**Youth Initiatives**

**Day 4 – March 11th 2022**

***Sarah***

My name is Sarah. I'm from America and have been living here for nine years, I work for Youth Initiatives in Downpatrick and I live in Belfast. It is so good to see so many people here, you are all very welcome.

When I was about 16 years old. We would always play Sardines in our church youth group; Sardines is similar to Hide-and-go-Seek, you hide, and everyone tries to find you.

I was hiding with my friend; we had the best place, the attic of the church, in the far back corner, where no one would go because there were no lights. As we didn't have lights on our cellphones in quite the same way as now, they would feel around in the darkness, we would sit in there for about 20 minutes before anyone could be able to find us. My friend, Chad and I, were always the best at this game, it was great!

If you imagine there were only two people in this church and the lights were all off, it might feel a little bit creepy. When I was in a dark church, I wasn't alone because my friend Chad was always with me; but I wasn't alone because God was always with me. There are times in our life when we feel like we are playing Hide-and-go-Seek, we can feel we are all by ourselves; other people are searching for us and ultimately God is with us.

I don't know if you have been in a church recently, or if this is your first time back in a church since lockdown and COVID; maybe you have never been in this church before and so there's something about it that maybe feels a bit unfamiliar; maybe you aren't sure if you believe in God and what you think in regards to your faith life.

Sometimes, when it comes to faith, it can feel like a game: -

Is God really there?

Does he believe in me?

Do I believe in him?

It isn't a game; God is always there.

Psalm 139 says,

***Is there any place I can go that I can avoid your spirit or be out of your sight,***

***If I climb to the sky, you are there,***

***If I go underground, you are there,***

***If I flew on the morning’s wings to the far western horizon, you'll find me in a minute, you're already there waiting.***

That is who God is; God isn't this guy that's just up in the sky, doing his thing and we are down below, doing our thing. God is a God that is with us, He is close to us. He isn't a God that's hiding, that we'd have to play Hide-and-go-Seek to find him but he is already there with us; sometimes we don't recognize it and sometimes we aren't aware.

I don't know what your life story is, I don't know what you believe in or what you don't believe in but I believe in a God that I know that loves and cares about me. I believe in a God who is willing to sacrifice for me and is always by me. By me just turning to him each day and just saying yes; I know that He is always with me.

I have my Bible and there are a whole bunch of different stories in my Bible. Some people have a Bible on their phone; the thing about a Bible is, that it tells a story about God. There's a whole bunch of different stories in it. There is this one particular story about a woman who has lost this coin. I don't know if you guys have ever lost anything, I once lost this charm bracelet, it's been gone for about 10 years; whenever I go back home to the States, I'm always looking for it.

This story of this woman, who is looking all around to find this coin; she is looking underneath, above, in the back corners and sweeping everything out, she turns her house completely upside down and finally, she finds the coin. When she finds the missing coin that was so important to her, she invites all of her neighbours to come over and have a big celebration.

To me, that sounds kind of crazy; I'm kind of crazy about this whole idea of, why would God or why would this woman do this? Why would she be willing to find the thing that was lost, why didn't she just say, I'll get another coin, for her this coin was so important. It was kind of similar to our lives. It seems like it was just one coin but the same is true for God. He was willing to leave heaven to come to earth in Jesus. He would turn the whole world upside down just so that we would know of his love because He wants a relationship with us.

There’s another story in the Bible;

Growing up, I always thought Ireland was full of loads of sheep. I live in Belfast and people are always talking about the farmers; being in Downpatrick, I love seeing the sheep. Once, when I was on a trip to Romania, they had shepherds; people that were out in the fields night and day with the sheep. There's another story about how this person was willing to leave the 99 sheep to find the lost one; I think that's crazy when you already have 99 sheep.

Probably in here, we have around 50 people or more. If just one person was missing; the shepherd would be willing to leave all 99 people to go and find the missing one. People might be thinking, what about the other 99; that doesn't make sense, but this tells us something about how God loves. He would often talk in stories, to help us understand his love for us. We think it’s foolish to leave 99 and look for the lost one! God wants us to know, that is what his love is for us; Jesus is willing to die on the cross so that we would know his love. He knows that we have sinned, we have messed up; maybe there are times in our lives where there's a lot of trouble but he wants to know us intimately; that's why he was willing to die on a cross, so that even in our sin, in our mess, in our brokenness, God searches for us out of love, again and again.

I don't know how much you know this story of God? Maybe you have heard it loads of times. Maybe you think this is new, maybe this is something that you believe in, but the truth and the reality is, that God is not far away. He is very near and today we get a choice to choose him. Maybe it's choosing him for the first time; maybe it's just that I need to decide to remember that he is near. It doesn't have to be this big thing, that you need to sell all the things that you have or that you need to become a holy Joe.

Maybe it's starting at the beginning of your day and asking God to be with you today; maybe it's actually, remembering to say a prayer before you go to bed or, thank you God for this day. Maybe it is opening a Bible or on an app on your phone; there are a lot of ways in which we can acknowledge that God is near. Not only does God give himself to me but he also places people in our lives for me to be in a relationship with because God the Father, God the son Jesus and God the Holy Spirit are actually in relationship. We have our friends, family, people from church, youth groups or our sports team.

I know there are times in my life when I feel like actually, I'm alone and I'm by myself but God gives us people in our lives. We are not going to be a little island hiding by ourselves.

No matter what is going on in your life, we can turn to others and we can ultimately turn to God in our need. We can know the love of God in our lives; maybe you're not sure what that means and that could be something you could just ask God. What does it mean that you love me? God isn't playing Hide-and-go-Seek; he has already found us, have we found Him and do we know His love in our lives?

Tiarna is now going to share a little of her story and how she came to know this love of God. Tiarna is originally from Downpatrick and goes to school at Queens University. She went to Down High school and was involved in Youth Initiatives.

***Tiarna***

I grew up going to church, but for me, the idea of Jesus and God was a weird story that we told because it got us Christmas presents at Christmas and Easter eggs at Easter. For most of my life, God was this weird guy in the clouds like a Simpson version. Whenever I went to school that was still my idea of God and Jesus.

If he was real, he was probably fairly distant. When I started Down High School, I found life very hard, certain things started to happen and I lost a lot of confidence; I lost my granny at the start of school, which was really hard. I didn’t feel like I fitted into school; I lost a lot of friends and I became very closed off and had difficulty with my feelings and emotions.

In school, I felt quite lonely because I couldn't express how I felt, but God had different plans for me; being around YI which I thought was just like a youth club, which it is, these people talked about God like a person who cares for you; a person who wants a relationship with you, like your friends, your parents or your siblings; most importantly, a person who loves you. That was something that really changed my mind on how I saw God; before God was distant and he didn't exist; if he did, he was in the clouds and so being around these people who talked about a loving God was a new experience for me.

I couldn't understand how God was this loving God; if I felt so upset, angry or so lonely. One day in my anger, I decided to pray to God because I had nothing else to do; I said to God if you are really real, just do something, just listen or just change something in my life. This was one of the most groundbreaking things I had ever said! To be honest, I felt, for the first time that someone had listened to me; that someone had heard my story, someone had heard how I felt, and it really changed my life; I felt like I was loved for the first time.

The next day going to school felt so much easier because I knew that someone loved me, or someone heard me. School, in general, became so much easier, God started doing things in my life. I started to make new friends and I got involved with YI, I really met God here and that's my experience of how God changed my life. He came in and just spoke about how much He loved me and it's really changed my life to where I am now, so thank you.