

“Knowing When God Is Present”

John 14:25-27

April 29th, 2001ate – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons



An unknown author, perhaps wisely, suggests that we go about our lives somewhat backward. That if we had it to do over again, we would, more logically, choose to live our lives in reverse.

“Reverse Living”

Life is tough. It takes a lot of your time, all your weekends and what do you get at the end of it? Death, (a great reward).

I think that the life cycle is all backwards. You should die first and get it out of the way. Then you live twenty years in an old-age home. You are kicked out when you're too young.

You get a gold watch and you go to work. You work forty years until you're young enough to enjoy your retirement.

You go to college and you party until you're ready for high school. You become a little kid. You play and you have no responsibilities. You become a little boy or girl. You go back into the womb and you spend your last nine months floating. You finally finish off as a gleam in someone's eye.¹

¹ Anonymous, quoted by Jack Kornfield in his *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry; How the Heart Grows Wise on the Spiritual Path* ISBN 0-553-100290-7



We do tend to look back at our lives and most of the time, we learn from our past experiences. It's why we have the idiom that “hindsight is always 20/20.”

It is also true about our spiritual growth. We usually don't realize God is beside us until *after* we've been through the good or the hard times. Most of the time, we have to see the footprints in the sand (behind us) before we comprehend God's realities. Perhaps, though, there's a way to know about God's presence in the present.

For me, sensing God's presence has usually been after the fact. My preoccupation with what I'm doing, what I hope to do (because *I'm so task-oriented*) and my fears of the future – all these usually blind me to all that God is doing in my life. Most times I think I'm not spiritually tuned or focused enough for this job so God usually has to work around me, despite my spiritual ineptitude. I don't think I ever knew that God was doing something right before my eyes. I've only *perceived* that God was doing something in reflecting back about an event or a person's actions.

Perhaps Jesus was just too much to “take in” so the New Testament writers, strangely, didn't get around to writing about Him until years later. Paul, who wrote the earliest New Testament documents, waited until the year 50 CE² – nearly twenty years later. Mark didn't write the first Gospel until the mid-sixties – thirty years after Jesus' time.³

² C.E. stands for The Common Era, the term that has replaced the older term “A.D.”

³ Biblical scholars think the early church thought Jesus was coming back soon so perhaps it wasn't until they came to feel He wasn't coming back anytime soon so it was then that they began their writing.

But in my life, there have been times when I felt or thought that God was present and active. On one level, this is a little ridiculous because God is always present and constantly involved with our lives. As far as I can recollect, I was only aware God was present when I encountered someone with a pressing need – either me or someone else. Perhaps the same has been true for you.



Once, back in college, I was in a period when I was feeling as if my life was utterly meaningless. I had been kicked out of college and was living with others in just about as nihilistic an existence as possible. Most of us had been brought up with some form of dysfunctional religion that claimed kinship to Christianity but none of us had actively and intentionally pursued God. We had only been spending our time pointing out what doesn't work with the church and we pretty much stayed away from it. We were all pointing our finger at the phoniness and shallowness of judgmental Christianity but we didn't see the rest of our fingers pointing back at us. We didn't have an alternative to what we ridiculed so *we were only finger-pointers but not solution providers*.

This, of course, left me open to trying *anything* that came along because of the vacuum within me. With such an undisciplined and unexamined philosophy and lazy outlook on life, what I "lived for" was basically as shallow as the current trendy paperback or some ad slogan on a passing bus. It was during this period of my life that I was, one day, riding out west of Chicago on a motorcycle. I stopped into a dingy bar and restaurant out in the middle of nowhere. I sat down at one of the blond wood tables (that hadn't been cleaned from the previous users).

There were two others in that bar. An older woman behind the bar and a drunk woman in, perhaps, her forties. This woman staggered over to a juke box and started playing "Is That

All There Is To Life."⁴ Given the general meaningless state of my life, the words captured exactly how I was feeling about life and myself and my lack of relationship with either of these two human beings. "Isn't this ironic" I said to myself.⁵

In hindsight, now, I think God put that record on for me and placed me amidst the visuals of that dim Edward Hooper⁶-like bar. Since I am a highly visual-type person,⁷ God seemed to be creatively showing me something about the aimlessness of my life. I got it right away but I didn't realize God was doing it until sometime later.

The first place award in the category for stunning visuals and emotionally compelling special effects, . . . goes to God. But God did it again a few months later.

After living with such a sense of despair, I found myself standing before the Swiss Alps (that you see on the printed picture) – seeing what is certainly one of the most beautiful sights on the earth.

By that time, I had decided to travel to Europe and attend a study-center that specialized in helping young adult Christians find God after being totally alienated from legalistic and disheartening "Christian" upbringings.

I was standing before those white snow-capped mountains and their rugged terrain.

I saw the gentle flowing green hills and meadows below, contrasting with the spacious blue sky above and the ever-changing cloud formations.

This wondrous panoramic view filled me with the desire to find the same kind of beauty in God in my life.

In hindsight, several months later, I realized that God brought me to that spot in the

⁴ perhaps by Peggy Lee

⁵ as Alanis Morissette sings.

