

2022.05.01 - Presence - Awareness

So What? Perhaps God is near and we have missed his presence.

Feel What? Peace

Now What? What might be a thin place where God is inviting me to visit and how can I make this a regular practice?

VISION CASTING

The purpose of Tallgrass at The Well is to create community together by inviting everyone into the Way of Jesus.

INTRODUCTION

We're currently in a series called Presence where we're asking the question, How do as a church community live into God's presence? How do we become a people of the presence? One of the first things most of us run into is a dwindling attention span and the inability to concentrate for extended periods of time.

Cal Newport, *Deep Work*: "The ability to perform deep work is becoming increasingly rare at exactly the same time it is becoming increasingly valuable in our economy. As a consequence, the few who cultivate this skill, and then make it the core of their working life, will thrive. ...Once your brain has become accustomed to on-demand distraction it's hard to shake the addiction even when you want to concentrate. To put this more concretely: If every moment of potential boredom in your life—say, having to wait five minutes in line or sit alone in a restaurant until a friend arrives—is relieved with a quick glance at your smartphone, then your brain has likely been rewired to a point where it's not ready for deep work—even if you regularly schedule time to practice this concentration."

It's not just that we're struggling with shrinking attention spans, it's what we're turning our attention to does to us.

Jonathan Haidt, "Why The Past 10 Years Of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid": "By 2013, social media had become a new game, with dynamics unlike

those in 2008. If you were skillful or lucky, you might create a post that would ‘go viral’ and make you ‘internet famous’ for a few days. If you blundered, you could find yourself buried in hateful comments. Your posts rode to fame or ignominy based on the clicks of thousands of strangers, and you in turn contributed thousands of clicks to the game. This new game encouraged dishonesty and mob dynamics: Users were guided not just by their true preferences but by their past experiences of reward and punishment, and their prediction of how others would react to each new action. One of the engineers at Twitter who had worked on the ‘Retweet’ button later revealed that he regretted his contribution because it had made Twitter a nastier place. As he watched Twitter mobs forming through the use of the new tool, he thought to himself, ‘We might have just handed a 4-year-old a loaded weapon.’ ...The newly tweaked platforms were almost perfectly designed to bring out our most moralistic and least reflective selves. The volume of outrage was shocking. ...By giving everyone a dart gun, social media deputizes everyone to administer justice with no due process. Platforms like Twitter devolve into the Wild West, with no accountability for vigilantes. A successful attack attracts a barrage of likes and follow-on strikes. Enhanced-virality platforms thereby facilitate massive collective punishment for small or imagined offenses, with real-world consequences, including innocent people losing their jobs and being shamed into suicide. When our public square is governed by mob dynamics unrestrained by due process, we don’t get justice and inclusion; we get a society that ignores context, proportionality, mercy, and truth.”

Who are we becoming when our reprieve from analog life is full of fear and hatred?

Church history teaches us many things, one of which is what life could be like if lived with attention given to God and his presence. The kind of awareness that helps us push back against the insanity of the world is given to us in the life of Brother Lawrence, who was a lowly brother in a monastery in the 17th Century.

Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*: “The difficulties of life do not have to be unbearable. It is the way we look at them—through faith or unbelief—that makes them seem so. We must be convinced that our Father is full of love for us and that he only permits trials to come our way for our own good. Let us occupy ourselves entirely in knowing God. The more we know him, the more we will desire to know him. As love increases with knowledge, the more we know God, the more we will truly love him. We will learn to love him equally in times of distress or in times of great joy. ...He does not ask much of us, merely a thought

of him from time to time, a little act of adoration, sometimes to ask for his grace, sometimes to offer him your sufferings, at other times to thank him for the graces, past and present, he has bestowed on you, in the midst of your troubles to take solace in Him as often as you can. Lift up your heart to him during your meals and in company; the least little remembrance will always be the most pleasing to him. One need not cry out very loudly; he is nearer to us than we think.”

Transition: Is that true? Could God be nearer to us than we think?

SOLUTION

There's a story from the first book of the Bible that may bring us comfort as we struggle with exactly this question.

Genesis 28:10-19 (NIV): Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the LORD, and he said: “I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” He was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.” Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. He called that place Bethel....”

This is one of the kindest statements God put in the Scripture for us. Maybe God is here and I just didn't realize it. Maybe God showed up when I asked and I was looking in the wrong direction. Maybe God was present and I was too distracted to realize it. Maybe God is just that good, and my doubts didn't intimidate him away.

For Jacob to make this statement in his situation means, for us, that you don't have to have it all together for God to move. You don't have to have all the answers, you don't have to be 100 percent certain, and you can still have some junk you need to work out and Jesus still cares. Now that's good news.

In fact, there's a story in the New Testament where Jesus shows up and the people are skeptical of him and he still is very kind and very good—actually, that's every story in the Gospels, but I digress. In this particular story, at the beginning of his ministry, he connects who he is with the story of Jacob we just read as a fuller expression of the awareness of God.

John 1:47-51 (NIV): When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, “Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.” “How do you know me?” Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.” Then Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.” Jesus said, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that.” He then added, “Very truly I tell you, you will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on’ the Son of Man.”

