

Reeks: Geloofsgewoontes wat Lewe gee...

Titel: ... *Practicing the Presence*

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Happy Spring Day to all of you, and especially to those of you who support the Blue Bulls, I hope it's a good day. Really good to be with you as we continue our series this morning on life giving practices. Johan began last Sunday, and I continue today. If you have a bulletin, I hope you got one as you entered into the auditorium, and if you pull out the leaflet you will find a reading that I use. I'll be using a number of other Scriptures as well. You may want to make a few notes if there's something that you feel that God is giving you or sharing with you today. It's sometimes helpful just to make a note of it so that you can go back to it and think about it a little bit more.

Our reading is from Acts chapter 17. You'll see the reading on the left hand side, and I'm going to read it to you from verse 24 to 28, wonderful, wonderful. It's a part of a sermon that Paul preaches to people who were really seeking God, and this is what Paul said to them on that day: the God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands, and God is not served by human hands, as if He needed anything. Rather, God Himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man He made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth, and He marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from any one of us, from any one of us, for in Him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets say, we are God's... we are God's offspring.

So we thank God for that part of Paul's sermon today and we pray the God will speak to us today through it, each one. I want to begin, friends, with just one of my favourite stories. Several, several, several years ago when electricity, and I read about this, when electricity first came to the northern parts of the UK there were lots of framers who were farming in that area, and they responded to the availability of electricity in different ways. There were some farmers who were over the moon. They just couldn't get over the availability of such an incredible power resource and they had no problems at all. They put up power lines on their properties and they were able to access the available electricity that was available to them.

There were, on the other hand, some farmers who wanted nothing to do with it, that even though, even though electricity was freely available, even though this incredible power resource was available to them they wanted... they preferred their kerosene lamps, their lamps, their lanterns, their candles, their matches. Some of them evidently, I read, did not even want power lines on their property at all, but what I found really delightful was the response of a... evidently an elderly woman who lived on her own her property, and she said to her people, you know, she said electricity is wonderful, it's wonderful. When it gets dark I switch on the lights to find my matches to light my candles, and then I switch the lights off again.

I'm not too sure why I like that story so much, but I think it's a story that reminds us of deep, deep convictions about our faith. It's a story that reminds us, does this make sense, and I'm going to speak a little bit crudely at the moment, it reminds us that the electricity of God's presence, the electricity of God's presence is all around us, it's all around us. Paul puts it beautifully, and the psalm will... the verse will come up, when he writes to the people, when he says to the folk, he says, in God, in God we live and move and have our being, in God we live and move and have our being.

You know, sometimes we think... we speak about God living in us. I much prefer to put it the other way around, that you and I and this whole universe, we live and we move and we have our being in God, huh, whether we like it or not, that this world... that this world is permeated, it's infiltrated, it's bathed in God's... in God's presence, and the astonishing, wonderful good news of Jesus, do you remember the good news of Jesus, when He started His ministry He said the Kingdom of heaven is available to every one of us, it's right at hand, huh, that through the life and through the death and through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God had made his presence available to every human being and to any human being.

It's available, it's available, but that story, why I like it, is because it reminds us of something else. Even though God is present, even though the electricity of God's presence, as it were, surrounds, us we can be disconnected. Does that make sense? We can be disconnected from God's presence, and that is why Paul, in that very same



sermon, and you can look at that sentence, he says we need to reach out, we need to seek Him, even though God is near, so it's not automatic. It's not automatic. Being with God is a two way street. God is with us. We need to be with God. We need to be connected. The power lines need to be up.

That's why Jesus said, the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. It's really at hand, but repent, turn around, believe this good news, but that story also reminds us, reminds us of something else. It reminds us that when we are connected, when we have the power lines up, the lights go on. The lights go on. The lights go on. That when we are connected God begins to work in us, that when we are connected God begins to work with us, that when we are connected God begins to work through us, when we are connected, when we are connected to the electricity of God's presence.

