

The Presence of God

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[0 : 0 0] Lord, open the eyes of our hearts. We want to see you. So I want to start by asking a question. What are you all doing here? That made all your heads look up, and that was the point.

Maybe a better way of phrasing it is, why are you here? But I like the first phrasing because I'd hoped everybody would look up the way you did, so that's good. I've given a lot of thought about this over the years, about why I come to church, even before I wore a collar.

And some of my answers over the years have included to be spiritually fed. I like the preaching. The worship's good. I'm here for the fellowship. My friends come here.

I'm looking for community, maybe to be plugged in. I want to find someone to marry. I should pause for Jen. This is an old list. It's not a current list. Other options might be, it's my duty, or it's good to me.

It's good for me. Maybe it's good for my kids. Maybe I want to serve. I've never heard anybody say they come to church for the coffee, but that's not the point of church, so it's good. I did not grow up in church.

[1 : 0 8] But all of these and other reasons have been my reasons for why I went to church over the years. If I'm honest, I have a funny relationship with church. I've experienced it as the mystical body of Christ here on earth, and as a dysfunctional institution that wounds people.

I love the body of Christ, but I often keep the church at a bit of an arm's length at times, which is weird because I'm ordained. But I was called to ministry, to the priesthood.

It was clear this was a call to consecration to the Lord, to service, but it would never be my identity, and I'm very thankful to the Lord for that realization. The church, then, is a people I love.

You are the people I love. But it's an institution that needs to be questioned and held accountable at times. So what does it look like in practice? When I reach out to love people like you, often it's me coming up to you in person or emailing you or texting you saying, how are you doing?

And it's probably often awkward. But church is one of those few places in D.C. where you can come up to someone and say, how are you doing? And everybody suppresses that inner urge to say, what do you want from me?

[2 : 2 0] So it's good. So I will keep asking you because your connection to the Lord matters to me very deeply. So why are we here? I want to offer one of my answers.

And as I was putting these thoughts down, I realized that these answers, my answers to this question, are probably way more personal than I thought. They are a much deeper reflection of what's going on inside of me than I realized.

So a couple starting points to this question. My starting point is my consecration through ordination. So there are two things that are very meaningful to me. One is a ring.

So on my left hand, I wear a wedding ring. And on my right, I wear a ring that Jen gave me when I was made a priest. This one has a crown of thorns embossed around it.

The wedding ring reminds me that I'm in a covenant with Jen wherever I am no matter what. And this other ring reminds me of the journey I had on my way to ordination where I came to know Christ crucified and resurrected.

[3 : 21] And that I'm one who said yes to Jesus long before ordination. That I would be found in him alone, crucified and raised. And this I carry with me as a reminder wherever I am no matter what.

And the second is a stole that Jen had made for my ordination of the diaconate. I'm wearing it. So this was made from a scarf that was given to me on a trip to India.

I was participating in an event that marked the 100th anniversary of the first baptism of the first 12 converts in that district. And those baptisms were the start of the church in that part of the world.

And the church grew. But in the 24 months leading up to this celebration event, the church was heavily persecuted. So I received this scarf as a gift that all foreigners who came to this event received.

My name was called. People started clapping politely. And a person walked over to me to give the scarf. And when the person came close, I saw that this person was someone who had survived the hatred and violence against the church.

[4 : 22] They were marked with scars, cuts and burn marks from what she'd suffered. She smiled and gave me this scarf. And at that moment, as I held my hands out, everything seemed to go quiet.

I felt the presence of the Lord. I felt like I was in the presence of a saint. Not quite would say maybe I should take my shoes off, but it felt like one of those moments. I was before someone who was faithful to the Lord in the face of actual suffering.

And she was giving me a gift. And I felt unworthy. So Jen took this scarf and had it sewn into a stole to remind me that my consecration is one to the suffering and faithful lamb who holds us all together.

And it reminds me of my connection to the faithful and witnessing church around the world. So from that starting place, I keep asking, why are we here? These experiences, why we're the ring and the stole, were moments of encounter with the Lord for me.

And it's that word encounter specifically with the Lord Jesus I want to talk about. So the passages we read today are bookends to an entire biblical narrative. It starts in a garden where everything is new and it ends in this global cosmic scene when everything is made new again.

[5 : 41] The Lord is fully seen in that moment and everyone and everything gathers around to give him praise. And in between these bookends, we read in the gospel a statement by Jesus. He made them before an absolutely astounding statement about himself made in an ordinary setting to an ordinary person.

The reason I come to church is to align myself with what Jesus and his father were after. From the garden in the beginning to the grand scene at the end and everything in between, God is in pursuit of us to restore us to relationship and connection with him.

