

Spirit of Hope

Mount Hope Lutheran Church

Preschool and Childcare

May 20, 2020

There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. John 15:13 NLT

Memorial Day is one week from today, as I am writing this weekly column on May 18th. It is hard to believe that we have been “locked down” for nine weeks. Time waits for no one and we are rapidly approaching the conclusion of the school year and summer. Yes, some of the restrictions of the coronavirus pandemic are easing, but this will still be a much different summer than we are accustomed to.

As mentioned last week, we are preparing for a return to worship services at Mount Hope, but not sure when that might occur. The governor did not renew the shelter-in-place order that expires today and also allowed for most businesses to open with proper distancing guidelines enforced. Churches and faith communities were seemingly not addressed, other than stating that we can continue to gather in groups of 10 or less, which has been the case all along. Our district office is working with other faith groups in discussion with the governor to gain an understanding as to why and to hopefully allow us to open with the same guidelines as businesses. Keep an eye out for updates.

We know that many are becoming frustrated with what may feel like an encroachment on our freedoms. Some are engaging in a political battle. Our desire as a faith community built on the solid foundation of Jesus and His love is to love as He loves. How can we best love our neighbors in the midst of this pandemic? I pray that we are continually thinking about how we can be a church *Where guests become friends and friends become family!*

Please continue to pray for Mount Hope, our country, the leadership, those on the frontlines battling during this pandemic and our world; COVID-19 will be conquered! We are praying for the day we will be able to worship together again.

Serving together,
Pastor Fran Green

Message

The following is part of a recording done a few years ago in which I was being asked questions about the presence of God. I thought I would share part of the discussion here in hope that it will offer you Hope worth pondering:

“So, Is God Present?”

Yes! Of course, I would say that He is present; however, I believe that most in our country would probably say the same thing. I believe that most people would say they believe in the presence of God. How would that be described and understood? My guess and observations are that many people believe that God is present much like a distant hidden camera or perhaps our government; distant, out there, somewhere keeping an eye on things to judge it all in the end, someday.

God is certainly present everywhere and at all times, but His presence is so much more than that. I believe and our Scriptures teach that God is near and that He can be known deeply and intimately. Most people are familiar with Jesus’ words in *John 3:16*, “*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.*” And continuing into the next verse Jesus said that God sent His son into the world to save it, not condemn.

God is not distant; He loves so much that He sent His Son! Again, I’d say most believe that Jesus did walk the earth. In fact, it is nearly impossible to claim otherwise because the facts are overwhelming; Jesus, Son of Joseph and Mary walked the earth. That’s of course, what we celebrate at Christmas each year. God sent His Son into the world to save it. But, much like the thinking of a distant God, I believe that we do the same with Jesus. We celebrate His birth and a short time after that His death and resurrection and we are actually losing the meaning in both of these seasons, but then we keep Him distant, out there somewhere when He is actually present and can be known.

“It does appear to be easy to show that Jesus was present, but how is He present now?”

It is very interesting if we look to the Scripture passage that precedes Jesus' famous words in *John 3:16*. Nicodemus, who was a religious leader of the Jews, came to Jesus and was basically asking Him, 'who are you?' because they knew that Jesus' power had to come from the presence of God. He proceeds to tell Nicodemus the way a person can receive Jesus' presence, to believe in Him and to ultimately inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him that God's Holy Spirit creates faith or belief and trust; baptism is part of this act of new creation and miracle of people being born anew. The Apostle Paul calls all this the great mystery of God. All who believe in the Lord Jesus receive God's Holy Spirit, God's presence within them. *1 Corinthians 6:19* says, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?" This is truly incredible isn't it?

"Can we truly experience the presence of God in our lives?"

Yes! Later in the book of *John* from which I've been quoting, Jesus is telling His disciples that he will soon be taken away and going through with the plan and purpose for which He came. Jesus frequently told the disciples that He was the one spoken of in the Old Testament, who would come from God to save the world. The Messiah. He told them that He must die to pay the price for people's sins and that He would restore the broken relationship between sinful people and God the Father. Even though, He said that God would raise Him from the dead they were greatly saddened and couldn't imagine Jesus leaving them.

For much of chapters 14-16 in *John* Jesus talks about the helper, counselor, guide whom He will send after He returns to the Father, one who will be with them always, to teach and lead them. We hear in chapter 17 and in the book of *Acts*, as well as other places that this same Holy Spirit is for all who believe in Jesus, not just the disciples. This is how God is present.

One of the greatest experiences that we receive from this Holy Spirit is peace. Jesus stated in *John 14:27*, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you, I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." Now that is indescribable peace and joy.

We also experience God's presence through prayer and reading the Scriptures. The Scriptures claim to be alive and active, to be able to show us our sins, guide us in life. The Scriptures show us who God is and who we are. We certainly experience the presence of God through the Holy Scriptures as well.

Community and the church are powerful manifestations of God's presence. We find in the Scriptures that God's Spirit has uniquely created people to fit together like a human body where we need each other to build each other up, for this earthly journey.

We also believe that the Lord is present through the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion/Lord's Supper. We do not try to explain this, we accept this truth by faith because Jesus said for example, "This is my body." Yes, the Lord is truly present.

What do you say to those who struggle with this whole idea? It seems difficult to prove God's presence doesn't it?

I suppose that depends on how one defines "prove". I believe that there is proof of God's presence everywhere, but that is of course because I believe what the Scriptures say. God created everything, from the simplest organism to the most complex such as people. Further, I honestly do not believe one can explain love and sacrifice without God. I do not believe that people are capable of loving others without His presence within. We are too selfish.

