



Webs Not Walls

Week 6: God is With Us

Brian Mattson - 09/20/2026

After I graduated from college and moved back to Springfield, I started helping out at my home church. I played drums in the band. Then I started volunteering with the youth group—the same youth group of my teen years. Then I got paid a little bit to help lead the youth praise band. Saying yes to that meant I was also saying yes to being a chaperone on the annual summer mission trip with the entire youth group.

I packed my bags and headed out with the group on a giant tour bus for a week each summer for several years. We went to Ohio, Tennessee, Colorado, and West Virginia. I loved those times with the kids and the service projects we did together. They reminded me of my own youth group adventures a decade earlier and the connections I made with friends that we still laugh about today. On the trip to Tennessee, we did some work with a street ministry, serving meals and leading a worship service in inner city Knoxville. It was a good time and quite eye-opening for a bunch of suburban kids from Springfield.

The speaker that evening, the regular preacher there, used us as an example during his talk. He wasn't trying to be mean or dismissive, but he kept saying, in one way or another, that we had no clue what it was like to have your life changed by God because our lives were too easy. We came from middle income, middle America, and we didn't have the first idea about the

transformation that happens when the Spirit gets ahold of someone in addiction, or incarceration, or neglect, or abuse. He was definitely right that none of us had ever experienced some of those truly difficult hardships. But, what he was implying was that the only proof people have of God is seeing the results of a completely changed life.

That evening as we were debriefing with the kids, talking about their reflections on the day, many of them said the stories they heard were remarkable. Stories about people in the darkest times, the lowest places, who had found the strength to change. There was an underlying current in the discussion that night of doubt. None of the kids said it outright, but we could sense that some of them were wondering if God was really active in their lives if they didn't have a story that would fit in a movie script or sell a memoir. One of the leaders offered a pearl of wisdom that I know helped those kids that night because it helped me remember a truth about God. He said, in so many words, "You don't need to have a story like the ones we heard today. Your story, whether it's been an easier journey or not, is the one God is writing with you."

Let's be honest and admit that sensational stories sell. It's true. They are entertaining and powerful, but are not the only stories that matter when we talk about the presence of God changing and leading our lives. Meredith Miller, the author of *Woven*, in a similar conversation with her son, recounts, that **"the closest we have to proof are the stories of God's presence [and] often people experience God's presence subtly, and yet they have a sense of God's nearness, God's leading, or God's comfort."**

Books, movies, even the songs we sing in worship use sensational language to make a point about true transformation by the power of God. Lives flipped upside down. Down to my last breath. There's nothing inherently wrong with these words, and they can be quite powerful for us to hear and remember. But the effects that linger can cause us to wonder if God is really here if God's presence is not evident or undeniable.

We started this series by discussing the results of a 2009 study that identified the faith of many Americans with the term Moral Therapeutic Deism. The idea that their faith was moralistic—religion is meant to make me feel better—and it was deistic—God is basically far away, but might make an appearance now and then when I need help. I don't believe that God is distant, nor does God only show up for use in emergencies. Rather, an anchor point for our faith is that no matter what, God is with us. God is present and active in our lives.

What that really means has changed for me over the years, and I bet many of you have thought that too. I used to think, and knew in my bones, that God was with me when I was singing worship songs in a dark space. The sanctuary, the youth room, outside at church camp—these were the places I experienced the presence of God. The rest of my time was just normal life.

As I grew older and had fewer “experiences” with God outside of my youth group, I wondered if God was farther away, or at least less accessible. Had my doubts, my sins, my lack of singing worship songs created a gulf between me and God? I know and believe now that God doesn't leave us, but we turn away from God. Still, even when we turn away, God is here. We can't outrun God. We can't hide from God. God's presence is here, wherever we go, much like the writer of Psalm 139 describes:

O LORD, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in

Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

When we miss the mark or stray from the path, our connection with God seems to suffer. Is that because God moves away, or because we do? As Meredith Miller notes:

Yes, sin impacts humanity's relationship to God, both as individuals and as a collective. But even before Jesus comes, even despite sin's best efforts, God is not far away and separate. It simply is not true that "a holy God cannot be in the presence of sin." A holy God cannot be overcome by the power of sin, and so can come as near to the people God loves as God would like. Which is to say, right among us.

In our Wesleyan understanding, God's grace is pervasive and everywhere. We declare God's prevenient grace is calling us into relationship before we even know about God. And even when we feel far from it, God's grace is always there, ever present on our journeys.

