Sunday, March 1, 1992
THE POWER OF GOD'S PRESENCE
Luke 9:28-36

The most frequent comment made to me about God is: "I believe in God, but seldom, if ever, feel God's presence." Then many people go on to say, "I very much want to experience the power of God's presence in my life, and I wonder when and how that might happen and what difference it would make. Or maybe I don't recognize God's presence even though it's a part of my life."

Here's an analogy that's been helpful to me: People who believe in God, but seldom, if ever, feel the power of God's presence are something like people who believe in music; they know that music is made, they hear it, but they are never moved very much by it. Music does not touch them in the deepest recesses of their souls.

Another analogy: People who believe in God but do not feel God's presence are like people who believe that the earth goes around the sun. They have been told that it does, told by people who are supposed to know, and whose authority they trust, but it doesn't look as if it did, and they never feel the cosmic motion in their bones. They don't feel as though the ground they are standing on is moving.

What then is the answer to more deeply experiencing the power of God's presence? To begin with, you need to know that very few people, if any, experience the power of God's presence in their lives all the time or with the same intensity. For most of us, it's an uneven occurrence. There are times when God's love and presence seem very much a part of us, and at other times, God seems far away.

That's mostly because our own receptivity is uneven. Sometimes we are more open to God's presence, and at other times, our lives are so filled with other things that we are not as receptive. God's presence may be there, but we are not aware of it or don't take the time to pay attention to it.

There may also be times when we don't want to feel God's presence. We don't want to be bothered with God.

A second point to remember is that you will not feel the presence of God in the same way as you feel the presence of another person or in the same way as you experience other objects in your everyday life. God is not another person or an object. In the New Testament of the Bible, God is never referred to as a person. God is sometimes addressed in terms we use to address another person, but that is because our language is inadequate for defining or describing God, so we tend to speak of God as a person. But whatever God's presence may be, you will never feel it the way you feel the presence of another person.

God is invisible, inaudible, and intangible. You are not a stranger to this realm of reality. Here's another analogy: This room is filled at this moment with all kinds of radio waves, but you cannot see them or even hear them unless you have the proper radio receiver to turn them into sound that your ears can hear and your brain can interpret. Simply because you cannot hear or see something does not mean it is not present.

Another example: What is an electron, or proton, or neutron, or quark? According to modern physics, these are all bits of energy which we cannot see but which are the basic stuff of everything that is. Simply because we cannot see them does not mean they don't exist. There's a lot of everyday reality that we cannot hear, see, touch, taste, or smell.

What is love? One small dictionary describes it as "a feeling of warm personal attachment for another human being." But we all know there is more to love than any group of words can describe. You have experienced the power of love. You have seen love in action. But love is still more than all of that.

Part of the problem is that most of our contact with the world outside of us is through the basic five senses: touch, sight, hearing, taste, and smell. These are the doorways through which we go into the world around us and through which the world comes into us and registers itself upon our consciousness, so we sometimes assume that we know all of reality through these five senses.

But we also talk about a sixth sense. You go into a home, for example. As far as you can see and hear, everything is normal, everything is in order; but you sense that something is wrong; there is trouble somewhere; something has happened that has upset the family. Or you do something that costs you a great deal. You sense that it is right or wrong, not because it obeys or violates any law, or because someone has told you that it is right or wrong. It is something you sense.

Or you meet a person; you don't know anything about that individual. You dare not make any judgment because you don't know enough about that person, but you sense that he or she is a person of integrity or someone you cannot trust. There are a lot of things in life that we sense, but not through our usual five senses.

In a similar way, we can say that we sense God's presence. But when someone is aware in some way of God's presence, we talk about it as though we had seen it or felt it or heard it because there isn't much of any other way to describe it.

The Bible is filled with such incidents. One day when Jesus took three disciples with him on the mountain to pray, they had an unforgettable experience of the power of God's presence, not only as overwhelming them but also as being present in the person of Jesus. As they remembered it later, the only way they could describe it was as if they had seen it. They said that while Jesus was praying, his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. And suddenly, they saw Moses and Elijah with Jesus. They appeared in glory. In other words, these three disciples experienced the power and holiness of God in a way that had never happened to them before. It was not something they expected or planned for.

In the Old Testament, there's a story about Moses coming down from the mountain after he had been in communion with God. When he came into the camp, all who saw him could sense that something mysterious had happened. He was different. They described it by saying, "The skin of his face was shining because he had been talking with God." They were afraid to even come near him.

Now you may be saying to yourself, "I've never had that kind of experience." My answer is, "Not everyone does. But that does not make you any less loved by God. Nor does it mean that God is any less present in your life."

The fact is, when it comes to feeling the power of God's presence, we vary tremendously from one another. Some are more sensitive to that presence than others. That's even true with our five senses. Some are much more sensitive to sight and sound and smell than others. You know the person who sees everything, never misses anything wherever she is; and the other person who misses things right before his eyes.

