

“Hearts Aflame: Sensing God’s Presence”
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Luke 24:13-32

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Please click [here](#) to read the Scripture.

Last week we got into Epiphany. It’s the after-Christmas time, when we explore and celebrate how God unveils Jesus and who he is to the whole world. So that reading, while it’s an Easter event, has an Epiphany feel to it. God unveils Jesus for those two disciples, and for us too.

What was it they said? *“Weren’t our hearts on fire!”*

One was “Cleopas.” The other? She or he was left nameless. Maybe we can imagine it’s us. You’ve been following Jesus. You’ve given your life to him. You’ve discovered your hope in him. With Jesus, you have been in the presence of God in ways you’d never experienced or expected.

Then, he ended. With each nail hammered into his shaking flesh, your Hope had screamed. With each weakening heave from his gasping chest, your Life had failed. Then, died. In your heart, the Presence of God had been murdered.

That had been “Good Friday,” though of course you weren’t calling it that, yet. Now it is the first Easter Sunday, though of course you have no idea, yet.

You walk along, talking about it all.

Then, Jesus is walking with you. But you don’t see. Maybe because of your confusion. Probably because he is so unanticipated, so unexpected, so impossible. Somehow, you are kept from noticing him. You see him, but you cannot see that *it’s him!*

You don’t know Jesus is with you.

II

Do we need to imagine ourselves back then, to know what it’s like to be in God’s Presence, but not know it?

Do you live with an ongoing awareness of God’s Always-Presence?

Are you available to how God wants to show you God’s Ever-Presence?

How are you attentive to the ways God says, “I am with you!”?

Our beloved United Church Creed begins with this:

We are not alone! We live in God's world.

It calls on us to do this:

Celebrate God's presence!

And it finishes with this (again):

We are not alone! Thanks be to God!

Surely, the Presence of God is in this place! Not just here, in an "official" worship spot? Everywhere.

We believe it. We proclaim it. Do we expect it? Do we celebrate God's Presence because we've experienced its truth? I worry we don't. I know that too often I don't.

So I've gotten involved in something new in the United Church. It's "The Presence Project Network." We've set out to help congregations grow cultures of God's Presence. We're realizing that we need basic ways of living and being and expecting that are aware, and available, and attentive to God's Presence. Not just in worship or prayer times, but coffee time, meeting times, in our neighbourhood times, in our home times, in our workplace times, in our "wherever we are" times.

Why did we lose this sense? Maybe because we've been secularized too, into a flattened experience of the world. Probably because we've bought in that God's Presence is so unanticipated, so unexpected, so impossible.

God is with us. Somehow, we are kept from noticing.

III

But you heard what happens. They get to their home. Since it's getting late, they urge Stranger to stay with them. (Remember, they still have no idea they are in Jesus presence.)

Then, it gets really good! Stranger is their guest, but he starts acting like the host. Takes the bread. Blesses and breaks it. Gives it to them to eat.

But their mouths are so full of dawning astonishment, I don't think they could take another bite.

Then, he's gone. They're left to make sense of what has happened. "*Weren't our hearts on fire when he spoke to us along the road and when he explained the scriptures for us?*"

What if those disciples' experience in Emmaus was extraordinary only because it was the beginning, and we are present with Jesus all the time?

We have a big advantage over them. Then, they realized Jesus' physical presence in a particular place and time. Afterwards, Jesus promised to be with his people all the time and everywhere.¹ Then, he was with them similarly to how we are with one another. Now, Jesus is present with us by the Holy Spirit, wherever God the Trinity is, which is everywhere.

IV

Can we sense God's presence?

Remember, even before they knew it was Jesus, they sensed something. Of course, their eyes let them see him. Their ears let them hear him. Maybe they touched him. Maybe they could smell him. That's how we experience each other, through our physical senses.

Yet there was something more. "*Weren't our hearts on fire!*" they said. At first they had not known it was Jesus! Yet there seemed to be a spiritual sense that told them something.

It was when Jesus broke the bread that it clicked. I'm sure it brought to them the last supper they'd had with Jesus, when he'd broken the bread and shared the cup. Now it was something similar, and very physical, that triggered their realization.

These triggers are ordinary, physical things that seem to ignite our spiritual sense. Each of us has our particular triggers.

God's creation can trigger us: a flower, a sunset, a mountain, a forest, and so on. These are not God. They are not divine. Yet our experience of them can point us to their Creator (and ours), warming up our spiritual sensory awareness.

Being in relationship with people can trigger the sense of God's Presence, experiencing belonging, friendship, comfort, ease, laughter, sharing, trusting, caring, loving.

Our spiritual sense of God can be triggered by feelings: gratitude, relief, longing, hunger, thirst, desire, even pain and challenges, ecstasy, peace, joy.

Doing things: creating, exercising, gardening, walking, reading, cooking.

Enjoying beauty: natural, artistic, music, dance, poetry, singing.

Anything can be a trigger. God can use anything to warm up our spiritual sense to

¹ Matthew 28:18-20.

God's presence.

What does this spiritual sense feel like? They spoke of their hearts burning. I've experienced it as a sort of pressing-in on me, but from the inside. People use words like full, expansive, depth, weight, timeless, raw, real, enlarged, connected, and so on.

God gives us the gift of sensing God's Presence, anywhere and everywhere.

V

John Wesley experienced God's Presence as a feeling of being "strangely warmed."

It happened to him in a church meeting in the old City of London. It was 1738. He'd wandered into an evening service. He later remembered that he hadn't really wanted to be there. Still, he went (or, was drawn) in. He listened to the speaker describe the change that God makes in us when we trust in Christ Jesus. He said, "I felt my heart strangely warmed." That experience, that sense of God's Presence and claim on him, changed John Wesley's life.²

This summer I went to that spot. The meeting place is long gone. The whole area was flattened during the Blitz in World War II. Now it's full of businesses, and shops, and eateries, and bus stops, and flats. The Museum of London sits in the middle, and the tall towers of London's financial district are all around.

It doesn't seem spiritual.

But God's is present there, amid all those places and activities, just as surely as that evening when John Wesley caught fire.

Wherever you are, Jesus is walking with you. Ask God to let you notice.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Wesley#Wesley's_%22Aldersgate_experience%22