***The Presence Project – Resources***

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**Webinar:**

Here is a link to the webinar containing the full explanation of the project. It is on YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a8sdjP2iHO8>

*(credits)*

Opening song on webinar: *“I Love Your Presence” –* Bethel Music – Bethel Live

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EEH0R33rEI8>

Star Trek: The Next Generation clip – *“Journey’s End”* episode 172 (season 7 episode 20)

Wesley: Will Wheaton Lakanta: Tom Jackson

(\*note: these were used for educational purposes and without permission – please do not share)

**Print Resources:**

1. Sermon series – see below. (An optional 4th sermon called “The Great Awakening” is there if you wish to use it at some point in the process.)
2. Surely God posters – 11x17 and 8.5x11 versions
3. Vocabulary wordle bulletin insert – .pdf
4. Worship materials – scripture, hymns, call to worship, opening prayer – see below.

**Here’s the process:**

* Preach the sermon series to begin
* Post the posters
* Put the affirmation on your street sign (if you have one)
* Include the affirmation in your Sunday liturgy for 3 months (perhaps as your Call to Worship opener)
* Commit to using “Presence” language in sermons, prayers, and liturgy
* Begin and end every church gathering, meeting, kitchen klatch, work party and event with the affirmation
* Send or insert the weekly email blast

*Sermon Images*

I display images throughout my sermon time when I preach (as you experienced during the first part of the webinar). The places where they would go are indicated in the text of the sermons. (The slides are indicated with an italic letter *S* and a one word description of the image. The actual file names of the images are listed at the end of each sermon.)

If you are interested in having or using those images I am happy to share them. I cannot promise that they are all “legal” and copyright free, but I do try to use as many “legal” pics as I can. I am comfortable with the amount of “illegal” images I utilize that stay on a screen for a fleeting moment and are not republished, if you are not then there is no requirement to use them.

The sermons stand on their own without the images. I like the added layers the visuals provide. Let me know if you’d like me to send them to you.

***Worship Materials***

**Week One**

Luke 24:13-35

Message: The Presence Project: Sensing

Theme: Road to Emmaus, noticing sacred presence around us, Presence

VU 391 God Reveal Your Presence

The Presence of God (a contemporary praise and worship song by Derald Daugherty)

VU 278 In the Quiet Curve of Evening

VU 459 Here, O My Lord I See You Face to Face

VU 288 Great Is Thy Faithfulness

(I used the same Call to Worship all three weeks. I varied my tone and inflection with each repetition.)

**\*Call to Worship**

One: Surely, God is in this place.

**All: Help me notice.**

One: Surely, God is in this place!

**All: Help me notice!**

One: Surely, God is in this place.

**All: Help me notice, and in my noticing let my heart worship.**

**Prayer of Invocation and Transformation** *(unison)*

Still basking in the glow of Easter we gather to open ourselves ever more fully to your transforming Spirit, O God. We pray that you will meet us on the roads we travel, overwhelm our senses with your presence, and nudge us to seek renewal of our purpose and our passion. May the Risen Christ rise within us and draw us ever deeper in faith. In Jesus’ name, and Jesus’ Way, we pray…

*(a moment of contemplation)*

**Week Two**

Acts 2:42-47

Message: The Presence Project: Savouring

Theme: practicing God’s Presence, spiritual practices, the early church

VU 389 God Is Here

MV 109 My Soul Is Thirsting for You

MV 82 Bathe Me In Your Light

VU 660 How Firm A Foundation

**Prayer of Invocation and Transformation** *(unison)*

Holy Mystery, we come not because we hope to find you here but because you have awakened us to your presence within, around, and beyond us and have drawn us together by your call to renewed life. We pray that your Holy Spirit might move through this place and through each one of us inspiring us to live out our new lives in compassionate service as we strengthen our connection with one another and deepen our communion with you. Savouring your Holy Presence, we pray…

*(a moment of contemplation)*

**Week “Three”**

Hebrews 10:22-25

Message: The Presence Project: Sharing

Theme: mutuality, travelling together, support, companionship

VU 413 O Splendour of God’s Glory Bright

We Are One in the Spirit

MV 173 Put Peace Into Each Other’s Hands

VU 595 We Are Pilgrims

**Prayer of Invocation and Transformation** *(unison)*

Wondrous God, we pray that our presence here will help us to notice your Presence everywhere. We yearn to be filled with the overflowing joy that comes from being plugged-in to your Spirit and sharing the sacredness you are growing in us. This is our deep desire. Savouring your Holy Presence, we pray…

*(a moment of contemplation)*

**Optional 4th Sermon material** (for a couple of months into the process)

Genesis 28:10-22

Message: The Great Awakening

Theme: Jacob’s dream and awakening

VU 391 God Reveal Your Presence

VU 278 In the Quiet Curve of Evening

VU 296 This Is God’s Wondrous World

**\*Call to Worship**

One: Surely, God is in this place.

**All: Help me notice.**

One: We have heard God’s call.

**All: We come to this place as seekers.**

One: We have come to encounter the holy.

**All: Let us worship in wonder, in awe, and in joy.**

**Prayer of Invocation and Transformation** *(unison)*

O God, you reveal yourself to us in mysterious ways, yet they all have one thing in common – an indescribably overwhelming sense of your holiness that weakens our knees and quickens our pulse and boggles our minds. And yet we dare to open ourselves to this experience, seeking transformation, seeking shalom. We pray for the courage and faith to follow your will and your way.

Standing in your light, hearts broken open, acknowledging our humanness, seeking transformation, savouring your Holy Presence, we pray…

*(a moment of contemplation)*

**Week 1 ~ The Presence Project: Sensing Presence**

Luke 24:13-35

*[S1]*

It’s one of the greatest stories in the New Testament. *[S-road]* It was the first Easter Sunday and despite the women’s discovery of the empty tomb and their experience of the risen Christ, the men had gone running to the place and saw nothing, and later that same day the group had apparently dispersed and set out to return to their homes because Jesus had not reappeared, at least to them.

