

There You Are
Part Six: A Friend Walking Beside Us
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As we come into our message this morning, I want to ask you to take just a moment to connect with whatever it is that is most on your mind and heart right now.

Think of the joys that surround you.
Think of the challenges and uncertainties before you.
Think of the sadnesses and sorrows pressing down on you.
Think of the relationships that impact you.

What if, right in the middle of that, you could hear God say: “And I am with you.”

Because he does.

Let’s remind ourselves where we are in our summer sermon series

Our series, called *There You Are*, is a study of the psalms and specifically what the psalms says about where to look for God based on the different metaphors God uses to describe himself:

The creator who is sovereign over us
The king who rules over us
The shepherd who watches over us
The fortress that stands before us
The mother hen that shields us
The house that surrounds us
The guide who leads the way before us

Today we focus on God as the One who is *with* us: a friend, a companion, who walks beside us

The passages we are looking at this morning are from Psalm 16.

Psalm 16.8-9 NLT

I know the Lord is always with me.
I will not be shaken, for he is right beside me.
No wonder my heart is glad, and I rejoice.

Psalm 16.11 NLT

You will show me the way of life,
granting me the joy of your presence
and the pleasures of living with you forever.

Before we go any further, I want you to notice **two really important shifts** in the psalmist's perspective as he goes from verses 8 and 9 to verse 11:

The **first** shift is a shift in time.

The psalmist starts out in verse 8 and 9 in the present

The Lord *is* with me now. He *is* right beside me.

Then in verse 11 the psalmist shifts to the future.

You *will* grant me the joy of your presence and the pleasures of living with you
forever

For the follower of Christ, the promise of God's presence is a now and always promise. Not once in a while, not from time to time, but now and always.

It's also a then and forever promise. Now we experience his presence in part, in a spiritual way. But one day we will experience his presence fully, physically *and* spiritually, seeing him, as Paul says, face to face. (1 Corinthians 13.12)

You are with me now
You will be with me forever
No wonder my heart is glad, and I rejoice.

Here's the **second** shift that takes place that I want you to notice.

Look at how the psalmist orients himself to God. In the first portion, in 8 and 9, he says "he is", he refers to God in the second person, reminding himself and others of the things that are true *about* God – *The Lord is* always with me, *he is* right beside me

But his perspective shifts as we go to the second passage. In verse 11, it shifts from "he is" to "you are," spoken in the first person, declaring to God himself in worship and in gratitude and in praise those things that are true about God. *You* will show me the way of life, *you* will grant me the joy of *your* presence, *you* will grant me the pleasures of living with *you* forever.

As I've said before, I believe this is *the* fundamental movement of worship that God intends would take place on the inside of us every time we worship him, whether on our own throughout the week or when we come together as a family on Sunday.

The shift from He is to you are, the shift from reminding ourselves and each other what is true *about* God to speaking our praise directly to the One who is present with us and stands before us.

It isn't crucial that the songs we pick make this literal change in wording. When I worship I will just make this change of wording in my own head even if the words don't say it on the screen, changing the wording from he to you.

Worship is an encounter with the Living God who is present, and whose presence defines and changes everything. We don't just come together and declare that he is worthy of our worship. At some point our gaze needs to shift, and we need to be saying *to him*, God, *you* are worthy of our worship.

I just want you to feel the difference. Read the first passage with me as words that we speak to one another about God.

Psalm 16.8-9 NLT

I know the Lord is always with me.
I will not be shaken, for he is right beside me.
No wonder my heart is glad, and I rejoice.

And now read the second passage to the Lord, as words of worship and praise.

Psalm 16.11 NLT

You will show me the way of life,
granting me the joy of your presence
and the pleasures of living with you forever.

Do you feel the difference? One is the language of description, but the other is the language of *encounter*. And at its heart, worship is meant to be an encounter with the Living God who invites us into his presence.

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Okay, having noticed those two important shifts in perspective, let's take a closer look at this claim that God is always with us.

Psalm 16 isn't alone in declaring that God is with us. That same affirmation is found all through the psalms.