To restore us to a place of intimacy as sons and daughters in relationship to the father so that we would know him and his love for us. You and I are the treasure, the hidden treasure in a field for which God would pay any price to have.

I come here to encounter the Lord. So what does that mean? What does it look like? So there are different approaches Christianity can take. Two popular ones. Intellectual. An intellectual approach gives us a deep reflective knowledge about God and spiritual things, sin, salvation, about how to live as a Christian.

And an intellectual approach to Christianity has given us a foundation to support our pursuit of truth and holiness and engagement with culture. And here in Advent, I've seen the fruits of that approach in the form of solid theology, piety and service.

[7 : 04] And I love that about the Advent family. Another approach is the liturgical. Liturgy is the embodiment of intentionality and purpose, of being deliberate about how we respond to God.

Thomas Cranmer, when he was writing the first book of Common Prayer, had this image in mind from his love of falconry. In that sport, when the falcon's flying around, the falconer puts a glove on and lays a strip of meat on the glove.

And the falcon is enticed back to the falconer. And in his mind, the liturgy was meant to be that thing which entices and draws us to the love of God.

I love that intentionality about Anglican liturgy. And this family does that well, too. The downside to intellectualism and liturgy is legalism, aridness, rigidity, lifeless talk.

It offers us the promise of safe control over the mystery of God, anxiety about screwing up the liturgy. But I don't need the church to feed my intellectual interest in God.

[8 : 07] And I'm probably the last one to worry about whether we nail the liturgy every time. What I sense among you, what I have in myself, is a desire for more.

To encounter the Lord experientially. And as I've come to know you over the last couple years, I hear in you this desire that coexists with a wariness of experience, emotional excess, and being cuckoo.

And I get that. But I want to encourage you to consider an encounter with the Lord as the difference between me giving Jen a book called The Mystery of Marriage versus going out with her on a date night.

Or my kids watching a YouTube cartoon about dads versus me spending time with them so they know me as their dad and as the dad who loves them. Books are good. Videos are great.

It's not the same as knowing a person in real life. Encountering the Lord for me has been about knowing the presence of God. It's been very profound for me.

[9 : 07] I think we've all heard this expression, the presence of God. I want to define it this way. The presence of God is our experience of when God, who is transcendent and omnipresent, draws near to us in a way that's manifest.

Let me say it again. The presence of God is our experience of when God, who is transcendent, in other words, something other from our creation, and omnipresent, present to us everywhere all the time, draws near to us in a way that is manifest.

It's a unique, special experience of God drawing close. Scripture describes these moments of God's presence. The Garden of Eden, what Adam and Eve enjoyed before the fall was that unfiltered experience of God drawing close.

And on the other side of the cross at the very end, that's restored when everyone gathers around the throne of God. It's what Israel experienced when God came down on top of Mount Sinai, when Moses spent time with God in the tent of meeting.

When the first temple was dedicated, God's glory filled the temple like a cloud. David had a regular experience of this in his place of praise in Jerusalem. And of course, when the Holy Spirit came on the 120 in Acts 2, and it goes on.

[10 : 23] Paul talks about these things in his letters. Jesus coming to live among us was, of course, the greatest manifest presence of God among his people, of God drawing near to us.

But also remember, in his humanity, he had this mountaintop experience of God's glory in an audible voice. This is something God wants for us.

Think of the presence of God as existing on a continuum. One end is God's intention to form a people for himself and dwell among them, to bring us back into his presence by removing the barrier of sin.

The other end of the spectrum is actually a place that has no end. What starts for us with our salvation is a journey of encounter and knowing and experiencing God's presence.

From God's perspective, this is a journey of him drawing ever nearer to us. And him drawing us closer to himself until he brings us home finally to himself where we see him face to face, standing among saints and angels.

[11 : 25] This is God's idea. I remind you, his initiative because he loves us. But it's not enough for me to just read this scripturally. I had to find out, is this common?

So I started reading about accounts from others in Christian literature from roughly the post-biblical era onwards. I read Catholic mystics from the Middle Ages who described encountering the presence of the Lord in ways that echoed biblical accounts.

I read the accounts of the Wesleys. The Wesleys were not people given to emotionalism. They documented what happened in their meetings, including their own uncertainty about what to make of it all sometimes.

I read Jonathan Edwards, Brother Lawrence, John Wimber, lots of other people who talked about their experiences here and in other parts of the world. I read biographies of people like Smith Wigglesworth, Leanne Payne.

I read accounts of revivals of the last 100 years from all over the world. I wanted to know all the ways that God draws close to us and what happens when he does. There's a consistency in all these accounts of what it looks like when the Lord draws close with his manifest presence and what happens.