Our story picks up the journey of two anonymous disciples on their way home to Emmaus which was about 7 miles or 11 kilometres from Jerusalem (that’s just a little further than walking from the church here to “insert appropriate landmark here”). Not a marathon distance, but not close-by either. Who are these disciples? Well, they’re definitely not 2 of the 12 in the inner circle. One of them is named Cleopas, but since he’s not mentioned anywhere else in the bible he might as well be anonymous. Some traditions have it that the other disciple with him is his wife. I like that.

*[S-two]* So who are these two walking? They’re just two people who are followers of the Way of Jesus. In other words, they’re anybody – they’re you and me. That’s the point. The story of the experience on the road to Emmaus isn’t meant to be a historical story, it’s meant to be your story! You are on the road, and you can have an encounter with the risen Christ!

Notice that as they’re walking along they’re talking about the events they experienced in the last few days. For them, that meant the last supper on Maundy Thursday, seeing Jesus executed on Friday, mourning with the other disciples on Saturday, and earlier this same day hearing the incredible story of the women at the tomb but then being disappointed again when no one else seemed to experience the same thing. So they’re walking home going over the events and feeling lost, and disillusioned, and heartbroken.

*[S-three]* A stranger comes along and walks with them. It’s the risen Christ, but these two disciples don’t recognize him. How many times have you been walking along so drowning in your own worries and troubles, or so mesmerized by your cell phone, that you’re practically oblivious to everything around you? It’s certainly happened to me!

*[S-purple]* Then the sacred presence of Jesus speaks to them and what is their reaction? It says “They stood still, looking sad.” When you encounter the holy presence of God it tends to stop you in your tracks! They explain to this stranger the events of their week and Jesus smacks them upside the head! Ok, not literally, he says “How foolish you are!” but that word foolish means “unthinking, thick-headed, and dumb.” Jesus is scolding them because they’d apparently forgotten what he’d taught them about his presence always being with them.

When they get near their destination Jesus looks to be continuing on his way but they prevail upon him to stay with them. *[S-bread]* Then, as they’re sharing a meal and the bread is blessed and broken their eyes fling open and they realize they are in the presence of the risen Christ! This is exactly the same thing that we profess when we partake in the sacrament of communion – that in the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the cup we aren’t just remembering Jesus but we are opening ourselves to receiving his presence. Christ is revealed in the breaking of bread together.

*[S-two]* At that point Jesus disappears and these two anonymous disciples bubble over with excitement realizing that they’ve just had a profound experience of Sacred Presence and their hearts burn with joy as they recall his teaching and it bursts open with meaning and importance. And their first thought, even though it’s now night, is to get up and race back those 11 kilometres to find their friends and share their experience with them.

What I’d like to suggest to you is that this wonderful story is not all that extraordinary, or at least it shouldn’t be.

*[S-beige]* I like the story even better if it didn’t actually happen, and this is just the story of two followers of Jesus who had an epiphany, an awakening as they broke bread together, and realized that surely God WAS in that place with them in the presence of the risen Christ, and suddenly all his teaching flooded through them with clarity and insight and meaning and understanding such that it made their hearts burn with wonder and communion.

This is not a story that could only happen later that same day of the first Easter. What’s described as happening to those two anonymous disciples could happen to you and me every single every day of our lives – if we were tuned-in to notice it.

*[S-angels]* In Genesis 28:16 Jacob has an experience of God’s Sacred Presence just like the Emmaus Road story. Jacob is walking along dejected because he’s cheated his brother and lied to his father and been pretty much disowned. Until this time he’d never really had anything to do with God.

So, tired and alone, he lays his head down with a stone for a pillow and has that famous dream of the ladder to heaven. On that ladder or ramp angels are going up and down symbolizing the connection of the heavens and the earth – and God appears to Jacob and tells him that he’s blessed and that God will always be with him.

*[S-silhouette]* Jacob wakes up from this sacred vision and declares, “Surely God is in this place, and I did not know it!”

Surely God is in this place! God is in every place. That means God is always with you, always where you are.

Every road you walk down, God is there, hoping to open your heart to the promises of scripture.

Every meal you sit down to, God is there, waiting to be revealed in the breaking of your daily bread.

Every person you encounter, God is there, shining through them, the holy in them seeking connection with the holy in you.

*[S]* Psalm 139:7-10 “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.”

*[S-woman]* Surely God is in this place! The problem is us – we just don’t notice. Well, sometimes we do. Sometimes it feels like God’s Presence or light breaks through the darkness and we have a wonderful mountaintop moment of spiritual bliss. In order for that to happen something had to trigger your awareness. Something had to catch your attention, startle and awaken you, and let you see.

I trust you’ve all had at least a few of those glorious experiences when God felt really real and very near, and all seemed right with the world, and you experienced the deep harmony and peace of the presence of God.

What I’m here to tell you today is that those experiences don’t have to be confined to the mountaintops, and they don’t only happen once or twice in a lifetime. Surely God is in this place – every place – wherever you are, God is – if you could be drawn to notice.

One way to practice noticing God’s presence is to be aware of the triggers or the windows that tend to reveal it to us. Not everyone shares the same triggers. Something that could trumpet the presence of God for you could leave the person beside you stone cold. But there are some common things that seem to open us up to God. The biggest one is probably nature – what we call God’s creation.

*[S-flower]* How many times have you felt a spiritual wave of warmth and presence and insight when watching a sunrise, or sitting by a quiet lake, or strolling through a forest, or smelling a pretty flower? Nature is a marvellous window for God’s presence.

But let’s be precise here about what’s happening. I’m not saying that God is in the flower or in the tree. What I’m saying is that the natural beauty of the flower catches our attention and draws us into an awareness that we are looking at something beautiful and wondrous, and that jars us out of our distractedness and opens us to the realization that while we thought we were just schlepping through the woods we were really walking surrounded by the presence of God.