I know that in a group this large I'm deeply aware, and I want to put this upfront, I'm deeply, deeply aware that there are many folk here who are in very dark places today, very dark places, caused maybe by relationship pain and struggle, caused maybe just by a terrible loneliness, but business upheaval, by things going skew, by deals not coming through, by moods of depression, despair, maybe folk just on the edge of wanting to take their own life maybe. I'm aware of that, I really, really am, but what I want to say is this; that when we are connected the lights go on. There's a sense in which we begin to know that we're not alone, and that whatever we are in, that with God, in God, through God we can, we can, we can overcome.

That's what that story reminds us of, so will you hold those three deep convictions in your mind this morning? We live and we move and we have our being in God. The electricity of God's presence is all around us. God is available, accessible to every human being, to you, to me, but we can be disconnected, the power lines can be down, but when we are connected, when we are connected, and that connection happens in Jesus Christ, when we are connected lights go on, they go on, and the darkness has never been able to put that light out.

Now, what I'm going to do against that background today is, and I'm going to enjoy this, I know, because it's very close to my heart, I want to give you a simple practice, a simple, simple practice that you can put into practice when you leave this auditorium straight after... straight after the service you can put it into practice, very simple. It's a practice that comes from the Scriptures. It's a practice that people who have followed Jesus have practiced throughout the years, for centuries. The evidence for this practice and what it does in people's lives is immense. I could refer you to numbers of books where men and women have practiced this and have written up their life as a result.

It's a practice that I find fundamental to my own life as a follower of Christ. It's a practice that helps us, what did we sing, to travel through life with a deep consciousness of God, and it's a practice called practicing the presence of God, practicing the presence of God, and it comes from a guy who lived a few centuries ago, his name was Brother Lawrence, a lovely guy evidently, I would have liked to have met him. He used to work in the kitchen, pots and pans. He called himself the lord of pots and pans.

He was... he lived in a monastery and so he had a very menial job washing dishes, cleaning floors, cooking, and it was within the context of his life in this kitchen that he found a simple way of practicing the presence of God in... just in the mundaneness of life, and he wrote a little book that's become a classic, and Christians around the world love it, from all backgrounds, and it's simply called Practicing the Presence of God, Practicing the Presence of God, and what I want to do, very simply, take a few minutes, is I just want to share with you, it's just a few ingredients of this practice, and it's like building a new habit in our lives.

The Christian life is about new habits, habits of heart, habits of mind, habits of body, and this is... it's simple, it's difficult, but the first ingredient is this, is that we can practice the presence of God when we... does this make sense, not if it does, do this, if it doesn't, and then I know whether... where to go. We practice the presence of God when we turn our minds regularly towards God, towards Christ, with faith and with expectation throughout the day. The psalmist, I love this verse, it's one of my favourites, it should go up, it's Psalm 16:8, the psalmist writes these words. He says I will set... I will set the Lord before me. I will set the Lord... and because God is at my right hand I won't be shaken.

Now, the psalmist has to do that. There's nothing automatic about this. It doesn't just drop from heaven. It doesn't just drop from heaven. God is not going to run over our lives. God is not going to gatecrash our lives, even though God is all around us. God is not going to jump down our throats. We practice God's presence as we turn our hearts and our minds regularly towards God, towards Christ, throughout the day. It starts, I think, when we wake



up. I don't know about you, but waking up is a difficult moment, huh, it's not an easy moment. I think almost our whole day depends on that waking up moment.

When we wake up, have you noticed this, I don't know about you, but it's like I get hit by my feelings, whatever my feelings are. If I'm a bit anxious they hit me in the morning, first thing. If I'm a bit fearful they hit me, and if I'm a bit down they hit me in the morning, and it's very easy to be overwhelmed by these feelings, and so I find even before I get out of bed I need to practice the presence of God .