The Certainty of His Presence

The Lord is always with me (16:8)
You are with me. (23:4)

The Lord Almighty is with us. (46.11)
 I am always with you. (73:23)
 The Lord is with me. (118:6)

Now this is saying something so much deeper and more intimate than just claiming that God can be accessed at any time. David isn't saying there is always an electrical outlet within reach that we can plug into.

God is not a concept we affirm or a power we tap into. He is a person we walk with.

At the same time he is the creator who is sovereign over us and the king who rules over us and the shepherd who leads the way before us and the fortress who stands before us, he is the companion who walks beside us.

How does that fit with your understanding of where God is to be found?

Psalm 16.11 speaks of the joy and the pleasure that God's presence brings. A number of other verses pick up the same theme.

The Joy of His Presence

You will show me...the joy of your presence. (16.11)
 You...made him glad with the joy of your presence. (21.6)
 It is good to be near God. (73.38)
 Blessed are those you...bring near! (65.4)
 Blessed are those who...walk in the light of your presence, LORD. (89.15)

What does it mean to find joy in the God who is present with us?

This week Sharon and I celebrate 39 years of marriage. I still remember vividly the moment that she came around the corner and began to walk down the aisle toward me.

Alongside the many challenges that inevitably come between two married people, there are all sorts of gifts and joys that God gives in a marriage relationship, and certainly the most important of them all is also the most basic of them. A companion. A friend. Company to go through life with.

Last night when it was pouring down rain, I asked Sharon to come with me to the door going out onto our deck, as I often will when there is a beautiful sunset or a storm cloud lit up by lightning or the slanting glow of golden light backlighting the leaves on the trees in the early morning. I might put my arms around her, or just hold her hand, and then we just stand and enjoy the moment together.

The joy of her presence is not something she is doing *for me*. It's just the sharing of that moment, the sharing of life, the enjoying of one another's company, together.

That's what the joy of God's always and forever presence means: having a companion to share every moment; him present and involved in every aspect of our lives, in a way that even a spouse never could.

Yes, it's true that God comes with gifts. He is with me with all his resources in tow. The promise of God's presence is also the promise of the availability of his wisdom, his strength, his generosity, his forgiveness, his healing, in every moment.

But the promise of his presence is meant to be more than merely our gaining access to what God *has*. The promise of his presence means our gaining access to who he *is*. He himself is with me, a holy companion, a divine friend, walking through life with me, making every part of my life rich with his presence in it.

Not God as means, but God as end. Not God as provider, but God as friend.

Digby Mackworth Dolben wrote a poem called "Requests," in which he wrestles with these two different ways of looking to the God who is present with us.

I asked for Peace—
My sins arose,
And bound me close,
I could not find release.

I asked for Truth—
My doubts came in,
And with their din
They wearied all my youth.

I asked for Love—
My lovers failed,
And griefs assailed
Around, beneath, above.

I asked for Thee—
And Thou didst come
To take me home
Within Thy Heart to be.

He isn't saying that God's gifts of peace, truth, or love are unreliable. He's just saying that none of them are lasting in an experiential way – not in this life, with its constant stream of challenging circumstances.

But God's presence is the one sure and lasting gift and answer to prayer. And it is the most important of them all. God himself.

As Thomas a Kempis says in *The Imitation of Christ*

A wise lover values not so much the gift of the lover as the love of the giver.

Realizing that God himself is the greatest gift of all, Julian of Norwich prays,

God, of your goodness, give me yourself; you are enough for me. . . . If I ask anything that is less, I shall always lack something, but in you alone I have everything.

Would you just pray that pray with me right now? Call back to mind the circumstances I had you think about as we began.

Now with that in mind, just close your eyes, put your gaze on God, and repeat this after me.

God, of your goodness, give me yourself;
you are enough for me.
If I ask anything that is less,
I shall always lack something,
but in you alone I have everything.

The more we live into the reality that God is our every-moment companion in the ordinary of life, the more we will experience the comfort of his presence when life gets difficult – which is another of the promises we find all through the psalms.

The Comfort of His Presence

Even in the darkest valley I will fear no evil, for you are with me. (23.4)
The Lord is close to the brokenhearted. (34.18)
God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. (46.1)
I will be with him in trouble. (91.15)
He stands at the right hand of the needy. (109.31)

Think of the comfort you receive when one of your closest friends is with you when you experience loss or confusion or grief or struggle, looking in their eyes and seeing compassion and care and love and tenderness looking back.