Why? – Because God is every place. The flower isn’t God; but the flower is Sacred because it’s full of Godstuff, and that sacred Godstuff that is infused into everyone and everything is what triggers your awareness that God’s presence is present, it tunes you in, it brings to mind something you’d set aside or ignored.

What does it feel like to be in the presence of God?

*[S-words]* It feels Spiritual – holy, mystical, profound, transcendent, blessed.

It feels Expansive – it has… breadth, fullness, spaciousness, depth, weight, timelessness.

It’s Experiential – it feels… raw, open, laid bare, really real, it fills your senses, it’s knowable, not just a concept, it’s energized, and tingly.

And it’s Evocative – it calls forth… awe, deeper and fuller breathing, pleasure, delight, disequilibrium, an enlarged world, an expanded consciousness, a sense of interconnectedness.

*[S-sacred]* It’s funny, that’s a really long list of words – you have the list as an insert in your bulletin – it’s a long list of words that are trying to describe something that can’t really be put into words! Nonetheless, we use words like these to try to explain what the Sacred feels like.

So that’s what it feels like, but when or where am I likely to notice this Sacred Presence? What kinds of things might be triggers or windows for me? Turn over the insert and you’ll find another list.

*[S-words]* People notice the sacred through their Relationships – in people’s actions, in their character, in feelings of belonging, friendship, camaraderie, comfort, ease, in laughter, in sharing, in openness, when you’re together at table, experiencing support, trust, caring, and concern. Our relationships are windows to God’s loving presence.

People notice the sacred through their Emotions – through gratitude, thanks, relief, longing, through hunger, thirst, desire, through our pain, our challenges, through our learnings and insights, in questioning, in discussing, in ideas, in wonder, and especially in communion, connectedness, love, freedom, groundedness, peace, shalom, joy, mystery, when we’re weak-kneed, and when we’re in ecstasy. These are powerful triggers for noticing the holy surrounding us.

We can become aware of the Sacred through our Activities – our experiences, the events of our lives, our work, our creativity, our acts of compassion can reveal God to us, our successes, and even our failures can reveal God to us, probably because our guard goes down when we’re feeling defeated.

*[S-yellow]* And of course, at last, we notice God’s Sacred Presence through the windows of Loveliness and Beauty in the world, in nature, weather, sunrise/set, flowers, animals, and through the beauty of the arts – visual arts, music, poetry, dance, drama, in originality, in excellence, and when we experience harmony.

*[S-beams]* You may be thinking by now, “Sheesh Larry, what isn’t a trigger for noticing God?” Yes! Exactly! Everything can reveal God’s presence to you because God is everywhere – in everything and everyone – if only we could awaken to it, if only we had eyes to see. In Latin there’s a phrase: *Coram Deo*. It means “before God” or “in the presence of God.” Wherever you are you are *Coram Deo.* Always.

Surely God is in this place! And what’s our prayer? *[S-add]* Help me notice! Help me notice! My mind intellectually knows that God is everywhere, but my eyes just don’t always see it. Too often, I’m not present. Help me notice! Help me live *Coram Deo*!

Noticing, sensing God’s Presence, is what happened on the road to Emmaus, and it can happen for us too. *[S-communion]* Something triggers your awareness and you awaken to the Sacred in your midst – for them it was the breaking of bread. That Presence evokes a reaction – their hearts burned. There’s a feeling of renewed energy and a new direction or understanding, and then there’s a passionate desire to share your experience with others. *[S-woman]* The Emmaus road story is a model for noticing and experiencing the presence of God in our midst.

Next week we’ll talk about more ways to notice and to sustain our sense of God’s presence, and the week after that we’ll explore the part about new directions and sharing your experiences.

Through worship gatherings like this, through our senses and activities, and with every single breath and heartbeat we affirm what Jacob, and the psalmist, and Cleopas, *[S-beach]* and every other anonymous disciple walking in the Way of Jesus has passionately affirmed. Surely God is in this place. And we pray together: Help me notice!

Amen.

1. Woman-serene [Sensing Presence] >> indicates you need to add these words to the pic
2. Road-cross-bible
3. Emmaus3
4. Emmaus1
5. Emmaus2
6. Emmaus-bread
7. Emmaus4
8. Emmaus
9. Jacobsdream
10. Worship-beams-a
11. Psalm139-7
12. Worship-fullness-light
13. Flower-sky
14. SEEE-2
15. Sacred-field
16. REAL-3
17. Flowers-smell-a
18. Worship-light-beams
19. Rep [Help me notice!]
20. Communion-grass
21. Woman-feel-spirit
22. Seniors-beach-walk [Help me notice!]

**Week 2 ~ The Presence Project: Savouring Presence**

Acts 2:42-47

*[S1]*

When we hear this scripture passage about the first church ever I imagine most of us zero in on the part that says “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” (Acts 2:44-45) I don’t know about you but when I hear that *[S-bus]* I think hippie commune, or maybe a cult! How long would I last here if I stood up and seriously preached that we should all sell our possessions and redistribute all the wealth among us?

Now, I don’t think they actually lived in a commune, but I do think they’re describing that the earliest church was so tuned-in to God and one another that they actually practiced *[S-sign]* that “love your neighbour” and “if you have two coats share one” stuff.

But as radical as that seems to our hyper-individualistic Western ears I don’t think it’s the most radical thing in this passage. *[S-group]* I think the most radical thing is their spiritual intentionality – that they found a way to be fully present to God, and it impacted the way the lived. I think what we get here is a glimpse of humans finally really ‘getting it’!

*[S-bible]* It’s interesting to ask people what they think the bible is about – things like: Whose story is it? What’s the theme? What’s it trying to tell us? Lately I’ve been thinking a lot about God’s presence, and that the bible is really a library of stories spanning thousands of years of faithful people practicing presence, but more often stories of self-centred people ignoring it.

