9 says that 'The mind of man plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps.'
- As actors in God's play, we may plan how we want to do things, but it is God—the director—who is really making sure we do what he wants. He in charge of the whole production, making sure it turns out how he wants it to.
- This morning we are going to hear three stories – one from the book of Acts in the Bible about a man named Paul, one about a man named James, and one about me. I want you to listen and try and spy how you can see God directing in each one of them.

Sermon:

All summer we are journeying through the second half of the book of Acts and asking: How do we see God on the move? This morning I'm going to tell three stories: Paul's story, James' story and my story. As I said to the kids, I want you to try and spy where you can see God on the move in each of these.

This is Paul's story. Paul is a man who has been called by God to preach the good news about Jesus to the nations. He's devoting his entire life to telling people about Jesus, and is traveling from city to city all around the Mediterranean Sea. As we've been reading Acts, I've started to notice that Paul has a bit of a pattern going on in how things go when he reaches a new city. I don't know if you have noticed this.

He starts out by going to the synagogue—that's where the Jews worship. Paul was a Jew, and he believed the good news about Jesus was good news first for the Jews—the people who God had called to be his people 1,500 years earlier. So he would start in the synagogue trying to convince the Jews that this Jesus was really the person God had promised was going to come and rescue the world. The Jews knew this person by his title: Christ or Messiah.

So Paul would preach and teach in the synagogue that Jesus was the promised rescuer, and guess what would always happen? The Jews would get angry. A few of them would believe, but most of them got angry. So Paul would give up on the Jews in that city and would go to the non-Jews, or Gentiles, and tell them about Jesus. However, in almost every city, there would be a group of people, sometimes Jews, sometimes Gentiles, sometimes both, who would get really angry and try to hurt Paul. He was driven out of Psidian Antioch, they tried to stone him in Iconium, he was stoned and left for dead in Lystra, he was put in prison in Philippi before being released, and a mob tried to lynch him in Thessalonica and eventually caught up with him in Berea before he fled to Athens.

Paul's basic pattern was this: arrive in a city, preach about Jesus to the Jews, get them angry, go preach about Jesus to the Gentiles, get driven out of the city by opposition and move on to the next one. So when he comes to Corinth, in Acts 18, and the Jews oppose Paul and become abusive, I bet I know what he is thinking: "Here we go again. I've riled some people up. I better start packing my bags. Get ready to jump on the night boat to Ephesus. God must want me to move on." That's the beginning of Paul's story.

This is James' story. James is our new modern worship leader for our 10.47 service—we hired him this week. He loves Jesus, loves this church and is a gifted worship leader. He's from California, and in the interview process he told us a little about why he feels called to the northwest. Initially, both he and his wife felt through prayer that God was calling them to the Northwest, but they had no idea why. They had no family, no friends, nothing here. Yet it seemed like that was what God wanted. James worked for the Navy, and put in a request to transfer to the shipyard in Bremerton, and after some time the request was granted.

Eighteen months ago he moved up here, but had to leave his wife and two daughters behind in CA to finish off the school year. After a few months of being apart from his family, not really knowing anyone here, and suffering through the

beauty of a northwest winter, he decided that he must have got it wrong. God mustn't have wanted them to move here. That's the beginning of James' story.

This is my story. Over a year ago my wife, Rachel, and I needed to begin the process of changing our visas. Up until that point we had been here on missionary visas, but there was a limit to how long you could keep extending them for and we had reached it. We needed to change our visa status in order to stay. I needed to move to a religious worker visa in order to carry on working for Chapel Hill which both Rachel and I felt was what God had called us to do.

But when the time came to change visas, there were some problems. The terms of the missionary visa were financially very favorable to both the church and to me & Rachel. The church wasn't allowed to pay us a salary but could reimburse all our expenses, and could give us housing and a car without any of it being taxed. But on the next visa, I became just like a regular employee of the church, with a standard salary and no housing/car benefits. It was going to cost the church more money and, ironically, we were going to receive less. As we crunched the numbers it became clear that if we stayed we wouldn't be able to cover our expenses from my salary.

All the way along, God had provided for us to be here. It continually affirmed our call. But all of a sudden, from our perspective, that provision was going away. As we prayed, we didn't feel like we could stay without being able to cover our expenses. We knew that God provided for those who he called, and it looked like that provision was going away. We in turn believed that God must be calling us elsewhere. Just over a year ago, after many lengthy discussions with Pastor Mark and the elders I let them know that we weren't going to be able to stay once our current visa expired.

Three stories... three men who are all facing difficulties... three men who are all doubting whether they are still called to something. Right now, it's hard to spy God on the move. But he is. Keep listening. See if you can spy God as I tell you how each man's story finishes.

Remember where we left Paul? He's thinking: new town, same old story. People are angry with me, I'm about to get kicked out. I think God probably wants me to move on. Then guess what happens? Well, let's read it: One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." (Acts 18:9–10 NIV) Just as Paul was about to give up, Jesus appears to him and says: Don't be afraid. Don't give up. I'm with you. I'm going to protect you. I've still got people in this city; I need you to preach to.

