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Good  
News  
from the  
Pews

Tom  
Blewett



Experiencing the  
Presence of God

Sunday, August 20, 2023  
“Experiencing the Presence of God”  
Tom Blewett | Isaiah 41:8-10

Good morning! It is so good to be here with you today. We are sometimes reminded that each day is a gift not to be taken for granted. In a spirit of gratitude to God for this day, I will share glimpses of a life journey that prepared me for a moment in the presence of God that changed the course of my life. I must temper my story by confessing to an imperfect faith life, one that depends on this faith community to be nurtured. My story is nothing more than a reminder of what we mean to each other in faith, just one story of many here today.

Let's open with an adaptation of a prayer offered by the Methodist pastor **Ted Loder in Guerillas of Grace:**

*O God, gather us now to be with you as you are with us. Soothe our tiredness; quiet our fretfulness; curb our aimlessness; relieve our compulsiveness; let us be easy for a moment.*

*O Lord, release us from the fears and guilts which grip us so tightly; from the expectations and opinions which we so tightly grip that we may be open to receiving what you give, to risking something genuinely new, to learning something refreshingly different.*

*O God, gather us to be with you as you are with us.*

*Amen.*

Our scripture reading today is taken from Isaiah 41:8-10.

*But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; you whom I took to the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, “You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off”, do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid for I am your God: I will strengthen you,*

*I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.*

This passage is from what many theologians now refer to as Second Isaiah, as it is thought there were three writers. The first chapters written by the prophet Isaiah had harsh words warning Judah about repentance before impending Assyrian assault. Second Isaiah spans chapters 40 to 55 some 150 years later near the end of Babylonian exile. As **Lawrence Boadt** wrote in **“Reading the Old Testament”**, second Isaiah has the quality of psalms of praise as though the writer had a sense of the imminent fall of Babylon at the hands of the Persian King Cyrus. So the words **“do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you”** give hope in a time of Israelite uncertainty, weakness of faith, tiredness, and aimlessness.

My Good News story is about experiencing the presence of God. There are many dimensions of the presence of God in biblical text as well as in writings today. My story emerged from a time in my life when I was beset by tiredness, sadness, anxiety, uncertainty, and even moments of exhilaration. It involved intense prayer like I had never prayed before. But first I should back up a bit and set the stage for how my understanding of the presence of God emerged in my life and how it led to that moment of prayer.

My earliest recollection of serious theological engagement happened when I was in Sunday school, when I heard the story of “doubting Thomas” insisting on proof of Jesus resurrection. Now I was concerned about the fact that I bore the same name and perhaps fate. ... OK so I was about 7 years old at the time. But why do I remember that moment? It has come back to me over the years.

I was probably pretty much like most kids going to church in those days. My parents grew weary of my fidgeting in church and gave permission to my older brother and me to skip church sometimes and go to grandma’s house where there was always chocolate cake and fresh coffee cake in the pantry. Grandma was in church of course but Grandpa stayed home in those days.

But as I grew into my teen and high school years I began a pattern of more regular attendance of church services. I recall the strict teachings of Reverend and Mrs. Martin at 1<sup>st</sup> Presbyterian Church in Dubuque during my catechism class. But it was the appearance of Reverend Wayne Lowry who’s teaching sermons began to catch my attention. And as I sat attentively for his sermons and those of guest preachers, it was

guest preachers who noticed my listening attentively. Over the course of a year there were three independent incidents of seminary students and a UD seminary professor approaching me after the service to encourage me to consider a life in service to God. This was eye opening to me and made me wonder if God was really there acting through these guest preachers.

I won't claim that I was a passionate believer in Jesus Christ or the presence of God in my life at that time, but I was becoming more aware of my faith. Indeed, I used my Christian faith as an excuse to get Cindy's father to give permission for our first date. I proposed to take her to a Billy Graham crusade at our high school auditorium. Seems like a logical progression in faith life, right? Well, maybe. Billy Graham was certainly uplifting and motivating, though I suspect I was as much thrilled to be on a date with a young lady.

In high school I began to realize a growing interest in the natural environment. I was influenced by the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm going back to required memory lessons in Catechism days. The first three verses instilled in me a **pastoral perspective** about the physical world where I could be with God. With coaching from Reverend Wayne Lowry I put on hold thoughts about how I was to serve God with my life.

In ensuing college years and early married life I had experiences that seemed to confirm God's presence in my life but I was not really active in the Church until I arrived back in Dubuque with Cindy and two daughters to take a faculty post in biology at then Clarke College. A few months after arrival I became an Elder at 1<sup>st</sup> Presbyterian Church in Dubuque. Before long I was involved a variety of committee roles, church mission study, co-leading with Ken Hindman a multi-church hospital fund drive for the Cameroon, teaching adult classes at Westminster at the invitation of Ken Hindman, guest sermons, and getting to know faculty at the UD Theological Seminary as well as professors from other campuses in town.