How does the bible begin? Where’s God? God is in the midst of creation. *[S-adam/eve]* God is tangibly present with Adam and Eve – walking in the garden with them. Yes, it’s just a metaphorical story, and no God isn’t an old guy with a white beard, but notice what this story tells us: it says that our ideal state is to be fully in the presence of God. So what happened in that story? Humans put their own stuff first, turned away from God’s presence, and ended up poorer for it. Paradise isn’t about lush gardens and frolicking carefree – it’s about being fully present to God’s Presence.

*[S-lego]* Think of all the horrific stories in the Old Testament about how God was supposedly helping various people raid and pillage villages and kill all sorts of people. Does that sound like a God of Love to you? Of course not! So did God’s character change over the centuries, or is it more likely that human ambition took centre stage and when it was successful they said “Look, God is on our side!” and when it failed they said “Look, God is absent!”

*[S-me]* If you trace through the biblical witness you’ll find that every time humanity put themselves at the centre and tried to draft God onto our side to help us do what we want we floundered, and every time we put God at the centre and let God lead us we flourished. When we practice self-indulgence and self-absorption we tend to spin out negatively, but when we practice Presence there are usually overflowing blessings.

Today we heard a story of the very first Christian church ever. It was probably the one and only time in the history of Christianity that the church lived in complete harmony, believed the same things, and radically supported one another. It was idyllic. And it lasted for about 5 verses. Almost immediately problems emerged and they were because of human self-centredness and self-importance.

But while it lasted it was a beautiful and true expression of church because they radically practiced presence instead of practicing individualism.

Look at how that church was described. Look at how they lived. Look past the hippie stuff and notice what it says about their faith – what they were intentional about.

*[S]* Acts 2:42 “They *DEVOTED* themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

Teaching, fellowship, communion, and prayer. They didn’t do church like we do exactly, but those four things are still the pillars of what we do – teaching/learning about God, Jesus, and Spirit, fellowship and support, communion, and prayer. So we’re on track so far.

*[S-group]* vv.46-47 “Day by day, as they spent MUCH TIME together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.”

It truly paints a picture of a group of people who really put God first – who shaped their whole lives with their spirituality at the centre. It doesn’t say “they gathered once a week to worship and support one another” – it says “day by day they spent much time together at church AND at home where their spirituality continued to be the focus.” It was their “day-by-day-ness”, their intentionality, their mindfulness, that created their unique church.

*[S-pray]* What are the things you do “day by day” to nurture your spirit?

In what ways do you strive to be “intentional” about your faith like they were?

And why would you want to be? What’s the payoff for this focused intentionality?

What was the benefit of their whole-hearted effort to be present to Presence?

*[S-beach]*Acts 2:43-46 “AWE came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need… And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

Day-by-day-ness, intentionality, mindfulness, these are all different ways to talk about practicing God’s Presence. Practicing Presence engenders feelings of awe, and amazing things flow through your life. It’s more than just an inner glow. It moves you to live less selfishly and urges you to share your whole life with others.

It doesn’t say they sold everything and gave everything away, it says they shared their resources so that no one had any needs. They shared their lives. They truly took care of one another. And they were inspired to live that radical fellowship because they were so immersed in their spiritual practice. They didn’t just learn to notice the Sacred; they learned to live present to Presence.

*[S-praying]* I will go so far as to say that for one brief moment in time, in the afterglow of Easter, as the Spirit was flowing richly among Jesus’ first followers, and they had ordered their lives for maximum openness to the Presence of God, that these people were ‘back in the garden’! (I think it probably didn’t last because living that open and vulnerable is hard work!)

Imagine what that must have felt like! Imagine how grounded, and connected, and immersed, and enriched, and blessed, and warm, and aglow they must have been as they devoted their lives to God and one another. Imagine what it would be like to savour God’s Presence so fully!

*[S-woman]* I love that word – savouring! It’s not a word we usually apply to our spirituality but I think it should be! Think of the things you savour.

You can chug down a coffee, or a cup of herbal tea, or a glass of wine, or you can savour the experience.

You can eat your food or you can savour the tastes – like chocolate!

*[S-dandelion]* You can look out the window or you can savour creation.

You can have some music on or you can savour the sounds.

You can sit around with your partner or a great friend, or you can savour their essence, their being, their uniqueness.

*[S-man]* To savour someone or something is to enjoy it, bask in it, glow in it, revel in it, allow it to wash over you, flow through you, fill you up, light you up, enliven you…

Close your eyes for a minute.

Are you savouring these words right now?

Are you savouring this feeling of shalom that permeates this sacred space when we gather here?

Are you savouring your breathing, savouring your heartbeat, savouring your aliveness?

In this moment are you fully present?

Are you aware of the Spirit that surrounds you?

Are you present to Presence?

Savour it! Enjoy it, bask in it, glow in it, revel in it, allow it to wash over you, flow through you, fill you up, light you up, enliven you…

*[S-woman]* You can open your eyes. Imagine what kind of impact savouring God’s presence like you just did might have on your life if you were more intentional about it. Imagine what kind of impact it would have on our church community if that level of communion and connectedness was our starting place. I think it might resemble that first church in Jerusalem even more than it does now.

*[S-flowers]* Last week I urged you to give more attention to the world and people around you – to look for windows that reveal and awaken us to God’s presence. Someone shared an article with me this week that talked about school kids doing an experiment to “look for the wow” in their world. Look for the wow! When you find it you’re experiencing God’s presence! You know the wow is there. Our bedrock affirmation is “Surely God is in this place!” – and our prayer for awakening to the wow is “Help me notice!”

So being intentional about tuning-in and sensing presence is the essential first step – and once you do, once you’ve caught a glimpse, once you’ve noticed, once you’ve wiped the sleep out of your eyes and know that you’re experiencing the really real – the next thing to do is to savour that moment. Be grateful. Be moved. Be present. Take a deep breath. Take the time to really stay with it.

Now, perhaps you’re thinking that’s lovely but you have jobs to do, and a family to take care of, and responsibilities that demand your time, so you can’t be standing around dreamily noticing clouds and flowers all day – and besides, that sounds kind of boring.

