

God with Us

A Sermon for Trinity Sunday by the Rev. Philip Major
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It's the beginning of summer. Here's a little assignment for you for the summer. I want you to answer this question: Where do you find God in your life?

I'm not asking you to write a two page essay, or keep a list to turn in at the end of the summer. I just want you to pay attention to where and when you are feeling God's presence in your life. What are the circumstances where you feel closer to God? What are the situations where you get the idea you might be hearing God speaking to you in some way?

God is present with us in many different ways, in many parts of life. This is one of the main themes of the Bible.

There were several times when Mary, the mother of Jesus, felt especially close to God. Some of these are described in the Gospel of Luke. In the first chapter, Mary received a visit from the angel Gabriel. From the passage it seems she was alone at the time. I always imagine that the visit happened at night, and Mary was in some private place. Regardless of the circumstances, Mary's response to the angel indicates that she had an encounter with God in the course of her conversation with the angel. Mary's response is an inspiration for those of us who are striving to be closer to God's presence.

In the second chapter of Luke, the situation was different. Mary was not alone. She had given birth to her baby, and Joseph was with her. They were in a more public place, the place where people kept their livestock. Mary and Joseph were visited by a group of shepherds. The group of strangers gave them news that was surprising to Mary and Joseph, but Mary seemed to be the one who was especially impacted by their words. Mary did not hear a voice thundering from heaven, or see an angel standing in front of her. But in the barn, in the presence of a group of ordinary people, Mary seemed to feel especially close to God.

Where are the places where you feel closer to God? God appeared to Moses in the form of a burning bush. The burning bush was partly to get Moses attention, because, like us, Moses wasn't especially adept at noticing God's presence in his life.

Later, when their relationship was a bit more mature, Moses and God came up with this routine where Moses would hike up to the top of Mount Sinai in order to receive more directions from God, and to complain about the ignorance and impatience of God's chosen people. Moses was the greatest of all of the Hebrew prophets, precisely because he worked so creatively and assiduously to find places where he would hear what God was telling him.

Where are the places where you find yourself closer to God? Several centuries after the time of Moses, there lived a prophet named Elijah. Elijah's story is very compelling because he received guidance from God in many different places. Elijah was very critical of the king and queen. Elijah didn't mince words when he criticized them for their corruption and lack of faithfulness in following God's commandments. The king and queen seemed to think the rules were for other people. Elijah didn't hold back in telling the truth of the situation. The queen and king wanted to silence him. They wanted to kill him, so Elijah hid in the wilderness, in a swampy place by a stream.

There among the rushes and reeds, Elijah heard the voice of God. Elijah followed God's direction, and travelled to a foreign country. It was a land where people did not know the God of Israel. It was a place where people worshipped the gods of fertility. Elijah encountered a poor widow and stayed with her. Once again, Elijah found he was close to God when he was staying with the widow and her son.

Several chapters later, Elijah replicated Moses' journey up Mount Sinai. Near the top of the mountain, Elijah listened for God, seeking to hear God speaking to him. Elijah stood on the side of the mountain, and there was a mighty wind, so strong that it was breaking rocks in pieces, but God was not in the mighty wind. Then there was an earthquake, but Elijah realized God was not in the earthquake. Then there was a fire of some sort, perhaps like the burning bush in the story of Moses, but God was not in the fire. After the fire and the earthquake and the mighty wind, there came a time of sheer silence, and then Elijah heard a voice asking him a question. "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah realized God was asking him this question.

God is always present with us, but we often do not feel close to God. Most of the time we don't hear the questions God is asking us. Where are the situations where you find yourself closer to God?

God appears in many forms, in many ways, to people in every place. This is part of the idea of Trinity Sunday. On Trinity Sunday we consider the idea that God is active in the world in at least three ways. God is the great creator of the world. This is the first way we know God. God is creative. God creates us. God creates each one of us in the image of God. This means that we find ourselves being closer to God when we are engaged in creative activities, because we are exercising a sacred gift when we are being creative.

The second way we know God is that God redeems us from our mistakes. I'm not talking about mistakes like not solving a math problem correctly. I'm talking about more serious mistakes; things like pride, or self-centeredness, or judging others harshly, or telling lies, or taking things that don't belong to us. The biggest problem with our mistakes is that they separate us from God, and God's way of doing things. Christ Jesus redeems us from our mistakes, and reconciles us to God. It's called forgiveness. This means that we feel closer to God when we follow Jesus' example and forgive people and create relationships of reconciliation.

The third way we know God is that God is the Holy Spirit. God is the spirit that sustains and guides us. Jesus describes the spirit as 'The Spirit of Truth' and as 'The paraclete', which means the one who comes alongside us and calls to us. The Holy Spirit often calls to us in a very quiet voice, so we have to listen carefully. We move closer to God when we take a break from all of our talking and from the noisy parts of life, and give our attention to listening. As we see in Mary's life, if we want to listen to God's voice we are going to have to listen to other people, because God often speaks to us through the people around us.

God is always here, beside us. God is the one who does not abandon us, even when we feel completely alone. We sometimes let go of God, but God never lets go of us. We sometimes stop paying attention to God and the work God is doing in the world, but God never stops paying attention to us, and to the work we are doing in the world.

Where are the situations where you feel a presence that might be God's presence, coming alongside you and calling to you? Some of us feel God's presence, coming alongside us when we are surrounded by other people. Some of us are more likely to feel God's presence when we are alone. Some of us feel God's presence in creation. We feel close to God in a forest, or in the waves crashing onto the shore, or when we are tending the plants growing on our windowsills. Some of us feel God's presence in music or in other forms of art. Some of us feel God's presence as we are serving our neighbors, perhaps by filling *The Open Pantry* or serving at *The Samaritan Center*.

Sometimes we feel God's presence after we have made a very intentional journey to a particular place, such as the special chair in front of the window where you can see the sky. Sometimes we feel God's presence in a time and place we do not expect.

Where are the places where you find yourself closer to God? I encourage you to pay attention to this, because it's not always easy to get yourself in a place where you feel close to God. Sometimes we lose a place where we used to feel close to God. Sometimes we lose the home

we loved, or we lose the church that used to belong to us. Sometimes we lose the ability to do something that brought us closer to God. Sometimes we lose the ability to walk through the park where we used to feel close to God. We are mortal. This means we are constantly losing parts of our lives, and people we love.

Since we are mortal, life is a continual process of losing places where we used to feel God's presence, and then trying, once again, to find new places where we can know God's presence. Life is a continual process of seeking out new places and activities where we can be strengthened and guided by God's truth and love.

This is why we are here today. We have many differences, but there is one thing that unites us. You and I are here because we understand life is a continual process of seeking out new situations where we can feel close to God.

We find ourselves moving closer to God as we sit in silence and listen for God speaking to us during the prelude. We rejoice because we feel God beside us as we sit together in worship. We feel a little bit closer to God as we sing the hymns and say the prayers. We feel a kind of openness and hospitality that is almost like God reaching out to us, as we extend greetings with one another at the Peace. We feel God reaching out to us and sustaining us as we receive communion.

So most of us have at least one answer to the little assignment I gave us for this summer. We feel closer to God when we come together in this strange assembly of diverse people, the body of Christ, formed by the Holy Spirit.

The good news is that God is seeking after us each day of our lives, and not just in one place, not just one day of the week. This is why we rejoice today. We find ourselves beside the God who loves us. We find ourselves beside the God who forgives us. We find ourselves beside the God who sustains and guides us.