Ultimately, I believe there are different ways of knowing. We can know things about the world through our senses. These seem to be the things all people can accept because we are able to study and prove them.

I believe that God's Presence, His Holy Spirit works through faith proving He is with us. Faith is a way of knowing and we know God works through faith. It is like an attempt at explaining love. It can be rather difficult, but that doesn't mean it is not real, we experience it, just as we experience God's presence. Nearly all of Jesus' closest followers went to their deaths completely convinced, and most because they would not deny the truth of all of what I have just stated. All through history and even today many are just as deeply convicted of the fact that God is present in their very being and they take this to their earthly deaths. It is only because of God's presence.

This all does make sense; I could see some struggling with this.

Many times, when I'm thinking about or talking about God's presence, I like to consider Elijah, one of God's greatest prophets. So many will agree and say yes, God's still small voice referring to a time when God came to him through a gentle whisper. I would like to share a little bit more of Elijah's story.

We read in *1 Kings* chapter 18 of a great contest orchestrated by Elijah. Some will remember this famous story. King Ahab and the Queen Jezebel were evil. In fact, *1 Kings 16:30* states that *“Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him.”* Elijah told Ahab to assemble the people and the prophets of Baal, one of the false gods of Jezebel, to meet him on Mount Carmel. There he proposed a contest. Elijah proposed to Ahab that both he and the other prophets would create an altar of sacrifice using a bull and that each would call to their god and the one who answers by fire He is truly God.

Well, Ahab liked this idea and so they went ahead with it the prophets of Baal going first. They called and called to Baal, but no answer, Elijah even taunted them saying to call louder because he might be sleeping, on and on it went.

Finally, it was Elijah’s turn. *He built an altar, dug a trench around it, placed the bull on it, and then had water, four large jars, poured over the entire thing filling up the trench. Three times they poured this water all over. Elijah prayed to the Lord God, “O Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known today that you are God.”*

Fire fell and burned up everything, bull, wood, rocks, and water. The people witnessed the presence of the Lord and fell prostrate and cried, The Lord He is God, The Lord, He is God!! Can you imagine the scene? What an expression of the Lord’s presence. I wonder what Elijah would say or add to a discussion on the presence of God after a demonstration such as this?

Let’s consider now what follows. Could I read a few verses of Scripture? *1 Kings 19,*

Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. So, Jezebel sent a message to Elijah to say, “May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.” Elijah was afraid and ran for his life.

He was afraid! He becomes so afraid that he asks God to take his life as he is hiding out!

What happened? What about the presence of God? This story truly gets me; it makes me think.

So, we pick up the reading again, *'What are you doing here, Elijah?'* God asks.

"I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." The Lord God said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by."

Now we read that God is not in the wind or the earthquake, but in the gentle whisper. God shows his presence to Elijah and tells him to go back the way he came. Go back, I am with you!

I believe there is so much to learn from Elijah. He clearly had a mountain top experience with God. He had no doubt God was present and with him, how could he not? Certainly, Elijah was not able to pull off that entire prophets of Baal deal without God. And yet how quickly he was overcome by fear. Fear is our enemy when it comes to our faith life. Hundreds of times in the Scriptures we hear, Do Not Fear. Fear causes us to take our eyes off God. We can come to believe that He is no longer present.

So, you're saying that God did not leave Elijah, but that was his perception?

Sure, and just as He reminded Elijah of His presence, I believe He is reminding us today that He will never leave us or forsake us. So many of us are afraid. I believe God is asking us too, *'What are you doing here?!'* Many are caught in addictions, hiding in fear, *'What are you doing here?'* Some are hiding in front of the TV or computer living in a world of make believe, *'What are you doing here?'* Some are living in fear in abusive relationships, *'What are you doing here?'* The list goes on and on; *'What are you doing here? Why are you so afraid?'* God is present, be not afraid.

Jesus promised and prayed for His followers, people even today in *John 17*, *"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray for those who will believe in me through their (the apostles) message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me...May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."*

Announcements

Memorial Day Service

Mount Hope is preparing a patriotic salute to our military men and women. We would love to include your picture and the pictures of your family who have served in the military. Please email them to Christina (cbrantner@mthopelutheran.org) by Friday, May 22.

We will include any pictures we receive in our worship service on Sunday, May 24th. You could also mail them to the church this week. We will return your pictures the very next week by mail or hold them safely until our return to church.

Financial Update

God is good. He continues to bless the ministry of Mount Hope. Thank you for your continued financial support for His ministry. After making some adjustments of expenses, we have been able to keep current with payroll and everyday bills. Hopefully, we will be able to worship together soon. Please continue with your financial giving. Thank you again for your support.

Bob Tolzin
President, Mount Hope

Sunday Worship Schedule

Services online during COVID19 shutdown

8:15am Traditional Worship Service

9:30am Connecting Hour

Bible Study / Sunday School

10:45am Praise Worship Service

Phone: 952-888-5059

E-mail: church@mthopelutheran.org

Website: www.mthopelutheran.org

Mount Hope's Staff

Fran Green

Pastor

Candy Frein

Administrative Assistant

Christina Brantner

Music Director

Kathy Sundseth

Custodian

Kim Wuebke

Preschool and Childcare Director

Administrative Assistant

Steve Sundseth

Custodian

Sam Killam

Custodian

Mount Hope Lutheran Church
3601 W Old Shakopee Rd
Bloomington, MN 55431

Address Service Requested