Well let me introduce you to one of my heroes. *[S]* His name is Brother Lawrence. Brother Lawrence was a simple, lay, Carmelite monk in 17th century France who spent most of his time working in the abbey’s kitchen washing dishes. We know his name because he was so tuned-in to the presence of God that even while he was in the midst of his mundane chores he knew he was experiencing the Sacred. He lived fully *Coram Deo.*

*[S-dishes]* He was so serene, so grounded, so vibrant, so at peace, so alive, so content, even as he was up to his armpits in dishwater, that people started asking him how he did it. His answer was so simple it confounds us.

*[S-words]* He said, “My only prayer practice is attention. I carry on a habitual, silent, and secret conversation with God that fills me with overwhelming joy.” In other words, he said “I just practice God’s presence.”

His grand, innovative, ground-breaking technique was that he *[S-nike]* just did it. He actually did it. He didn’t just talk about it, or do it once in a while, he made it his constant practice. He became the king of mindfulness. After his death a fellow monk gathered up his correspondence and wrote down their conversations and organized it all into what has become one of the greatest books on spirituality ever written: [S] *The Practice of the Presence of God.*

There is no secret. The answer to how to practice God’s presence is to practice. You don’t have to sequester yourself away in a special building, or become a recluse or a monk, you just have to become more and more and more intentional about savouring God’s presence. Surely God is in this place! Savour it.

*[S-woman]* You don’t need to escape from your life to savour God; you enhance your life by savouring God while you’re living it.

You don’t need to stop working to pray; you infuse your work with mindfulness.

You don’t need to set aside your responsibilities; you engage them with joy and passion and commitment because you are savouring God’s presence as you do them.

*[S-field]* That was the brilliance of a simple monk who wasn’t supposedly smart enough to become a priest, but who ended up teaching millions of people more than priests ever could. Brother Lawrence (or Brother Larry as I like to think of him!) truly ‘got it’! And from him we learn our second great prayer response. The first was:

Surely God is in this place! Help me notice.

The next stage after noticing is this: *[S-add]* Help me savour!

Sensing and savouring is living *Coram Deo.*

Amen.

1. Group-circle-light
2. Hippie-commune
3. Love-thy-neighbour
4. Pray-group-x
5. Bible-heart
6. Adam-eve-god
7. Lego-war-violence
8. Me-me-me
9. Acts-2.42
10. Acts-2.46-47
11. Praying-open
12. Pray-group-x
13. Praying-people1
14. Savour-chocolate [Savouring!]
15. Savour-life-dandelion-woman
16. Savour-man-flower
17. Pray-breathing
18. Flowers-smell-a [“Help me notice!”]
19. Bro-lawrence1
20. Dishes-kitchen-man
21. Bro-lawrence-quote3
22. Savour-just-do-it
23. Practice-presence-book1
24. Woman-happy-working
25. Man-parying1
26. Rep [“Help me savour!”]

**Week 3 ~ The Presence Project – Sharing Presence**

Hebrews 10:22-25

*[S1]*

Surely God is in this place! Help me notice!

Surely God is in this place! Help me savour!

Those are the affirmations and prayers we’ve explored over the past two weeks. Before I go on to the third and final part of the series, let’s review how we got here.

My first and foundational step in this whole spirituality or religion thing is to come to an awareness that there is Something More than just this. There is an awesome, holy, sacred Mystery that permeates everyone and everything I encounter.

My problem is that I don’t always notice it. *[S-cartoon]* I’m oblivious. I’m distracted. I’m busy. I’m too into my own stuff. But no matter how cluttered my life is the Sacred seems to keep poking through – relentlessly trying to get my attention – as Bruce Cockburn might say “kicking at my darkness until it bleeds daylight” – seeking me out despite myself. And once I catch a glimpse of it I want more!

*[S-standing]* It’s funny that we go through so much of our lives blind to God’s presence and then when we have an awakening we wonder how we could have missed it all that time. Like Jacob in Genesis 28:16 we have a spiritual experience that profoundly touches us and we snap out of our zombie-like fog and shout out, “Surely God is in this place, and I did not know it!”

But now I know it! Now I KNOW it. Now I want to dedicate my life to looking for it everywhere I go – because God’s presence surely isn’t just in sacred places like churches, it’s also in sacred places like nature, and in sacred places like your office, and in sacred places like your linen closet. God isn’t just in this place; the presence of God is EVERY place! Help me notice! Help me notice! I want to develop what Brother Lawrence calls “the loving gaze that finds God everywhere.”

And then what? What should we do after we start to develop the kinds of eyes that Jesus said we need – eyes to see! What do we do after these wonderful windows open up and we see God’s presence revealed? What do we do with that Sacred moment?

*[S-dandelion]* We savour it!

We enjoy it. We glow in it. We revel in it. We bask in it. We allow it to wash over us, flow through us, fill us up, light us up, and enliven us.

And we strive to become really intentional about committing and investing ourselves to practicing that Presence, to be more and more mindful about savouring the Presence that surrounds us.

Our affirmation is that “Surely God is in this place!”

Our first prayer response is “Help me notice!”

Upon noticing our second prayer response is “Help me savour!”

And then what? Are we done? If we stop here we get all sorts of inner glow but for what purpose? Tuned-in through noticing, filled up through savouring, but what next?

*[S-cat]* If we tightly hold onto it for ourselves we get to feel all grounded and connected and good inside for a while, but soon the glow fades away – like trying to hold water in your hands.

The Presence of God cannot be caged, controlled, or contained – it can only be tapped into. It is never yours alone; it is always ours together. So being a solo spiritual person is an oxymoron. Yes, aspects of your spirituality must be entirely personal, private, and just about you and the Mystery, but if it stays only private and personal you aren’t experiencing the reality of God, you’re just delusional.

*[S-field]* Sensing and savouring God’s Presence fills you with spiritual energy and spiritual power, and like those first disciples of Jesus in the upper room on the day of Pentecost (which we’ll talk about in a couple of weeks) that Spirit moves you, it animates you, it draws you out of yourself and into the world to share that Spirit and Presence with others.