Both of these stories contain:

- Revealing the supernatural dimension
- Astonishment from the hearer
- Promise of blessing from God

Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John*: “Nathanael’s historical truth is transhistorical truth for all Jesus’ disciples who are standing here now with Nathanael and for all in the Church who are sitting here now with them, reading this text with comparable expectation and faith. ...The Opened Heaven is in the Greek perfect tense—‘opened,’ conveying completion, stressing the last two letters in the English word—opened. This opened heaven is the first reality promised the Church here in Jesus’ most personal remark. ...Among Jesus’ major contributions to history, and certainly to faith, is the gift of an opened and so somewhat demystified Heaven—an Opened Heaven. Ever since Jesus, God is no longer only inscrutable mystery (though God always remains deep mystery). God has at last been “enfleshed” and wonderfully ‘exegeted’ (exēgēsato, ‘interpreted,’ ‘explained,’ and ‘revealed’) in the human life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus,

who is God's autobiographical and substitutionary Word and Son. In this gracious sense, ever since Jesus, believers honestly believe themselves under 'The Opened Heaven.' One senses throughout the Gospel that over this man—this 'Son of Man'—there is, in fact, an Opened Heaven, and that all who join company with him experience something of this supernal opening themselves."

Counter to what seemed closed to us before, when we draw near to Jesus we will experience the opened heavens for us to directly access God.

This is available for everyone—no matter your background, where you grew up, how much money you earn, what family of origin issues you're struggling with. All it requires is a humble and hungry heart to draw near to Jesus and experience the grace of his presence.

Transition: But how do we live into this opened heavens in our busy lives?

APPLICATION

Two Postures Of Seeking God's Presence:

Corporate Posture

Every week, we call together a gathering of our church community. Our corporate posture in worship

And I must resist the consumeristic urge to make worship about me and my preferences. We all have to be aware that we bring with us into the church gathering the messaging from the world that says everything is about you and everything is for you. And if you don't like it, complain loudly or move along to the other options available.

Hungry people don't turn their noses up at food set before them. Hungry worshipers also don't turn their noses up; they bow low and enter into God's presence.

A couple things, then, on when we gather for worship. First, take advantage of our time together. God will do more when we ask him, so when we say, "Come, Holy Spirit," we mean it and he hears it. These times of gatherings are not for entertainment. We really want to know God, experience him, and contend together for breakthrough. I know he is good, and I want to experience his goodness. Come in faith knowing that God wants us to encounter him even more that we want it—we love because he first loved us, as 1 John says. So we can come expecting that even if we don't perceive it perfectly, God has done something in our lives.

One of the reasons we keep the lights low is so no one feels exposed if the Spirit moves in a unique way. We're cultivating an environment where we can be together, but also feel like we can have a moment with God as well. You have the freedom to express yourself in worship and know that no one is watching you. Put your hands up in expression if that feels right. Close your eyes and allow any tears that need to flow if that feels right. Overall, you have permission to encounter God here.

Private Posture

Our private posture of worship are those devotional moments alone with God. We need corporate moments, and we also need private moments. The way God has arranged life in the kingdom is that we need corporate moments that remind us that formation is for us but not about us. And we need private moments of discerning of God's Spirit in the gentle ways that he moves. And in those either of these situations, we're not to beat our chests so God will show up. Our job is to draw near and open ourselves up to him and then wait for him to reveal himself.

One of the ways to cultivate awareness of God in a private posture is to discover what called a thin place. The term sits contrary to the normally thick environments we find ourselves, full of busyness, distraction, and confusion that take our attention away from God. Jacob stumbled onto a thin place and discovered God's activity in a unique way that marked him. Everyone humble enough to recognize who Jesus was had the same experience of becoming aware of God.

Tracy Balzer, *Thin Places*: "A truly thin place is any environment that invites transformation in us, helping us as believers in Jesus to think and see and understand as he does. Any place that creates a space and an atmosphere that inspires us to be honest before God and to listen to the deep murmurings of his Spirit within us is thin. ...Such connections with God are most often very simple indeed. His presence is rarely accompanied by cosmic fireworks; not many of us have burning bush encounters. Rather, we find that God's presence is most often more like the comfort we know when we are in the presence of a dear friend. Between ourselves and that friend there are no obstacles; only enough space for love to flow freely back and forth between us, either through words or through silence. ...It is true that the realities and responsibilities of life can make us feel tethered to the here and now, helpless in the effort to really get away from it all in search of thin places. Yet Jesus reminds us that the whole project is really very

simple: a closet is all that is needed. We can look for such places in our homes—a corner, a comfortable chair, a room set aside to be sanctified as a thin place.”

When you discover a thin place, entering into God’s presence seems to take less “work,” if I can say it like that. There are places that call to us, invite us to step in and be with God. They are a grace that make it easier to connect and detach ourself from the thick world we live in where everything else feels hard and impossible.

OBJECTIONS

Now, you may be thinking, How does this apply to me and my busy life? It sounds nice to spend all this time with God in an place conducive to his presence, but I travel, I have kids to bus around town, or I don’t have the attention span to even make this a priority.

Transition: And I think those are reasonable challenges to consider.

INSPIRATION

My story of working from home and the office with both kids.

Transition: So it might be difficult, as most things things that are rewarding are. But it’s not impossible. So, I leave you with this question.

CONCLUSION

Next Step:

- What might be a thin place where God is inviting me to visit and how can I make this a regular practice?

Prayer

Invitation