Walter Wangerin wrote a wonderful book called *The Book of the Dun Cow*. It's sort of a cross between *The Lord of the Rings* and *Watership Down* in which the Christ-figure is represented by a tan or dun-colored cow.

Chanticleer the Rooster has lost his sons in a battle against the evil dragon Wyrn. Sobbing, utterly devastated and broken, he collapses in tears and grief.

And then it was that the Dun Cow came to him. She put her soft nose against him, to nudge him into a more peaceful position. Gently she arranged his head so that he might clearly see her.

. . . Her eyes were liquid with compassion – deep, deep, as the earth is deep. Her brow knew his suffering and knew, besides that, worlds more. But the goodness was that, though this wide brow knew so much, yet it bent over his pain alone and creased with it.

Chanticleer watched his own desolation appear in the brown eyes of the Cow, then sink so deeply into them that // she shuddered. Her eyes pooled as she looked at him. The tears rose and spilled over. And then she was weeping even as he had wept a few minutes ago – except without the anger. Strangely, Chanticleer felt an urge to comfort her, but . . . the initiative was not in him.

A simple creature only, he watched – felt – the miracle take place. Nothing changed. The clouds would not be removed, nor his sons returned. . . . But there was this. His grief had become her grief, his sorrow her own. And through he grieved not one bit less for that, yet his heart made room for her, for her will and wisdom, and he bore the sorrow better. 125-126

As the psalmist says, “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted.” (34.18)

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All this business about the presence of God brings us to two opposite challenges. Two different “yes-buts” that may have come to your mind as we’ve been exploring this promise that God will always be with us.

The first problem is that *I do have a sense of his presence and wish I didn’t*.

Job 13.21

Remove your heavy hand from me,
and don’t terrify me with your awesome presence.

Here’s what I think might cause you to wish God wasn’t quite so near.

You look at God, and at your circumstances, through the guilt and shame that are the result of your sin and failure.

When we do that, God’s gaze seems harsh and scrutinizing, and our difficult circumstances feel like God’s punishment as he visits our guilt and shame back upon us.

But if we are followers of Christ, and we see God through our guilt and shame, and we see our difficult circumstances through the lens of God’s punishment for our sin and failure, then we are not taking Jesus at his word, and we are failing to take to heart what God has clearly communicated in his word.

Followers of Christ believe that Jesus took our place on the cross, and bore what we deserve. So now, the God who is near does not point his finger at us and say, “You failure,” like a parent who is forever disappointed with us, always quick to catch us in our failure and to point out where we’re not doing it right.

Jesus has *removed* our guilt and shame.

We need to hear Jesus say to us, definitively, with an exclamation point at the end:

I bore your sin. (1 Peter 2.24)

I washed away your guilt. (1 John 1.9)

I endured your shame. (Hebrews 12.2)

Now, according to Jesus, the only thing left standing between us and God is not our guilt and shame but is his *love* for us. This is what is on the lips of God as he draws near to us:

Isaiah 43.4

You are precious and honored in my sight and I love you.

God doesn’t *punish* us in our difficult circumstances, he *meets* us in our difficult circumstances.

That leads to the second problem. The first problem is I do have a sense of God’s presence and wish I didn’t. The second problem is *I don’t have a sense of his presence and wish I did*.

Psalms 22.1-2

My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?
Why are you so far away?

This is a problem connected to the narrow range of our senses when it comes to spiritual things and the unreliability of our feelings as truth tellers.

When God created us he did not give us the physical senses that allow us to see him. The problem isn’t that God is not there. The problem is that we can’t see him beside us.

As Job says in Job 9.11

When he comes near, I cannot see him.
When he moves by, I do not see him go.

We also have a problem with our feelings, which, while important, can never be trusted to tell us what is true, not on this side of the fall. And the worse our circumstances, the less we can rely on our feelings to tell us what is true about spiritual realities.

The piece of advice that CS Lewis repeated more often than any other in his letters of spiritual encouragement is that, when it comes to the things of God, we just can't trust our feelings. As one example, he wrote:

The great thing to remember is that, though our feelings come and go, His love for us does not.