*[S-hearts]* And here’s the greatest thing about this. When you share your experience of the Presence of God it’s not like having 4 chocolate chip cookies and giving away 2 of them leaving you with fewer cookies – which is clearly not God’s plan! (LOL). When you share your Spiritual Energy which filled you up as you sensed and savoured God’s Presence you don’t spend your Spirit and have less, rather it amplifies your Spirit and you get more, and more!

So if you open yourself to *sensing* Presence, and become more intentional about *savouring* Presence, the next step is about *sharing* Presence! How might you do this? I’m going to suggest three ways.

The first is the most obvious. *[S-us]* Look around you. Look where you are. You’re sharing God’s Presence with others right now. Unless you were dragged here today you’ve come because at some level a window opened and you awakened to and sensed the Presence of God in your life, and hopefully you savoured it when it happened and it nudged you to make your way here today.

*[S-collage]* Sharing our spiritual experiences through participation in group activities is what we do best in the United Church! We have all sorts of wonderful ministry opportunities, and groups like United Church Women, and our youth group, and our Men’s coffee and work group, and our program calendar learning events, and the countless times you all stand shoulder to shoulder in the kitchen or pitching in at the church. All these and more are how we share our spiritual experience of God’s presence in groups.

*[S-path]* A second way we should share our spiritual experiences is in a guidance relationship. For most of our church members that means being in dialogue with me, or a wise lay person, about questions or confusions or just describing things that have happened in your life.

But I think for us to really grow spiritually we need to learn to be more intentional about this. We’ve talked about the importance of mentoring before – being in a sharing relationship with someone “more spiritually experienced” or “more spiritually mature” than you is a wonderful idea. A lot more of you are more mature than you probably think. Many of you would make terrific mentors.

Throughout church history there have also been more formal mentoring-style relationships. *[S-chairs]* Usually this gets called “Spiritual Direction” – where a trained person sits with you on an ongoing basis and through prayer and dialogue draws your spiritual experiences into focus and reflection. (The third chair, by the way, represents a chair for the Holy Spirit or Jesus to sit in. The Spirit is the real director.) I actually did the spiritual direction training a couple of years ago, but there aren’t very many of us around. It has mostly been a “Catholic thing” however it’s gaining traction in our circles.

Spiritual direction isn’t just a learned person dispensing wisdom though. *[S-candles]* It’s a relationship. It’s like Romans 1:12, where Paul said *“I'm eager to encourage you in your faith, but I also want to be encouraged by yours. In this way, each of us will be a blessing to the other.”*

Sharing your spiritual sensings and savourings with a guide, or mentor, or director can be a profoundly powerful way to grow deeper.

The third form of sharing spiritual experiences I want to lift up is probably the most powerful, yet paradoxically it’s the least practiced! I’m talking about sharing with a fellow journeyer – *[S-bench]* what Philippians 2:2 describes as a “deep-spirited friend.”

We do great at sharing our spiritual experiences through groups and ministries. And many people yearn for someone to guide them and find mentors. But we are generally terrified at the prospect of opening ourselves to a deep-spirited friendship! And it’s too bad because we’re really missing something wonderful.

*[S-silhouette]*In Celtic Christianity they call deep-spirited friendships being “soul friends.” It was a core part of their spirituality. In their culture it was expected that everyone would have a soul friend (or *anam cara* in Gaelic). In fact, one of the famous ancient Celts, St. Brigid, said “a Christian without a soul friend is like a body without a head!”

I can imagine Brigid echoing Paul in Hebrews 10:24-25 *[S-words]* *“Think of ways to encourage (or provoke) one another to outbursts of love and good deeds. Let us not give up the habit of meeting together, as some are doing. Instead, let us encourage one another all the more!”*

*[S-men]* A soul friend is a spiritual confidante, a spiritual equivalent to a husband or wife – it’s a very deep and very intimate relationship. It was fascinating at our Monday morning scripture discussion group (“The Porch”) this week as I kept trying to nudge the group to talk about personal one-on-one soul-friend-style relationships that being good United Church folks they kept nudging me back to groups!

*[S-women]* Why do you think that is? Why are we so good at group expressions of our spirituality but less so with mentoring and downright bad at personal and intimate expressions of our spirituality? What holds us back? I think it’s a number of things: *[S-man]*

- we don’t do trust well – we’re pretty guarded

- we’ve been taught not to talk about politics or religion

- we (mainliners) don’t do emotion well – unlike our more charismatic sister denominations

- we don’t do openness and vulnerability well – we like to be in charge!

- we may think the other person won’t want to talk about the spiritual stuff so we never bring it up – and so it goes unsaid

- we may lack the language to express our feelings and experiences about the things that go beyond language

- we don’t like silence – we tend to fill up potentially sacred moments with noise

*[S-painting]* We can learn to sense God’s presence, and we can become more and more intentional about savouring that presence – but until we can let down our guard and really share our experiences and ourselves with a trusted soul friend we may never get to the depths of joy and abundant life that sensing and savouring Presence has the potential to open us to.

I pray that you will hear that and pray about it yourself, and take the big risk, and open yourself to finding a soul friend.

*[S-women]* So, we sense and savour Presence SO THAT we can share it – in intimate relationships, in loving community, and in the world!

Sensing, savouring, and sharing Presence isn’t the only thing we need to do – but I truly believe it’s the first thing. We can’t let go of worship, or prayer, or contemplation, or fellowship, or service, or evangelism, or outreach, or justice, or any of these very important aspects of our faith journey – but sensing Presence, savouring Presence, and sharing Presence is the foundation, the first step on the journey, the lifeblood that inspires all the rest.

And so I dream of a church: *[S-dove]*

* a church filled with people who affirm that “Surely God is in this place!” – every place!
* a church filled with people whose constant prayer is “Help me notice!”
* a church filled with people who upon noticing God’s omnipresence set more and more of their time and intention toward savouring that presence
* a church filled with people who are becoming more and more fully human because they are sharing their experiences of sensing and savouring with deep-spirited friends
* a church filled with people whose sensing, savouring, and sharing God’s presence so empowers them, and inspires them, and energizes them that they pour themselves into sharing God’s loving presence with everyone they meet, everywhere they go
* a church that truly lives every moment *Coram Deo*!

