

Nurture an Awareness of God's Presence

written by Catherine Upchurch |

Notice

Jesus made a habit of seeing the big picture of God's action in the world without neglecting the individuals often ignored by others. He invites us to do the same: pause in our routine to recognize the holy and notice opportunities for a kind word and healing touch.

Questions for reflection or discussion:

1. In what circumstances have you experienced a deep sense of God's presence? What helped you to become aware of it?
2. Sometimes it is easier to identify God's presence in retrospect. Are there any habits you are developing to help you become more attentive and mindful in the present? (e.g., nurturing silence, walks in nature, talking with faith-filled friends, extending love to others, etc.)
3. Do you have any fears or concerns about developing a greater awareness of God's presence and calling in your life? Are there concerns that the mission of being a disciple of Jesus might be too challenging?
4. How might you share with someone this week your experience of God or your desire for a deeper sense of God's calling?

The first time I ever met with a spiritual director, she posed a two-part question: In what circumstances do you most often find yourself aware of God's presence? Or, even aware of your need for God's presence? I've discovered that spirituality, living in a way that is tuned to God's spirit, is very much connected to an attitude and a disposition of awareness or attentiveness.

Consider the story of Jacob in Genesis 27-28. On the run from the consequences of stealing his father's blessing that should have been given to his older brother, Jacob camped for the night. In his fitful sleep, Jacob received God's promise of land, heirs and protection. When he awoke, Jacob marveled, "Truly, the Lord is in this place and I did not know it!" (28:16). The words of Jacob could easily be our own, often discovering only in retrospect or introspection that God is right beside us, in the messes with us. We have only to wake from our fitful anxieties to recognize it. Sometimes that's easier said than done.

The Scriptures abound with stories of this kind of spiritual awakening. Moses, for example (Exodus 3), minding his routine responsibilities, probably passed by a certain bush often as he led his sheep to meager sources of water or shade. Perhaps, as some rabbinical traditions suggest, God was always speaking his name and only when the bush was set afire could Moses pay attention to God's presence and calling that was there all along.

Think about the way Jesus called his first followers. He met them in the daily routines of their

lives — casting fishing nets or mending them (Matthew 4:18-22) and collecting taxes (Mark 2:13-14; Luke 5:27-28). We may not know the professions of the other apostles, but we can presume that they too were going about their business when Jesus invited them to “come and see.” (John 1:35-46)

Recognizing God in our midst is not reserved only for the great mystics. Like Jacob, Moses, Matthew, Peter and Andrew, we go about our days and occasionally catch glimpses of God’s presence. These are “formative moments”; they are forming us into being attentive. More often than not, God uses the ordinary routines, the chance encounters and the challenges of our days to draw us to himself.

In his 2020 book, “Let Us Dream,” Pope Francis ponders what we may be learning from the pandemic and how our world’s understanding of a return to normal may need to be adjusted, most especially in light of the Gospel. He laments what he calls “so-whatism” and says, “This attitude ends up armor-plating the soul; that is, indifference bulletproofs it, so that certain things just bounce off.” Such indifference, both to God’s presence and to the realities of our world, may seem to protect us, but in the end it simply leaves us numb and isolated.

“No one has ever seen God. Yet, if we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us.” (1 John 4:12) By developing the habits of love we grow in our ability to see with new eyes and to pay closer attention.

There are several accounts of Jesus restoring sight to the blind. One account in particular appears with slight variations in three of the Gospels (Matthew 20:29-34; Mark 10:46-52; Luke 18:35-43). In this story Jesus asks the blind beggar, “What do you want me to do for you?” It’s such a simple question, and the response, “I want to see,” is important.

On one level, the blind beggar is simply himself, asking for sight, the ability to see faces and things. On another level, the beggar is us, asking for insight, the ability to see deeply and truly, to recognize the face of God in the world and its people. Jesus has the power and the will to give both.

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