I have a dear friend, he's a philosopher. I often speak about him. His name is Dallas Willard. He was asked just the other day... I saw an interview with him. He was asked the other day, what do you do when you wake up, Dallas? He said this: I wake up. I wake up. I acknowledge the Trinity. I receive the day. What a way to start your day, waking up, acknowledging the Trinity, receiving the day as a gift, and then through the day, through the day, through the whole day just... not thinking about God all the time, but just now and then, turning my heart and my mind towards God in the midst of my life, that when I go into a new situation, God, I invite you into this.

When I send an email, I find that, for me, a very important moment of just, God, I call you into this moment, I invite you into this moment. When I get into the car and when you move to another appointment, God, it's a... just a moment of turning your heart and your mind to God's presence. Now, it's not easy, and there may be days when you suddenly think, hey, I haven't even done it at all, and so sometimes I find it quite helpful to have little things that help me, a screensaver on my computer that just maybe reminds me of God's presence, a symbol on my desk, a cross in my pocket.

Every second Thursday night, Debbie, the woman I'm married to, meet... we meet with eight... 14 30 year olds, and it has been a wonderful experience for us just of learning, but there's a young guy in that group, his name is Grant, he's a financial director. He still lives in Benoni but he travels across to Sandton where he works each day, and what he's done, and he was just telling me about this last Thursday, in his office he has an empty chair. He's put an empty chair there. He says to me it's Jesus' chair, so through the day he just glances to this empty chair, and it's like a reminder for him that he lives and moves and has his being in God, of the availability, the accessibility, the nearness of God.

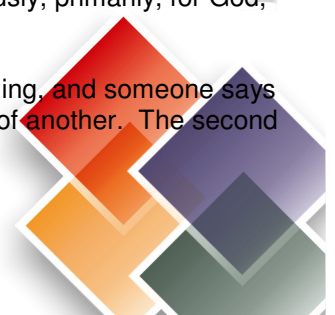
It's something simple, but he's practicing the presence of God. He's beginning to learn to live with God, and as soon as you start consciously living with God things begin to happen that otherwise would not have happened. The lights go on. Things begin to take place. I begin to do things that I could never have done without God. That's the ingredient that is so...

Can I share with you another ingredient? It's the... of just practicing... I practice the presence of God, and here I don't know what English word to use, by willing God's presence into the lives of people around about me. I like the idea [?], I think it's in Luke 10:5, I think, where Jesus says to his disciples, he says to them, when you go into a house, send my peace into that place, say peace be with you, and Jesus Himself used to do this. Do you remember? He would often say to people, My peace, I give it you, My joy I give to you, and I'm learning, and it's been a slow learning, that in almost every encounter that I have with people, inwardly I can ask Jesus to send the joy and the peace that He's given me into the lives of other people.

I don't know about you, but I meet... I meet troubled people every day of my life. Sometimes I'm also troubled, and I'm just learning in relationships to send the peace and the joy of Christ into people. I don't have to say anything. I don't have to get religious. I don't know about you, sometimes I go into very hostile meetings, difficult meetings, antagonistic meetings, just that in this meeting, Jesus, send your peace into it, send your joy into it, so I use every encounter to practice the presence of God, to practice the presence of God.

I want to share one other little ingredient of this practice that I find helpful, that anything I do I'm learning to do for Christ. I do it for Him. I do it for Him. Paul writes, Colossians 3, this is a text you must memorise, stick it on your fridge, put it on your computer, Colossians 3:17: whatever we do in word and deed, do in the name of Jesus, do on behalf of Jesus, do with Jesus, do for Jesus, giving thanks to God. Whatever you... I don't know what you do. You sell life insurance, you fix cars, well, if you... no, you... only folk in Benoni fix cars, you do training, you consult, you do operations, you teach, you lecture, whatever you do, whatever you do, do consciously, primarily, for God, for God. I do it for Christ.