It was in that mix that I met **Don McKim**, professor of theology at UDTs. We ended up doing a series of public presentations together on science and theology starting with a shared presence on a televised panel discussion. That led to discussions about the presence of God and how the natural world can play into that experience. I told Don I felt like I could experience the presence of God when I was out in the natural world. In his book "**Presbyterian Beliefs: A Brief Introduction**" McKim calls this general or **Natural Revelation**. Some Reformed theologians have upheld this notion of natural revelation through scriptural interpretations. He told me back then as now in his book

that all Reformed theologians would agree that there are things we need to know about God that we cannot get from natural revelation. He calls this **Special Revelation**. **“We need a revelation that tells us special things, gives us special knowledge of God beyond what we could ever know by our human reason or by observing the world around us”**. What he means is that the Scriptures are the Special Revelation. The Scriptures are the Word of God and means by which we learn who God is, how God enters our life, and what God has done in the world.

In short, at this time I was enmeshed in all the goings on of my faculty role with students, my church and spiritual life and my family life. I agreed with Don that my sense of God’s presence in my life would not be complete without the church experience, without the teachings of scripture, without the presence of people in the church, and without prayer. But I must confess that my prayer life has been an uneven road over time and I have not always practiced prayer in ways that Charlie has admonished us to do.

The Dubuque setting was in the 1980’s and by 1987 I reached a critical point in my life that began to overwhelm my sense of who I was and my path forward. I loved teaching but my faculty post had no future, my father was terminally ill, I had a growing family, I had an opportunity to take a church relations position at UDTs, I had just finished a fascinating course in Old Testament as a special student at UDTs and wondered whether I should enroll as a full-time seminary student along with a seminary friend. This collision of events and circumstances left me with a sadness, tiredness, fretfulness, and a sense of aimlessness. What was I to do? **I sought the reassurance God offered in Isaiah 41: 10 “do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you”**.

This was a moment of truth for my faith. I decided to pray in a manner described today by **Ruth Haley Barton** in her book **“Invitation to Solitude and Silence”**. She describes her own troubled journey that took her to an approach of seeking solitude and quiet and letting God’s presence into your heart. I needed those elements to pray. I found solitude and silence in the quiet of our home when Cindy and the girls were fast asleep. It was 10 p.m. and I settled on my knees in quiet, and then in prayer, acknowledged the pain of caring for my dying father and all the uncertainty in my life. I tearfully admitted to God that I did not know what to do and I could not move forward without God’s help. **Please Lord help me understand what I am supposed to do. How am I supposed to serve You? How do I take care of my family?** That was the first and one of the few times that I have prayed in tears. Then I went to bed

hoping God was listening. (there was doubting Thomas again)

Conservative Christian writer **R.T. Kendall** in his book **“The Presence of God”** writes **“God may be pleased to show up in our lives in a way of which you and I have not remotely thought of”**. Well, that was certainly the case in God’s answer to my prayer. The next morning as I was preparing to start my first class of the day I scrolled through my notes on the overhead projector from the previous day. I always outlined for the students our study plan for the day. But then as I came to the end of my notes on the lecture outline from the previous day there was more, several pages more on the overhead scroll for the whole class to see. There was a series images depicting the many learning experiences and methods of teaching and expressions of thanks ending with hearts from my students. I was stunned. I blurted out without thinking when, who, how was this done. Four senior students that I had in class since their freshman year managed to find the door to the classroom unlocked and came in at 10 o’clock to write on the scroll, the moment I was in prayer. You might say I was gobsmacked by what just happened. For a moment I stared in silence past the students. They became concerned and even apologetic and I had to snap out of it and express appreciation for their kind support in my difficult time. I did not confess to them until years later what happened to me in that moment. It was as if God was saying **“Thomas, are you listening”**?

God answered my prayer, God called me to serve through my life as a teacher. As with the **Ted Loder** prayer **“O Lord, release me from my fears and guilts....that I may be open to receiving what you give, to risking something genuinely new, to learning something refreshingly different”**. And so it was that I took the risk of moving my family from Dubuque to Des Moines for a five-year period building a new educational unit in the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. Then I took a faculty position with the University of Wisconsin Extension, retiring after 21 years as professor and administrator helping new faculty in their careers. Through those 26 years my teaching roles were heavily influenced by my faith life. How I treated people according to their needs without regard to their personal beliefs was important to me. Whether through individual interactions or in group settings I always sought to support and encourage people and organizations, sometimes finding paths out of conflict and finding common ground.

My uncle David, a very conservative but dedicated Christian, once lamented to me that he never heard God speak to him. Perhaps in his more literal understanding of God’s Word he was waiting for a dream or heavenly voice from on high. A lesson here for

me **was and is that God may speak to us or answer prayer through the words and actions of people around us**, just as you may recall Melissa Schmidt's good news sermon on encouragement a few weeks ago. Of course we all experience joys as well as facing new pain and sadness as we travel the path of life. God is here for us in both good times and bad. We may at times feel lost and hurt, like the Israelites in Babylon, **but be assured God is with us today, here, in this room.** Amen.