[12 : 36] Well, let's talk about what happens. Everything that God does is meant to be transformational or catalytic. The more intense the presence of God in a place, the more powerful the transformation.

What God does when he draws close is to save, heal, and deliver. He softens hearts, changes minds, convicts of sin, moves us to repentance and forgiveness.

You get the idea. There's a story a guy called Todd Smith tells about what can happen in the presence of God. This was during a church service. A group of inmates came under a lot of supervision.

As part of the service, people were invited to come up to get baptized. Now, let me pause and say, as an Anglican priest, I have questions. Who's getting baptized? Why?

How many times? What for? Right? We say every week, one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. So, it's not a drive-through. But anyway, this is his story. And so, this guy came up, nervous, hesitatingly.

[13 : 36] He's huge, right? It's always like a huge guy, right? He comes up to be baptized. And this is how this guy Todd Smith describes it. The guy who came up to be baptized was called Robert.

I don't know. I didn't pick this. Well, I did pick it, but not because of the name. So, Robert was a very bad man, a very bad, angry man. Violence was a way of life for him. He had hurt a lot of people.

He was also a member of the Aryan Nations, this anti-Semitic, white supremacist, terrorist organization, and he hated black people. And while in prison, he had proved his trustworthiness to the Aryan Nations hierarchy so that he advanced through the ranks.

He was given more and more authority and responsibility. And his authority was so great that even when he was in solitary confinement, he could control the activities of the Aryan Nations in four different prisons, his and three others.

One of them was more than 1,000 miles away. This guy had reach. But he's at this service, and he comes up to the baptistry, and he comes up, and he takes a step forward.

[14 : 40] And when his foot contacted the water, he looked up with tears running down his face, and he said, I've always wanted something like this. And he gets into the water, and he stands there.

This guy, Todd, who's telling the story, watches God begin melting this guy, Robert, right before his eyes. God's, Todd writes, God's overwhelming love, conviction, and power settled on him.

We watched heaven in all of its glory come upon a very wicked man. It took two grown men to help submerge Robert to be baptized, and Todd didn't think the tank would hold him.

It displaced a lot of water. It went all over the floor. But while this guy was under the water, the Lord met him with a ferociousness that was completely unexpected.

Robert had an experience, an intense experience, with the presence of God, and it rocked him to the core. This guy came up out of the water, and he placed his hands on his face, and he began to cry and to weep.

[15 : 42] And people who were standing nearby heard him whisper, precious, precious, precious. And so Todd comes over to Robert and says, why are you saying precious? And Robert turns and says, when I was in the water, when I was submerged, I saw Jesus' face, and it was so precious.

There was an immediate transformation right there in the tank, as Todd writes. Jesus met this guy, and he became a new man. God turned him from a violent, hate-filled man in one moment and took away all the anger, hatred, and drugs.

And Robert went back to prison. He didn't get off from his time. But he started pastoring the jail that he was in. Instead of running Aryan Nations gangs, he started pastoring the jail with another inmate called Melroy, an African-American man.

The two of them became co-pastors and loved each other like flesh and blood. We all know testimonies like this. It's not once and done. Powerful encounters with the Lord are real and true, but Robert would have had to walk out further repentance, healing, and deliverance.

But what happened to him when he encountered the presence of God in baptism was real. How do we experience the presence of God? Baptism. The Eucharist.

[17 : 02] Tommy and I had some stories about people who'd come up for Eucharist and experienced the Lord. We talk about the real presence. We both have stories of people who came up and took the bread and the wine and experienced physical healing.

Reading Scripture. Have you ever had those moments when you're reading the Word and it seems to jump off the page at you? Where you feel the Lord's presence when you're reading, when you feel like the Lord is speaking those verses to you right in that moment?

That's the presence of God. Prayers when it happens. In your quiet times, in small groups, during church, definitely in moments of inner healing prayer. Prayers also when we hear the Lord's voice.

And worship. There's something really unique about worship as a place to experience the presence of God and I want to say a little bit more about that. So it's not about the music. I went back and listened to some vineyard music from the 1980s.

People, it's not great. Right? It's like it's tinny. It's not like, you know, you wouldn't put it on and listen to it. But it's what people were singing when they were encountering the Lord in that time and place.

[18 : 10] And that music was powerful and real. And when you go back to older revivals and you read, what were they singing? It was hymns. It was organs. It's not about high production value, guitars, or the style of music.

King David knew this. And I've been indebted, I've said this to some of you before, I'm indebted to this stiff Presbyterian minister with a PhD from Cambridge, who wrote about how David discovered that he could offer sacrifice of praise distinct from the sacrifice of animals, and that in those moments of worship and praise, he could know the Lord's presence.

