

“The Presence Project”

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Genesis 28.10-17; Psalm 16; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-24

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If you're reading this online,
you can see the Scripture selections by [clicking here](#).

I

This message began with a video clip. From the driver's perspective, it shows the way from Grace Christian Fellowship to the Groves Memorial Community Hospital, both in Fergus. As people watched, I told this story.

It was December 11, last year. That morning I was together with some other ministers from our community. We get together weekly to share life, learn together, pray, bug each other, tell inappropriate jokes . . . stuff like that. That day we'd gathered at Grace Christian Fellowship, on Farley Road, off Beatty Line.

Of course there's coffee. That day we had pastries too, leftovers from an event at Grace the night before.

About 10 minutes after I'd started my snack, I started feeling uncomfortable. I began sweating. Itching. I couldn't sit still. I got up, went to the washroom.

When I got back, someone said that I looked flush. I figured I was getting a flu bug or something; I'd woken that morning with signs of what I thought was a cold. I decided to go home.

I got in the car and left.

At Colborne Street, I would have turned right, to Elora.

Instead, I kept going. To the hospital.

I could feel my tongue. It was swollen.

At St. Andrew Street, I was stuck behind a truck turning left. It took forever.

Traffic heading into Fergus was light. But it didn't feel that way.

I could feel my throat. It was tightening.

I should have pulled over. I should have called 911. What if I passed out? Driving was putting me and others at risk. Forgive me, but I didn't think of that.

I was planning my route. Continue along through downtown to St. David Street? No.

Ministers learn how to get to the hospital quickly. The Tower Street bridge had reopened. So I turned at Melville Church. Across the river. Left. Past the market.

I was barely able to breathe.

The light was red when I got there. So I turned right, past the funeral home . . . hoping I wasn't becoming a client. Rolling stop. Left. Left again onto the hospital driveway. Main parking lot? No, it's always full. Empty spot ahead! Park. Stop.

Stagger inside. No waiting today! Rushed into emerg. Onto a gurney. Needles. Pills.

I'm here, telling you, right. So I made it. They have never figured out what I reacted to. It wasn't the pastry. Thank God!

II

O ya. God. The whole time, I never thought of God.

It's not that I wondered if God was with me. I did not doubt God.

I simply never thought of God. Not from the parking lot — A church parking lot! Where I had been with other ministers! Not until much later, when lying on an emergency department bed, needles in my arms and relief in my heart, did I think of God.

The Scripture Randall read, the last one, from Paul's letter to Christians in Thessalonika . . . Paul finished up with last words for them (and us): encouragements, wisdom and blessing. One of them: "*Pray continually.*" "*Pray without ceasing.*"

Ya . . . I'm not a poster child for that one.

The Psalm we read together, Psalm 16. Lines like:

Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.

I keep you always before me.

*So my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;
for my body shall also rest in safety.*

Ya . . . not much of a role model here.

Ironic! My drive to the hospital happened when I was up to my neck in something called *The Presence Project*. It's about God's Presence.

III

We believe God is with us.

The United Church's favourite proclamation of what we believe starts like this:

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

It completes with this:

***In life, in death, in life beyond death,
God is with us.
We are not alone.
Thanks be to God!***

When we worship, we say we “**celebrate God's presence.**”

Yet . . . too often we have lost a sense of God's Presence. Perhaps sometimes we have never had it! Too frequently, we do not know how to experience God's Presence. We don't even know that we can! We have no expectation that God might “show up.” Our worship can be very much about God, but not so much with God.

This is when we are gathered together! To worship! God! How much more is it true when we are in our day-to-day lives!

Have you experienced God's Presence?

What helps you experience God?

What makes it hard to experience God's Presence?

So our national Faith Formation team decided to develop *The Presence Project*. This network aims to help congregations shape their culture to become more aware, available and attentive to God's Presence.

They asked me to coordinate it.

Me!

Remember my drive to the hospital! Never a thought of God! I am part of the problem we're trying to help. How can I lead this?

“Greg, maybe that's why you should lead this,” was the answer.

IV

Remember Jacob in the Bible. Messed up. Cheated his brother. Lied to and humiliated his father. On his own. On the run. No evidence he had ever paid much attention to God.¹ Certainly no reason to expect God to show up now!

God's Presence surprises!

Jacob woke from his God-given vision-dream:

Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!

The Presence Project builds around two basic sentences . . . which I hope you recognize.

***Surely God is in this place.
Help me notice!***

We say that, or things like it, at the start of our worship. As we finish too, sending us on our way into other places of Gods' Presence.

We could say it at other times too: starting meetings, gathering in small groups, working around the building, preparing for a community dinner, before we open doors to a public event.

We can also say it when we're scattered from each other. We are still the church, and we are still in God's Presence: as we start and finish the day, at work, in the garden, at the rink, when we're driving. Anywhere. Everywhere.

The Presence Project has made visual reminders. (I hope you recognize these too!) Big ones for posting. Smaller ones too. You've got a sample this morning. Want more of them (big or small)? Let me know.

*Where might you put them?
Where might you need a reminder?*

We're creating versions for secular spaces, where talking about God might be difficult. You might need a reminder for yourself that God's there too.

A regular practice like this — simply saying two sentences — shapes a culture.

***Surely God is in this place.
Help me notice!***

¹ Jacob does mention God when he's in the midst of deceiving his father. Part of his lie is lying about God. See Genesis 27:20.

It's a culture that is alive to God's Presence. We start seeing how God is showing God's Presence to us, in ways we did not know.

All this is on a new website: PresenceProjectNetwork.ca.

V

Of course, you can talk with me too.

Not that I'm an expert. I need this as much as you. Together, we can learn and live into this wonderful truth.

God is Present! Here. Everywhere. Sometimes God makes God's Presence obvious. Sometimes, God hides. Still, God is always there.

Most of the time, we just don't notice.

God, help me notice. Help us notice together.

Amen.