

The Presence of God
Psalm 121
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All of us have had the experience of having to repeat ourselves to make our point. Maybe you were talking to a spouse who is pre-occupied with something else and not really listening to you. Or maybe you've told something important to a friend who's forgetful, so you have to say it again. Parents seem to have this experience a lot, we've all spoken great words of wisdom that were never heard in our attempts to teach an important life lesson to a child with a very short attention span or to a teenager who's sure they know more than we do. In one situation or another, we've all felt the frustration of knowing that we've said something important and haven't been heard.

So, lots of times we end up repeating the same message, maybe in a slightly different way, hoping that this time it might sink in. We want our words to take root and produce some results. Having to repeat ourselves like this can get pretty annoying and it usually turns out to be a real test of our patience.

Well, God has experienced this too. But his frustration has spanned thousands of years. Thankfully, God's patience is on a completely different level than ours. For thousands of years now, God has been delivering the same simple message to human ears, "I am with you," and incredibly, no matter how many times he's told us, no matter how many different ways he says it or how dramatic his presentation is, we still, for the most part, don't get the point. Throughout all of human history, the voice of God has spoken those words time and time again with his absolute assurance.

In the pages of the Bible, the reality of God's presence unfolds in breathtaking detail through the histories, poems and prayers of individuals, tribes, cities, nations and generations as our relationship with our creator develops on earth ... as God tries to get us to believe that we can trust in his love. God is our keeper. He is there for us when we need him the most. The Lord will keep us from all evil. He will keep our life. He will keep our going out and our coming in from this time on and forevermore.

When Isaac was on the move searching for a new home God said, "I am with you and will bless you."

As Jacob was running away to escape from his brother who was trying to murder him he heard God say, "I am with you and will keep you wherever you go."

The prophet Nathan tells David, just after he was installed as king, "Do all that you have in mind, for God is with you."

When the Israelites are being threatened by the Babylonians God says, "Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God, I will strengthen you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand."

Reassuring the prophet Jeremiah at the beginning of his ministry God says, “Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you.”

Heading into years of exile the nation of Israel heard God say, “Do not be dismayed...For I am with you, to save you.”

At the end of terrible era of corruption and materialism, the prophet Zephaniah spoke these words of hope to God’s people, “The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.”

God said to the discouraged group called to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, “I am with you.”

The risen Christ in his final words to his disciples, instructed them to go and make disciples of all nations saying, “Remember I am with you until the end of the age.”

To the apostle Paul, facing persecution in Corinth God said, “Do not be afraid to speak and do not be silent for I am with you.”

Across thousands of years, with wave upon wave of names and faces and recurring events, the Bible threads God’s patient words of love and faithfulness, “I am with you.” God’s message is timeless and meant for each of us here today as well. But the prophets have been silent for along time now, we don’t have a modern day Nathan, Zephaniah or Haggai. Burning bushes seem to only happen these days from careless smokers. How do we hear God’s message today, how do we get that assurance that God is with us always, to the end of the age?

There are three things that come to my mind. First is simply by breathing in this mind-boggling world around us. You take a walk outside right now and you see the miracle of transformation; a cold, dead, grey world turning into an explosion of life, colors, sights and sounds that are bursting out like fireworks on these warm spring days. In every opening bud and chirping bird, you can’t help but know that God is near. If you like to see things scientifically you know that we live each day in a world where sustainable life depends on several intricate details remaining in place like the degree of the earth’s tilt on it’s axis. You know that God is with us sustaining life in every minute and if he stopped, we would stop too.

Secondly is through one another. We have been given the power of the Holy Spirit. A force so great, so wonderful that Jesus told his disciples it would be better if he left so that the Spirit would come. And so, we live in a time when we are the hands, the feet, the mouth of God for one another. God is with us in the way we love and care and reach out to one another in this world by the power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us.

We also understand that God is with us by his word as it comes to us in the Bible, a living book like no other text. These aren’t just stories about an ancient civilization of people that we have no connection too. We read these stories now in a new light because through Jesus Christ these stories have now become our own. I know that’s hard to recognize at times because the culture is so different and the circumstances are too.

Unlike Jacob, I know my three brothers may be upset that I never remember their birthdays, but I don't think they have plans to murder me any time soon. The Babylonians aren't our neighbors, but I don't usually wake up feeling the threat of the Canadians taking us over and sending us into exile. And I know there's a chance that someone here might grow up to be president, but I'm doubting anyone will have the experience of being a King in the same way that David was. But let me give these stories a different face, which is what we need to do to make the Bible's stories our own ... to hear the voice of God reaching out to us and see if any of them start to sound familiar.

Isaac was on the move in search of a new home, which meant he was probably not only worried about how his family would fit in to a new neighborhood, but he was also wondering how he would provide for them. He must have been worried about finding a job, having food and a place to live.