It's just amazing, if you're an academic out there and you want to kind of drill down and, you know, sink your intellectual teeth in something, I got the book for you. This was so amazing.

It was out of this that David wrote in Psalm 22 that the Lord is enthroned on our praise or inhabits our praise. It's why you see in his Psalms, he writes about being in the presence of the Lord, hungering and thirsting for the Lord's presence, and why he cries out in Psalm 51, don't cast me away from your presence.

King David had a keen understanding of the Lord's presence. He knew when he worshiped and praised, he was, as the Irish say, in a thin place. And when we worship, Dan alluded to this earlier, we are also in a thin place.

[19 : 33] We are before the throne of God, joined with saints and angels who cry out day and night holy. And as we worship before the throne in those moments, we are kneeling there, kneeling in that river of living water that flows from under the threshold.

We are refreshed and renewed. When we worship, we are transformed because we become what we behold. We become more like what we fix the gaze of our hearts upon, what we adore and admire.

When we worship, the Lord fights for us, intervenes for us, and does for us what we can't do ourselves. Worship postures my heart in faith.

It helps me let go of all my conditions and preferences for outcomes. In other words, worship brings me to this place of surrender and trust. Lord, have your way. And when we worship, the Lord grows our faith.

The things unseen are more readily apprehended and known. The person of Jesus comes into clear view. This may be one of the final things I want to say. At the heart of worship, of experiencing God's presence, of encountering the Lord as the person of Jesus, it's not about encounter for its own sake or experiencing the presence for its own sake.

[20 : 48] It's about encountering and experiencing the Lord. Under all the hunger, all the surrender, the trust, the cry for more and for change is about having Jesus and Jesus having us in a way that Christian mystics described with words like being consumed.

Do we want this? If I'm honest, I'm not sure I always do, but I need it. I don't have it all together. I face many tough things in life and I carry the weight of knowing that family, my kids, and people I love are also going to face hard things.

I can't solve it all. So I need to be in the presence of Jesus who is, as we read in the Gospels, the resurrection and life, through whom and for whom are all things, who loves us.

Things change when the Lord draws close, in part because of things he does and because of what he speaks, but in part simply because he's there. I don't know how to explain it further.

It's like everything, all of reality, just somehow bends and yields to Jesus and I need that. I need Jesus. Paul spoke obliquely about his experiences of his encounters with the Lord and I've taken that as my guiding principle, but I will say that encounters with the Lord, again, are his idea, his desire for you and me.

[22 : 10] They have come when I've been at my most broken, most hungry, most surrendered and honestly, most desperate. They come when what I've wanted most was more of Jesus. God's presence is a gift, something he shares.

It can't be triggered, forced. It can't be guaranteed if you follow the right steps or meet the right conditions, but it is something to want and seek, something to ask for and wait upon the Lord for it.

So, a final answer, simply put then, I come to church to encounter the Lord, to know him, even intimately, and not just know about him, but to know him and be transformed by him into his likeness and hopefully to be someone through whom others may encounter the Lord.

I want to bring us together in a moment of prayer. I think the altar guild may need to bring the table out, so if you want to start doing that, I invite you to do that. Let me pray for us and then I'm going to turn back to you and invite you into something.

Lord Jesus, you want to share yourself with us and to draw close to us and draw us close to you and for that, I thank you. And turning back to you, I want to put this to you.

[23 : 27] You may have heard things in the message just now that provoke different feelings and reactions in you. So I want to invite you to take a few moments to tell the Lord about these reactions and feelings and to be brutally honest with God.

God already knows it's not about giving him information he doesn't have. It's about you being real and authentic with him and he's honored by that friendship. So take a few minutes just to tell the Lord very brutally, very honestly, your reactions against, for, whatever.

And now, having told the Lord honestly your reactions, I want you to wait on him to respond to your honest confession.

What pictures, what verses, what song lyrics, reminders, nudges, what words and impressions come to mind as you say these things, as you share these things honestly to the Lord.

And I ask you, Lord, that you speak to all of us quietly in our hearts in the way that you know we can hear from you. What do you want to tell us about the things that we honestly shared with you just now? Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[24 : 48] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. As we bring our time together to a close, I want to invite you to take time to process what your reactions were, what you heard in this message, what your reactions were, and what you maybe felt the Lord was saying to you about your reactions.

Have a conversation with the Lord, but with friends also. Honestly, I'd love to hear from you if you ever wanted to process it with me. I'd love to hear your reactions and your thoughts.

It's always about a journey towards the Lord and what He has for us. I'd love to be part of it. Amen.