That would be a church overflowing with the new life that Easter promises!

That would be a church like the very first one – sensing, savouring, and sharing God’s Presence.

Could Faith United be that church?

Amen!

1. Women-talking
2. Oblivious-phone-cartoon
3. Worship-beams-a
4. Savour-life-dandelion-woman
5. Cat-found-mine
6. Worship-field-light
7. Heart-sharing-give
8. Faith-worship-pic
9. Faith-collage1
10. Mentor-guide-lead
11. Three-chairs-ocean
12. Two-candles-together [“In this way, each of us will be a blessing to the other.” Romans 1:12]
13. Seniors-talking1
14. Women-talking [Soul Friends ~ Anam Cara]
15. Encourage-one-another
16. Praying-men
17. Praying-women
18. Men-talking1
19. Anam-cara-pray-friend
20. Women-talk-friend2
21. Spirit-crowd-dove

**(Optional 4th Sermon) ~ The Great Awakening**

Genesis 28:10-22

*[S1]*

Consider a person who would say, *[S]* "Surely God is in this place—and I did not know it!" What have they discovered? What made them come to this realization? Why did they not know this before? Where is the place? Is it special? Why? Will this insight change their life? Is God where you are? How would you know? These are just a few of the questions that swirl around this remarkable scene from Jacob’s life, the night of his awakening. And for us it’s one of the most intriguing and instructive biblical stories for awakening to the presence of God. If you are a person of faith then this story of Jacob is your story.

*[S-cartoon]* Jacob is not a paragon of virtue (in fact, he’s a pretty rotten guy), and he begins this story utterly alone. He’s fleeing to escape his brother Esau’s wrath after deceiving him twice, finagling for Esau’s birthright (25:29-33) and stealing Esau’s blessing (27:20). Jacob is in liminal, in-between space; and here this nowhere man will encounter God.

*[S-sleep]* The sun has set and it’s night time, a time of danger, vulnerability, and mystery. Jacob has come to ‘a certain place’ that he later names Bethel. To Jacob it’s just a place but in rabbinic tradition the Hebrew word for ‘place’ is also a name for God. Listen to the language: Gen 28:11 “He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place.” ‘Place’ is important!

So he’s taken a stone for a pillow. In the stories of the patriarchs of Israel when stones are mentioned it’s usually about building an altar. If that connection holds true here Jacob could be seen to be placing his head on an impromptu altar making an inadvertent offering of himself to God.

*[S-dream]* Then he goes to sleep and has one of the most famous dreams in history. It was the first dream in the bible, perhaps foreshadowing his son Joseph’s many dreams to come. But why did he dream this dream? What state of mind or being was he in? Maybe it’s because it’s only when Jacob is asleep that he’s unguarded enough to be open to a divine encounter?

The NRSV bible diminishes the power of the dream for us by omitting the key Hebrew word *hinneh* (behold). The dream begins dramatically as we behold in increasing amazement the revelation of God – *Hinneh* a ramp! *Hinneh* the angels! *Hinneh* the Lord! Angels ascend and descend the ramp indicating there’s a constant connection and presence between the two realms. It’s telling us that the spiritual is greatly present in the material. God is present.

God then speaks to Jacob, repeating the blessings and promises of land and progeny given previously to Abrahamand Isaac. These promises are very personal. God promises God’s presence directly and ardently to Jacob saying *[S]* “Hinneh! Behold! *I* am with you!” The “I” is very emphatic in the Hebrew.

I hope *you* have heard God say to you, “Behold! *I* am with *you*!”

Jacob more than all his ancestors, the one who was somewhat estranged from God and living a duplicitous life, needed to awaken to God’s presence in a profound way.

Walter Brueggemann says “(the) miracle is the way this sovereign God binds himself to this treacherous fugitive.” Whether Jacob deserves it or not he inherits Abraham’s blessings and receives his own. The question is will he embrace these promises?

Now we get to my favourite part! For me the story’s about awakening to God’s presence and v.16 is the moment it happens. *[S] “Surely God is in this place – and I did not know it!”*

Rabbi Laurence Kushner said, “The beginning of knowing about God… is simply paying attention, being fully present where you are…waking up.” Here Jacob has a spiritual awakening and encounters God’s omnipresence as an experiential reality for the first time. What was stopping him before? “God was here all along, and the reason I didn’t know it is because I was too busy paying attention to myself.”

*[S-blindfold]* One question that emerges here is if God really is every place why don’t we seem to notice? Surely Jacob would have learned about God’s presence from his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac. But as we all know too well, just because someone has been taught this truth, and their grandparents and parents know it, doesn’t mean the person has ever truly understood or experienced God’s presence for themselves.

*[S-whatever]* In fact, prior to his awakening Jacob was pretty antagonistic to the idea of God. When he fooled his father and stole his brother’s blessing he referred to “your God” (27:20). I wonder if for someone who’s felt far from God, or antagonistic toward God, or never given God a second thought, that they might not even know how to start. Here’s the thing: it’s not ours to start. It’s God who initiates the embrace and it’s ours to receive or reject. “God was here all along, and the reason I didn’t know it is because I was too busy paying attention to myself.”

*[S-blue]* There are two main ways God is talked about in the bible: as transcendent and as immanent. The more common one is the transcendent God who’s the maker of heaven and earth. God ‘out there’. But there’s another understanding too. God ‘right here’!

The idea of an immanent and personally knowable God is all through Genesis: God strolls through Eden (3:8), grieves over creation (6:6), delights in pleasing aromas (8:21), and lunches with Abraham (18:1-8). This is the aspect of God that Jacob has never encountered before. He could ignore the ‘out there’ God – but he can no longer ignore the ‘very Present’ God.

