

Karen Hollis  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent  
Psalm 63

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be reflections of your word to us in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Um

Practicing the presence:

In the hallway during seminary one day a friend of mine was sharing a story. He had approached our liturgy professor about some struggles he was having. God seemed far away, his prayer life was blah and wasn't getting anything out of worship. Instead of receiving from her a kind listening ear, the fiery Latin American woman responded, "take off your shoes, you are standing on holy ground." Those words from Exodus gave him a jolt and he remembered that he was not a consumer of his relationship with God, rather it was a 2-way relationship, and he hadn't been holding up his end.

This morning we find ourselves in the middle of a long 6-week Lenten journey of being intentional with God. What's your go-to way of opening yourself to God's presence? Is there something that reminds you to pray? Or reminds you of God's presence? Do you have a meditation practice, on your own or with others? Do you hear beautiful music on the radio that moves you to praise God in the middle of your kitchen? Maybe dance around? Do you do a morning devotional or a personal time of study? Do you walk in the woods, opening your senses to God's creation?

About 15 years ago I noticed a shift in the language church leaders around me were using . . . before, I would hear them pray, "God come near . . . we invite you here as we worship you" . . . that shifted to, "God, open us to your presence already with us." Because God is present with us always and everywhere, it is us who learn and re-learn how to practice the presence of God . . . sometimes we need to take off our shoes and remember we are walking on holy ground.

When I talk about practicing the presence of God, I'm indeed talking about prayer, if you think of prayer generally as this kind of opening ourselves to God's presence with us, and living accordingly. King David, to whom this morning's psalm is attributed, is actually a great example of practicing the presence of God – he spends a considerable amount of time singing praises to God in a state of prayer and he is able to draw on that relationship when it counts.

I want to begin this exploration by talking about presence . . . a topic that always brings me back to a memory at the Haven. In session one day someone asked for clarification on what it means to be present with another person. One of the leaders described what he meant while bringing his own presence directly to this participant. The man said later that he felt a kind of electric chord connect the leader's chest to his, as he experienced the leader's full attention in the moment. He was no longer confused. Being present is essentially to have one's attention and involvement in a situation . . . when we are present we bring an alertness, awareness and fullness to a situation; we are sensitive to others and willing to respond; we are invested in the interaction.<sup>1</sup> By comparison, you can tell when someone is not present. One doesn't have to be in the same room with a person to be present with them; and one can be present with another even in sleep: mothers are woken with disturbances by their babies or caregivers by their patient.<sup>2</sup> So it is that we can be present with God even when God isn't embodied in the flesh. God on the other hand is able to be present with all of creation – God is always here and now, attuned to our context, loving each of us all at once – it is awe-inspiring!

As humans we think we had this awesome idea of approaching God in prayer, when we are actually a responding to God's initiating presence in our lives.<sup>3</sup> In other words, God always moves first, God seeks us out even before we have a thought about God . . . and God gives us God's full attention,

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> from a Michael Fishbane quote.

already invested in who we are. Any movement we have toward God is in response to God initiating relationship.

Practice:

So it is that somewhere in us, we hear God's call and we find a human way to answer . . . and then we do it again. So, now let's talk about practice for a second . . . we call it practice because it's something we work at; we hopefully have some sense of success or reason to continue, perhaps even perfect a skill or become masters of a craft. Learning how to row a boat or knit a shawl or play music . . . we practice by intentionally doing it over and over again. Even something like reading scripture takes practice; it's not straight forward for us to take in information that comes from a 2,000 or 5,000 year old source. That's one of the reasons we're encouraged to do it with others, because hearing God in the text takes practice.

God's Presence:

Again, when I say practice the presence of God I'm talking about opening ourselves to God's presence with us, and living accordingly. What is the presence of God in our lives? Is that even quantifiable? It's hard because it's very individual . . . with the added challenge that we're physical and God is not. God is manifest in creation, but even that comes with a layer of mystery. To know the presence of God with us, we do have to turn on our listening; the most straightforward way is to do it is by spending regular intentional time with God. Fortunately most of us are not starting from scratch there. It is literally as simple as being present with God. Regardless of the form of prayer we choose, the essence of prayer is the same: bringing alertness, awareness and fullness to God, being sensitive to God and willing to respond, being invested in the interaction . . . and with practice, as we know, many come to feel God's presence.

I have read psalms of David goodness knows how many times, but it finally clicked in for me perhaps why he spends so much time praising God . . . when we feel God's presence, is it possible to not respond with praise? There's that scene at the beginning of Revelation in the throne room of God and all the living creatures are praising God . . . because God's presence feels so good that it is a natural response to say, as David does: You are my God, I seek you; I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory; your steadfast love is better than life; my lips will praise you; my soul is satisfied as with a rich feast; you have been my help; in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. Some of us, like David, use words and song; others of us praise God in breath and a still small voice of our own that is perceptible only to God. I realized through David's prayer practice how essential praise is to practicing the presence of God . . . because when we feel God's presence, our natural response is praise.

We learn to practice the presence of God in safe spaces, building those muscles and confidence. I think it was the Dalai Lama or another contemporary wise one who said (and I'm paraphrasing), anyone can meditate in silence and stillness – it is more challenging to do it in the world. As disciples we are called to work together to bring the kingdom of God here on earth, serving those in need, caring for the poor and vulnerable . . . are called to move our practice of God's presence into the world, bringing God's presence to these places that are most in need. We are the hands and feet of Christ, called to be the hope of the world . . . like with any skill, we practice in safe spaces until we can offer its gifts in service of the world. God be with us on the journey.