⁶ the artist

⁷ We usually prefer to interact and take-in life around us in 3 ways (1) visually, (2) audio (speech and listening) or (3) kinetically (touching, doing)

Swiss Alps just for me to see the contrast of that beauty with the gray aimlessness of my inner life at that point.⁸

Uncontested winner of all top places in the award for artistic excellence, compelling script writing and visual special effects without animation, . . . is God again.

It was at this time, when I was studying at this Swiss study center, that I found more integrity in answers to the questions (I had previously not been allowed to raise about my faith). It was through intuition, I guess, that I sensed that God had been in the heart and the compassion of the people who had placed themselves there for me. I sensed God's presence in the people and the events of my life – especially in the times when I had been in pressing need. I realized God had been with me all through my experiences.

It was at that time in my life that I became fully mindful that God had, in fact, been with me all along only I just happened to be the last person around to realize it. God is involved with our life when we find ourselves in pressing need. Blessed are those who know they need God.

God's kingdom will be theirs.



There's another way you can tell God is in your life and it has to do with the needs of others.

Maybe you were standing in line at the supermarket and behind you was a person who kept going through her wallet. She seemed to be anxiously looking for more money than she was seeing. Perhaps she had food stamps out and was nervously counting them to see if she had enough to get her family's groceries.

When you paid for your handful of things, you gave the cashier a larger-than-necessary bill and quietly told her to use it to pay for the person's groceries behind you and give her the change. You don't know what made you do it but you quickly slipped out of the store and didn't look back. You knew she wouldn't know her

groceries would be paid until all of her items had been checked and by then, you were driving away down the street.

Remember the feelings of compassion you had in those moments. Something inside of you made you feel empathy and compassion for this person (who obviously had a life so much harder than your own). Something within you caused you to respond to that need *from your heart*.

If you were to magically slow down and run the video tape of your life backwards and in slow-motion, you would have seen this spirit-like Being reach out (from inside of your chest) and hold that woman in your arms and gently tell her that '*God loves you and you are never going to be lonely or hungry again.*' Because in that moment, in hindsight, you could feel the compassion and caring for that person and there was no one in the entire world who could have stopped you from doing it.

You know it wasn't a rational moment. It was a moment when you had absolutely no awareness of yourself or any of your needs or fears or selfishness. It was a moment in time you felt so *compelled* to do this act that it almost brought you to your knees. It was a time when you felt God's Holy Spirit surging within you – groaning with compassion for this sister's human need.

You do unconventional things when God is in you.



If it isn't in the supermarket, it might be on the street. You happen to be driving down the street to return a rented video and you spot her on a street corner. A woman sitting on the ground, near an intersection, wrapped in a thin blanket. It is cold out but for some reason, she seems to be gently rocking.

Your warning voices within you say "there's a psych history here and she's probably rocking because she's on anti-psychotic meds that cause repetitive behavior. You don't want to get involved because it could be trouble. It could be a scam and there's danger. This is clearly not

⁸ Talk about a mountain-top experience!

someone who just stepped out of Talbot's and has a flat on one of her Mercedes' tires.

You're almost past her and you have other things to do at home . . . but you see the blanket. It is one of those thin cotton ones like the kind you used to put on your baby in a crib in the summer – just to keep a breeze off. But you passed her by and in your mind you see a few snapshots from your Sunday School childhood flash by – the clay-colored people in bathrobes and sandals in the 'Good Samaritan' story. And all of a sudden you feel as if some giant hand comes along side of your car and slaps a big sticker on it which says "the Levite who passed them by."

You turn around, without causing a head-on collision, and make your way back to the corner. You're looking at the person sitting on the ground in that blanket and not only is she gently rocking – she's trembling because she's cold. You see some guy, about ten feet away, who is probably her pimp and he looks at you out of the corner of his eye with disinterest. In an instant, you realize why she's freezing and this guy is standing near but he's not cold himself.

You come over to her and kneel beside her and ask her if she's cold. And in her quivering voice, she says 'yes.' You see blotches on her face and know she's got serious health problems and might be dying. You don't even stop to question yourself and you don't know what is making you do it but you ask her if you could give her your coat.

You see a look of surprise in her face and she says, weakly, 'that would be nice.' And in a flash, your coat is around her and you think you quietly told her '*God loves you*' and then you're back in your car, driving away. You don't do this sort of thing but something irrational and compelling just took you over. You know there isn't a relative in your entire family clan who would believe you did it or would ever encourage you to do it again.

It was God. It was God's Spirit leaping out of your heart and groaning with compassion for this child of God in need.

Sometime down the road, years ahead, this person will be sitting in a small group of people, telling how an angel, one day, gave her a coat when she was cold. You'll never hear about it in this life. In hindsight, you know it was the presence of God.



God's Spirit is already in you. When you see people in need, pay attention. Slow down and look in the eyes of this person in front of you. You're about to see God. At this moment, stop trying to be in control and get out of the box. You're about to be filled with God's Holy Spirit so that you have to respond to that need.

Jesus lived His whole life like that. In every encounter with people in need, Jesus just threw convention to the wind – totally forgetting about Himself. He reached out to whoever was in need. In almost every case, it was a person who was not like Him. They were outcasts – discarded and abandoned people.

You are a vessel of God's Spirit. Forget about yourself. Forget your image and what you think people around you will think. Become non-self-conscious AND THEN God will use you to change this world.

In the process, you will also see God. So don't wait till it's all over. Watch for the need because God's cameras are rolling and you're in the starring role.