The difference in sensitivity is even more noticeable when you come to the area of spiritual things, invisible things. Some people are more sensitive than others to people. Some seem to be completely insensitive to what another person is feeling. Of course, you can never be sure of that, but judging by the things they say and do, the only thing you can conclude is that they are blissfully unaware of what the other person feels when the critical or embarrassing word is spoken, when the cruel deed is done. And some people are more sensitive artistically than others, more sensitive to line, color, shape, and form.

In other words, some people have an eye for beauty, some have an ear for music, and some people seem to have more of a feeling for God. We all have different capacities and abilities. But that does not make one person better than another.

However, I would go on to say as emphatically as possible that there is no human being totally incapable of knowing God's presence; that there is no human being who has no sense of awe, or mystery, or majesty, or glory. No one is totally immune to the Divine. Nor is there anyone who totally knows God. There is always mystery. The spiritual journey in this life never ends. To affirm God as mystery is not a cop-out. It is saying that we can never know God completely. And God is not the only mystery in life. The more we know, the more we are aware of what we don't know. "Life is not a series of problems," said the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel, "It is a network of mysteries."

You have heard me quote Dr. Lewis Thomas before. He said, "The greatest of all the accomplishments of 20th-century science has been the discovery of human ignorance." There was a time in human history not too long ago when we thought that soon we would know everything. And to hear some religious people talk, they already know everything there is to know about God and God's will.

Having said all of this, there are some steps we can take to help us be more open and sensitive to the power of God's presence and mystery.

First of all, be yourself in relating to God. Relax, take off your mask. In God's presence, you can drop the "shoulds," the "have-tos," and the "musts," and replace them with innocence, spontaneity, and curiosity. Accept the fact that you are vulnerable. God accepts you as you are. You don't have to put on a holy front or try to impress God in any way. If you are always trying to be something different from yourself, you are so occupied with that effort that you may be blocking the experience of God's presence. As you are being yourself, listen to your innermost thoughts. Discover and live out your best instincts. They are all a part of God within you.

Secondly, where you are as well as who you are has something to do with your receptivity. Places have a strange way of evoking presence. That's why the architecture of church buildings is so important. The place is not the presence, but it can help make the presence more real in spite of the fact that God is not limited to any time or place. It can affect our mood of receptivity.

I still remember the first time I visited Israel and walked where Jesus walked. Being in old Jerusalem, in Bethlehem, in Nazareth, in the Garden of Gethsemane — all of these places gave me a feeling of the presence of God in a fresh way. I also remember being in St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome several summers ago, and there I was able to look again at Michelangelo's sculpture of Mary holding Jesus; it's called the Pietà. As I stood there studying that beautiful and magnificent piece of art, tears came to my eyes, and I felt strongly God's presence. God is everywhere, but we are more open to God's presence in some places.

That's why Jesus took the three disciples apart and up on the mountain. Place can be important, and being with others can help. Remember, Jesus said, "Wherever two or three or more are gathered together in my name, there am I also." By accepting his invitation and going with him, they also indicated their openness and receptivity.

Third, it's also helpful for being aware of the power of God's presence in our lives when we admit that we cannot live our lives by ourselves and that there is a power greater than any of us and greater than the universe. Recovering alcoholics have told me over and over again that their sense of God's presence came in the moment when they were at the bottom and admitted they needed help.
As I have said before, and as the Bible reminds us again and again, God does not force us but waits for our invitation in whatever form it is given. At the same time, God never gives up on any one of us but is always waiting to be a more integral part of our lives. Remember those beautiful words of Jesus, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock, and if anyone opens it, I will come in."

When all is said and done, who you are and where you are will not mean much unless you regularly practice the presence of God. You could be the best musician in the world, but if you never practice, it will not amount to anything. I think it was a concert pianist who said that when he missed one day of practice, he knew it, and when he missed several days of practice, his audience knew it.
How do you practice the presence of God? You have to take time out from your schedule. That's why regular participation in worship at least once a week is so important. Coming here on a Sunday morning can be the same as going with Jesus on the mountain to pray. Finally, be patient, wait, be open and ready, and one day the power of God's presence will fill your life in a surprising and unexpected way. It might be in a still small voice or a mountaintop experience. I have felt God's presence when someone put their arm around me to comfort me. I have felt God's presence while being at the bedside with someone who was dying.

I have felt God's presence in a marriage ceremony where two people make those promises to love and be faithful to one another for the rest of their lives. I have felt God's presence in the joy and laughter of children. I have felt God's presence while singing "Silent Night." I have felt God's presence while visiting someone in jail.

Didn't Jesus remind us that we would come into contact with God's presence most noticeably while clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, visiting those in prison? "As you did it unto one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me." Amen.