There's an ancient story, it's a lovely story, of three stone masons who are building a building, and someone says to them, what are you doing, and the one guys says, ag, I'm just putting one stone on top of another. The second



one says, well, I'm putting one stone on top of another to earn some money for myself and my family. The third guy says, I'm putting one stone on another stone to build a place where God's presence can be worshipped, I'm building a cathedral, and I think we all have those approaches to life. I'm just doing this mechanically. I'm just putting one stone on top of another, or maybe I just work just to earn some money for myself and for my kids, or maybe I can work for God, so that God's presence can be made manifest in this world.

Christ, I'm doing this for You. I'm selling this life insurance primarily for You, for Your presence, for Your blessing to come into this person's life. I'm consulting, Lord, ultimately for you. I'm being a doctor, Lord, ultimately for You. I'm doing legal work ultimately, Lord, or You, that Your presence, Your care, Your love may be made manifest in this world. I'm doing it for You, and as I do things for God, God's presence becomes real in my life. I don't only... God doesn't only live with me; I start living with God.

Has this been helpful? Practicing the presence of God, huh, turning my mind, my heart towards Christ throughout the day, huh, willing the peace and the joy of Christ into the lives of people who I meet during the day, who I pass by, doing everything, doing everything I do for Christ. Whatever you do, that leaves nothing else, whatever you do, do for Him, do for Him.

I end with a true story. A friend of mine is a pastor, and he loves a person who lived many years ago. Her name was Julian of Norwich, I think it was, and Julian, she was a person who followed Christ, she had many revelations that God gave her. I read a book of her revelations. I found some of them off the wall, but there was one beautiful revelation that she had. It was all about a hazelnut, a hazelnut, and she had a vision of a hazelnut, and as she had that vision it was like God saying to her, Julian, I created that hazelnut. I hold that hazelnut together, and I love it, and that hazelnut represents you and it represents this whole world. I've created it, I hold it, and I love it, and my friend knows that story, and in his congregation there was a man who was dying of cancer, but dying with a lot of pain, and in spite of all the medication, the deterioration of his body, of his functions, he just lived with incredible pain.

God seemed a million miles away for him, and my friend gave him a hazelnut and just said to him, I just want you to hold this hazelnut and I wanted to remind you of God's presence, that God has created you, that God holds your life, holds your life, and that God loves you with a love that will never let you go, and my friend said that when his friend died his family found him, he died through the evening, his family found him in the morning, and his hands were closed, and when they opened his hand they found a broken hazelnut that he had obviously held onto with everything he had, that, as he moved towards death he practiced the presence of God, that he was created by God, that he was held by God, and that he was loved by God.

I asked the team to get some hazelnuts, and so, when you walk out of the theatre today there will be big baskets of hazelnuts, and I want to... I don't know what you're going through. I want to invite you, if you want to, to just take a hazelnut today. Just take a hazelnut, remember Julian who said it's a reminder that God has created us, that God holds us, and that God loves us with a love that will never, ever let us go, and maybe some of us, during this week as we face things that are very difficult, maybe that little hazelnut will remind you of the living presence of God that is with us. Let's pray together.

God, we live and we move and we have our being in You, and sometimes, God, we are so disconnected from You. We want to put our power lines up today. We thank You for Jesus Christ who connects us profoundly to Your presence. We thank You, Lord, that when we're connected we... the lights go on, and the darkness has never put those lights out. Lord, we want to learn how to live with You through the day, so it's not just like thinking of You on Sunday, and then we come to the next Sunday and realise that we haven't even thought of You during this week, let alone lived with You.

We want to learn, Lord. We want to learn to live with You, that we may begin to know the electricity of Your presence in our lives, that the lights may go on, that with You, in You, through You, we may begin to accomplish those things that we can never accomplish without You, so come, Lord. May today be for someone here today the beginning of new beginnings; of a real walk with You, oh God. This is the prayer. We offer it to You, oh God, with all the love and with all the longing of our hearts, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, and we say together as God's people, amen, amen.

Friends, may the presence of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with you. Thank you. I need it as well. God bless, friends. Have a great day. Take care, hey. God bless.

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