So what did Paul do? Well, the next verse tells us: 'So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.' (Acts 18:11 NIV) On his travels Paul had never stayed anywhere for that long. This was unprecedented, but because Paul

stayed, he saw people come to know Jesus. God said to him there were many people he had in Corinth. From the book of Acts and the letters he writes, we can tell that Paul saw a number of people come to know Jesus, including some prominent leaders—probably two synagogue rulers, the city's director of public works, and some other wealthy people. When Paul was faced with opposition, God intervened, told him to stick it out, and the mission bore even more fruit. That's Paul's story.

Remember where we left James' story? He thought God had called him and his family to the NW, but it had been so hard he now wasn't sure. So he put in a transfer request to the shipyard, back to the base in California. Thankfully his request was granted and he prepared to leave. On his last day of work, he packed his car that morning with all his stuff, ready to drive home when he left work that evening. However, as he was walking out of work he got a phone call from the California base: 'James, the job has gone. I'm sorry.' He said, 'What do you mean it's gone? I'm all packed; I'm driving down tonight.' The voice said, 'I'm sorry. We don't have the job anymore.'

So James stayed. He became convinced that this was God intervening, telling him that he had work for him to do here, affirming that he was called here, so he threw himself into it. His family eventually joined him that summer, but he still wasn't sure what God had for him here. He had been a youth pastor and a worship leader, but they couldn't seem to find a church. So he devoted himself to sharing Jesus with the people he worked with. He and his wife, April, began a Bible study in their home and started inviting James' co-workers to join them. And through that Bible study, God has been bringing people to believe in Him. Lives have been transformed. Lives of men and women who might never have heard about Jesus without James staying around in the NW. God intervened in James' life, told him to stick it out, and people came to believe in Jesus. That's James' story.

Remember where we left my story? It looked like God wasn't going to provide for me and my family to stay here in Gig Harbor, so we assumed he must be calling us somewhere else and we let the elders know we were going to be leaving. Well, they didn't really take no for an answer. One elder in particular laid it out straight. He said to me: 'Ellis. Put aside all of the money stuff. Do you believe God has called you here? That's what's important right now.' Honestly, at that point, I didn't know. They told me to take the weekend and think about it some more.

That weekend, Rachel and I received a message from a member of the church with whom we had shared what had been going on. Here's some of what it said:

"I was reminded this morning of a similar time when we asked the same questions and wrestled over similar places. When we were about to leave overseas to work, our sending church made no commitment to us. I was very angry at the elders. One of the elders was Uncle Syd who was a missionary in some Caribbean island that I forget... And he listened to me asking, "Why don't you guys commit to a

certain amount of money. Why do you expect the missionaries to live by faith, and you guys don't live by faith?" And Uncle Syd said, "You need this." And that's all he said. By some miraculous act of God, that somehow soothed me.

"And I have story after story of how I saw His mighty power on my behalf, stories that would have been stolen from me. Those stories are mine to administer to others, to calm me in the middle of the night, to remind me of His true character when the World, Flesh, Devil say otherwise—constantly. They are the kind of experiences that no money can buy, that give us tools to truly minister to the world. I think the Lord is offering you this opportunity... an invitation to hang on to only Him and not on anybody or [any]thing else... "

After receiving that message, we knew God was asking us to stay, asking us to trust Him, telling us that He would provide, He would be with us, and as a result we would be able to tell others about our great God who provides. And He has provided through all sorts of circumstances and situations, and I know we are called here. I know this is where God wants us. God intervened in our lives, told us to stick it out, and we now have a story of his faithfulness to share with others. That's my story.

Three stories: Paul's story, James' story, my story. Three men who had almost given up on what they thought they were called to. Three times God intervened and said: "Don't be afraid. Don't quit. I'm with you. Your story isn't finished here." Three times that people have had a story to share about our God; of his presence, of his provision, or his faithfulness. And as a result of the sharing of those stories, lives have been transformed. You see, our lives are like one big play where God is the director. 'The mind of man plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps.' We might have our plans, our ideas, but God is the one directing. He determines our path. The question is: Are we listening? Are we going to hear God when he calls? Or are we going to keep going our own way? And even if we do, will we follow through? Will we be obedient? Will we follow God?

There's one final thing I want you to notice from Paul's story. When Jesus appears to Paul in a vision, He says to him: "I am with you." You see our God is not the kind of director who stands offstage and shouts commands. Our God is the kind of director who seeing that things were going awry, stepped into that play and intervened. Our God saw that our actions were resulting in hurt and pain and he didn't want to remain distant, so he came to us as a man—Jesus.

Our God suffered alongside us, and through his death and resurrection made a way for us to be with him forever. That's the story of the Bible: God made a way to be with his people through Jesus. In reality God is not only the director, but he is the star of the show. And every time we take communion we remember that God intervened into our lives and said: Don't be afraid. I'm with you. Here's my body: take it. I'm with you. Here's my blood: drink it. I'm with you. Don't be afraid.