Miller goes on to share how the ancient Israelites, in the midst of their defining Exodus story, experienced the very real presence of God on their journey. In spite of their doubts and fears, Yahweh went ahead of them as a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire at night. God didn't just show up in their time of crisis and oppression to set them free, but God came to be with them. Ahead of them, behind them, above them, and below them. God is not bound by sanctuary walls or cathedrals. God is not limited by geographical boundaries or the laws of humans.

Miller emphasizes that this idea would've been foreign to people in the ancient near-East. In that culture, deities were constrained by territories, seasons, the weather or other deities. But Yahweh God was different, and came near to the people to be with them in all places; in all circumstances.

For the Hebrew people, God showed up to free them, protect them, lead them, and reshape them. They were no longer a people controlled, but had been set free to live life differently. One defined by loving God and one another. Fear was slowly being replaced by trust.

We read these stories and love the ideas behind them, but we wonder where are our pillars of cloud and fire? Is God really with me if I can't see or hear God? How can I trust God is always with me if I used to associate God with certain places or events or times of the week? Life is just too busy to fit one more thing in!

Miller uses a great analogy for learning how to notice God's nearness in the chaos of life. She talks about the Merlin Bird ID app and how this amazing piece of software can identify different bird calls and songs even in noisy surroundings. If you've never used this app, it truly is amazing. It's helped me identify birds by their looks and their sounds on all of my travels. Somehow, my phone can hear the different frequencies and patterns of birds and then spit out each species in a list. In ways I don't understand, the app can silence competing sounds—cars, people, wind—and isolate what I'm really trying to home in on. She writes this:

Like the birds in my yard, God is always there, and yet without tuning myself in to God's presence, I'm liable to go long stretches not hearing the song of love that's calling to me.

- Meredith Miller

To recognize God's presence with us, we need to figure out the spiritual equivalent of our own Merlin Bird ID. What are the ways I can practice noticing and tuning into God's presence? Miller calls them prayers and pathways, but they could just as easily be called practices and habits, with the idea being the roads we walk to meet God.

The first is prayer. This takes many forms: improvisational, memorized, breath prayers, and even silence. The key is finding one or two ways to add

these moments to our routine. If prayer is one way we travel to meet God, the more often we take the same path, the easier the journey will be.

Every time I drop my kids off at school in the morning, the first thing I do when they get out of the car is open my Lectio365 app. I've talked about this before, but spending those 10 minutes being led in prayer and meditation are important for my rhythms and routines. It sets the tone for my day and helps me slow down from the craziness of the mornings.

Another way that I try to instill routine and familiarity with prayer is to use consistent words. I love that we say the Lord's Prayer every Sunday, as my kids have picked up the words and cadence. And when I put them to sleep at night, many times I'll say a prayer with them, but it always ends with the same refrain: and thank you for Jesus who showed us how to love everyone. If my kids don't remember anything else about the prayer that night, I know those words are written on their hearts, because they will occasionally recite that part with me too.

There are also practices that will help us notice. When I was in Scouts growing up, at campouts or backpacking trips, we would gather around a fire after dinner and spend some time remembering our roses and thorns from the day. I've tried to instill this practice of reflection with my family around the dinner table. We've been reflecting on our roses and thorns for years, but maybe a year ago, in Jack's obsession with Harry Potter, it was renamed Patronus and Dementor, but the sentiment is the same: Let's spend some time talking about what was good and bad about our day.

I know Pastor Lori occasionally does this with her family, too, though they call theirs High-Low-Haha—what was good, what was bad, and what made you laugh. I love that. I think everyone should steal that and implement it regularly. These are great practices for all of us to do, but how often do we spend that time noticing where God was present.

A common question we've asked around here for years is, "Where have you seen God lately?" It's mostly relegated to small groups, but I can't recommend the practice to you enough. The more you ask yourself this question, the more obvious God's presence becomes. What you may have attributed to luck or coincidence at the time is more easily seen, on reflection, as God at work in your life.

And I notice God's presence when I am with you all. At worship each Sunday, and especially when we observe communion, I'm reminded that an invisible God is made real and present in my faith community. Thus, the more familiar I am with my family, the more familiar I become with God's presence in my life. Do I have proof that God's presence is with me? Not in the way we often yearn for it. But I do have the stories and experiences of the subtle ways God has been made known to me. And over the years, I've become far more convinced of God's presence in my life and the lives of others through these tiny moments and encounters, rather than one or two or three stories of drastic life transformations.

And as we slowly recognize and trust that God's presence is with us, perhaps we can see ourselves as conduits of God's presence with other people. We cannot hide from God's presence, and therefore we take it with us, woven into our interactions with God's people. Much like the conclusion of the Prayer of St. Patrick.

**Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my
left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.**