*[S-field]* Because now he has awoken, literally and figuratively, to a profound paradigm shift and has come to a new understanding of himself and his relationship with God. Ok, here it is: The critical difference in this verse and in Jacob’s life is not that God suddenly became present to Jacob; *[S-add]* ***the difference was Jacob became present to God***. Rabbi Kushner says, “Now Jacob begins to ponder the events of his life in a new way… ‘If God was here, and I didn’t know, then perhaps God has been other places also.’” And boom! The light goes on and your world changes!

*[S-hand up]* vv.16-17 *“Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place!”*

In Hebrew *afraid* and *awesome* are the same word – *yr’*. Both meanings are meant both times. *Yr’* is the emotion of fear or being scared, and also a powerful sense of awe and reverence and utterly overwhelming mystery. Encountering God’s Presence is frightening and wonderful at the same time. It’s a kind of fear that’s indistinguishable from joy. That’s what Jacob is experiencing! Is that how you experience God’s presence?

He’s fully awake now, and he realizes that God truly is in this place. He’s savouring the awesomeness and the scariness of the moment. He’s revelling in the awakening. Surely God is in this place!

Ok, now more questions. *[S-senior]* Why there? Why did Jacob awaken to God in that particular place? Was it because of its geography? Would he have had the same dream if he had journeyed one more kilometre, and would Bethel then be a kilometre further than where it is now?

What makes a place holy ground? Is it that the place is imbued with a particular innate holiness? Is it like a church that’s accrued a spiritual residue from numerous worshipful experiences that have occurred over time in that place? Maybe it’s a sacred space because the people in it are sacred and the place is neutral?

Quite simply, **a** **place is holy if God is in it**, and since God is every place then every place must be holy. We encounter God in some places (like in church, hopefully) in order that we might notice God everywhere. Again, it’s not about a particular place – the missing piece is our perception, our awareness, our awakening.

*[S-crowd]* There was a fascinating movement that happened in the United States in the 19th century called the Great Awakening. They had camp meetings – passionate preaching, lively new music, big gatherings that people hadn’t experienced before. (Just as an aside it was also very social. Young people began meeting people they’d never have met on the farm – which led to the joke: at camp meetings more souls were ‘made’ than ‘saved’!)

Camp meetings, or revival meetings, were all about ‘reviving’ people’s lapsed or sleeping faith. True, for some it became cultural and they wanted to be revived over and over again, but it was an undeniable outpouring and movement of the Spirit. These were people who were already churched and knew what they were supposed to be doing but weren’t doing it. It was an awakening from nominal faith to deep and vibrant faith.

So was it the preaching? The music? Was it the place where they set the tents up? Was it the collective spirit of all the people who gathered? *[S-awakening]* What caused the Great Awakening? All those things may have been a catalyst and created some favourable openings, but I think the difference was the exact same thing that caused Jacob’s great awakening, and causes yours and mine: “God was here all along, and the reason I didn’t know it is because I was too busy paying attention to myself.” By showing up the people got out of their own way, and God, who was there all along, was revealed! The missing piece is our perception, our awareness, our awakening.

Now, what does one do after one is awakened? Clearly the answer should be to make some sort of response. Did Jacob? Well, not right away. *[S-sleep]* Astoundingly, Jacob goes back to sleep after his life changing encounter with God. I’m not sure what to make of that. He has a dream, gets promises from God, has a paradigm-shifting experience, awakens to God’s Holy Presence in him, with him, and all around him, and then decides to go back to sleep. Maybe he wanted to see if he lay down for a while the strange feeling might go away!

But it didn’t! *[S-anoint]* When he arises in the morning he responds to God’s presence with an action and a vow. It was a family thing, apparently. Following encounters with God, Abraham made altars and planted trees (21:33), Isaac made altars and dug wells (26:25), and Jacob set up pillars (28:18; 31:45; 35:14, 20) and anoints them – first mention of oil or anointing in the bible, by the way. *[S-add]* And Jacob named the place Bethel which means ‘house of God’ (literally *Beth-el*).

Then Jacob “vowed a vow” (which how the Hebrew reads). He will repeatedly stumble and fail at keeping his vows throughout the remainder of his story, but in this moment, in the afterglow of his awakening to the personal presence of God, I would take him at his word. God is now “my God” (28:21) to Jacob. Now he will turn his attention to trying to live *Coram Deo*.

*[S-woman]* Jacob’s awakening teaches us that no matter who we are, or how estranged from God we may feel, or how dark our spirit may be, God is seeking to stand beside us and bless us with God’s abiding presence. Our task is to lay our head on the altar and become vulnerable enough to allow God through our defences. (Maybe that’s why people come to church?)

*[S-awaken]* God may come in visions, or words, or nudges, and we can choose to ignore them and stubbornly stay asleep, or we can choose to awaken to the awesome, fearful, wonderful mystery and have our world rocked. This kind of profound spiritual transformation is a daunting challenge for us logical, rational, traditional mainline church types, but it is the sure path to the heart of God.

Surely God is in every place, but we have not done a good job of helping people learn to perceive that. It’s time for an awakening – a great awakening! God is present, in this place and every place, waiting for us, like Jacob, to awaken and be present to God. Everything else in our faith journey flows from our great awakening.

So……………………*[S-clock]* wake up!

Amen.

1. awakening2
2. worship-standing [Surely God is in this place – and I did not know it!]
3. Jacob-esau-birthrite
4. Jacob-stone1
5. jacob’s dream1
6. road-sky-path [Behold! *I* am with you!]
7. pray-palms-up [Surely God is in this place – and I did not know it!]
8. blindfold-people
9. whatever
10. breathe-god
11. worship-field-light
12. rep [***the difference was Jacob became present to God]***
13. pray-silhouette-hand [fear awe]
14. praying-senior.man
15. camp-meeting1
16. awakening-blue
17. Jacob-stone2
18. Jacob-stone-anoint
19. rep [Beth-el]
20. surrender-woman1
21. awaken1
22. alarm-clock