Jacob is trying to escape a murderous brother. How do you cope when the people you love the most, the ones you thought loved you, turn out to be your worst enemies, going from protecting and providing for you to intentionally trying to cause you pain? Divorce can be ugly and devastating for everyone. And lots of families have other conflicts that drive wedges between them and destroy relationships.

Nathan was newly installed as King, just taking on a huge new responsibility for the first time. Remember how scary it was to be a parent for the first time, or the first time you lived on your own and had to pay your own bills?

The nation of Israel was reassured of God's presence as they headed into years of exile under the rule of the Babylonians...when we grow older and have to move out of our own homes and into a nursing facility, giving up our independence and handing over control to someone else or when we have to make this tough decision for our parents, we need to know God is with us.

The young boy, Jeremiah was called to ministry and felt so inadequate. God calls us at times to do things that we know we can't do on our own, not just church positions but maybe raising a handicap child or caring for a home bound spouse or parent.

This one I don't have to change much, the prophet Zephaniah spoke God's word of hope to the people at the end of an era of materialism and corruption. This nation had dug themselves into a pretty big mess fueled by their greed. Sound familiar?

Haggai reassured the discouraged group called to rebuild the temple. Have you ever looked at your life and seen a pile of rubble so deep that you don't even know where to start? Some of us feel like Humpty Dumpty with no hope of ever being put back together again.

Our risen Christ in his last words to his disciples commanded them to go and make disciples of all the nations. How many times have you tried to do what Jesus asks us to and failed? How hard is it to take up our cross and walk the same path as Jesus? To live selflessly and tell others about Christ?

And at last there is Paul ... Paul knows that if he speaks out he will face persecution and death. He is facing his mortality. Hearing the diagnosis of cancer, heart failure or some other terminal condition is overwhelming. Our bodies were not made to last forever. Our death is certain.

In each of these situations, most of us need to be reminded that our help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. God is with us. The most difficult times in our lives are usually the times when we wonder if God's around, we wonder if he cares or hears our prayers. Doubting God's presence can cause us to be afraid. And fear can sometimes paralyze us.

Living without realizing the full extent to which God is present and working in our lives is like sailing a boat and still thinking the world is flat. A faulty worldview will limit what we're able to accomplish. A faulty view of God's presence in our life limits our relationship with God and keeps us from experiencing the fullness of the joy we were created to enjoy in each day.

It seems to me that we think of our life with God like a highway system. Life is a road that we travel along. And every once in awhile, God's road intersects with ours and we're so surprised when it does. I hear these stories all the time, in fact I've told these stories myself... Someone is in a hallway in need of help and I happen to find them just because I felt a strong sense that I should take a different way back to my office or I'm looking for someone with a very specific set of qualifications to run a support group and the perfect person just happens to call me looking for a way to serve God. God shows up and we are all so surprised like he's some foreign dignitary instead of an ever present father. The sad thing is that God is probably just as surprised as we are, "Hey what do you know, I've been with her every day for 50 years now and she finally noticed me helping her! Our senses are dulled to the activity and presence of God. Now we see through a glass darkly, but then we will see face to face it says in I Corinthians.

That's the point of a great story found in II Kings. The Syrian King is trying to conquer the Israelites by ambushing them but the Israelites are always warned ahead of time. Frustrated, the king finds out that it's the prophet Elisha who keeps blowing his cover, so he sends a huge army to kill the prophet. The army comes and completely surrounds Elisha and his servant. The servant is terrified realizing that the two of them will be killed, but Elisha remains calm and he says to his servant, "Don't be afraid, we have more with us than they have." I would love to have seen his face. The servant must have thought Elisha was crazy.

The servant can only see his physical surroundings but Elisha is enabled by the Spirit to see the whole spectrum of reality. The servant saw the activity of men. Elisha saw the activity of God. Elisha prayed that the servant's eyes might be opened and then the servant saw the mountains full of God's horses and chariots of fire gathered all around them.

What if our eyes were opened to the activity of God around us? Maybe we would see a multitude of angels singing of God's love to the spouse we're worried about because he can't bring himself to believe in God anymore. Maybe we would see chariots of fire surrounding the mother who can't seem to face down the demons of alcoholism alone. Or, maybe the hospital room that seems cold and empty and frightening late at night, holds a shepherd who is kneeling at our bedside close enough to wipe our tears.

When something bad happens in our lives, when the floor falls out from under us, we cry out to God for help as if we're putting in the first call to the 911 dispatcher ...and then we sit back and wait to see if God is going to answer the call. When the reality is that God is already there and working in ways we can't even imagine to restore the good to a bad situation. God goes before us, and behind us, and beside us, and most of the time we are completely unaware of his presence.

We send up our prayers.... as if we are shouting out... to some distant star in the heavens..... when maybe in reality we are whispering into the ear of our Lord who is always right beside us. Amen.