So if we can't trust our senses and our feelings as finite and fallen human beings, what can we trust? God's word. We need to learn to trust less what our senses are telling us, and what our feelings are telling us, and trust more what God has said to us in his word, such as these affirmations we read earlier.

The Certainty of His Presence

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You are with me. (23:4)

The Lord Almighty is with us. (46.11)

I am always with you. (73:23)

The Lord is with me. (118:6)

I really want to encourage you to pick one of these that speaks to you and commit it to memory. You might even want to pull out your phone and grab a screen shot of this and go back and spend some time with it. Because that – not what your eyes tell you, not what your heart tells you – that is what is true.

Prayer Practice

So how do we develop a deeper sense of God's presence with us?

Let me share with you a prayer practice that began even in the first few hundred years of the life of the church. The desert fathers in Egypt in the 300s called them "arrow prayers."

An arrow prayer is a brief phrase, almost always straight from scripture, that is repeated throughout the day, like shooting arrows toward the heavens. The earliest of them is the one known as the Jesus prayer. It's the words of Bartimaeus to Jesus in Mark 10.47:

Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!

Or the shortened versioned, "Lord, have mercy." *Kyrie eleison*.

Over the next ten centuries the idea of the arrow prayer developed into what came to be called a "breath prayer," where the prayer was divided in half and part of it was prayed

as you breathed in, the other part as you breathed out, allowing your prayer to be as much a part of your daily life as your breathing.

Here are some other examples, in addition to the Jesus prayer:

The Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need. (Psalm 23)
 Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths. (Psalm 25)
 I love you Lord Jesus. (my five-finger prayer)
 Lord, here I am. (Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*)
 Your will be done. (MaryKate Morse, *The Guidebook to Prayer*)
 Abba, I belong to you. (Brennan Manning)
 Jesus, you are with me. (Christine Li Suh, "Practicing Abundance in an Age of Anxiety")
 Holy Spirit, fill me. (Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast*)
 Let me be nothing, and Christ be all in all. (John Wesley)

Madame Guyon taught about this kind of breath prayer in her little book *Experiencing the Depths of Jesus Christ*. In it she writes:

In the beginning, you [a]re led into His presence by [this] prayer; but . . . as prayer continues, the prayer actually becomes His presence. In fact, we can no longer say that it is prayer that continues. It is actually His presence that continues with you. . . . You begin to discover that God is more intimately present to you than you are to yourself, and a great awareness of the Lord begins to come to you. 67

One of my favorite moments in *The House at Pooh Corner* is this one:

Piglet sidled up to Pooh from behind.
 "Pooh," he whispered.
 "Yes, Piglet?"
 "Nothing," said Piglet, taking Pooh's paw. "I just wanted to be sure of you."

Arrow prayers, breath prayers, are a way for us to sidle up next to our Holy Companion and whisper his name and take him by the hand in order to be sure of him.

There are so many times when we are tempted to believe we are alone. But we have a heavenly companion who insists that he will go with us, even when we go our own way. Kind of like Sam with Frodo in *The Fellowship of the Rings*.



Frodo: (paddling away from shore) "I'm going to Mordor alone, Sam."

Sam: (wading out into the river) "Of course you are. And I'm going with you."

Psalm 16.8-9 NLT

I know the Lord is always with me.

I will not be shaken, for he is right beside me.

No wonder my heart is glad, and I rejoice.

Communion

On the last night Jesus spent with his disciples he instituted a special holy meal that he intended for his followers to share in the ages to come. We sometimes call that meal "communion" as a way of reminding us that when we share in this meal, there is a unique way in which we are blessed to experience the presence of the Risen Lord

God promises his presence to those who are his. This is a meal for those who are his. So as we come to this table, we do so in his presence.

As we take this meal, I encourage you to use the time to enjoy God's presence: as you take the bread, resting in his presence now as the risen Lord is in our midst, and as you take the cup, being encouraged by the promise and joy of his presence with us forever.

I am present with you now

Whenever two or three of you come together in my name,
I am there with you. (Matthew 18.20)

I will be present with you always

Surely I am with you always,
to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28.20)