

Hungry for God's Presence

When I started going to Lindley U. M. Church as a kid, the Pastor – Jerry Crossley – used magic in children's sermons and occasionally put on a show. I loved it. Somehow it communicated to me a sense of the excitement and wonder of being Christian. Not that I thought "magic" was real or was mystified – I just loved the spirit Jerry brought to the message.

A while back I saw a program about research that involved putting on magic shows for babies. Now it wasn't "pull a rabbit out of a hat" magic - it involved giving the appearance that physical laws like gravity were being violated. They put a small block on top of a large block, and then a disembodied hand came out from behind a curtain and pushed the small block off the large one. Well, we all know the small block should fall, but they rigged it so the block stayed suspended in midair after being pushed off – just like magic!

How did babies react? The youngest ones - a few months - just look bored and unimpressed. They weren't aware of the law of gravity yet, so it didn't seem magical to them. They easily accepted the notion that the world could work that way.

But babies just a few months older had a much wider range of reactions. They'd learned more about how the world works. Some smiled and look pleasantly surprised - the trick gave them a bit of joy. For others, the contradictions between what they saw and their experience bothered them so much that they cried. It upset them because it shook their view of the world. Other babies just looked confused and bewildered.

Those are the very much like the reactions we have when God pulls a switch on us! Depending on our maturity as Christians we react to that kind of change in different ways. Let's look at some of our reactions when God changes things; when God makes things new:

The first is, **1. We Get Upset and Hold onto the Familiar** - We like things to go the way they always have; we like things to be predictable. The Bible, over and over shows God likes to change things. God doesn't leave things alone. People start to think they've got God figured out and know how it all works and understand how God does things, and God says, "I'm bigger than that." It's not that God changes – God's the same forever – it's that God's ways aren't our ways, God's plan goes beyond our understanding; it's ongoing; developing; moving toward a goal.

Romans 12:2 says, *"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be **transformed** by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."* We like the pattern of life – we like life to be predictable. But we can't understand God's will if we stick to the pattern of life – only if we allow ourselves to be transformed and renewed.

God knows we get complacent if things get predictable. When we're satisfied with things the way they are, we lose the zeal God wants and that's when God changes everything – when God pulls the rabbit out of the hat!

We seldom see it coming – we expect things to happen as they have. We react like some of the babies – we're upset or confused. We like things to go the way we've experienced them. God knows what's coming, but for us it seems to come out of nowhere! We miss what God's doing because we look at where God was rather than where God's going!

That's what Jesus talking about in Matthew 13:15, *"For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them."*

Now it's easy for us to see how that applies to the people back then. The people didn't recognize what God was doing in Jesus and in his followers – even believers in Paul's time had trouble seeing it! There was a big debate in the church right at the beginning – It's in Acts Chapter 15. They expected to be able to hold on to the experiences and traditions that had been so meaningful to them. After all, those traditions came from God! The Council at Jerusalem decided that it was wrong to stick with tradition – that you have to go with what God is doing now, not with what God did at one time.

Most of us have no trouble with the decision to change tradition at the Council at Jerusalem and not require that we follow all Jewish customs. It's harder to accept changes in tradition when it applies to ones we like! People like to have God in the neat package of their religious experience.

I know when I have experiences that are meaningful to me I want to hang onto them and duplicate them. Every now and then when worship works really well I want to just hang onto it and do it exactly that way again and again. I want to hang onto that feeling! I want to use that song over and over again! I start to depend on those power-moments – like Christmas when I can relive wonderful experiences of childhood. The problem isn't those experiences... it's that I become dependent on them.

When we do that we're focusing on where God has been, not on where God is going. Is it strange then that we're taken off guard then when God reveals a mystery?

Not only do we hang onto the old, **2. We Get Resistant and Avoid Innovation.** We come to think that what we have is enough... we're satisfied. We're not hungry for anything new. There's nothing quite so dangerous as being satisfied with where we are in our faith! We need a hunger to grow in maturity – no matter where we are or how young or old we are. Hebrews 5:12-14 talks to people who have stopped growing. It says, "...you need someone to teach you again the basic things about God's word. You are like babies who need milk and cannot eat solid food. For someone who lives on milk is still an infant and doesn't know how to do what is right. Solid food is for those who are mature..." When we're satisfied with what we have – that means we're still infants in the faith - no matter our age or knowledge.

My experience is, people who are the hungriest for God are the ones who've experienced the most of God! If I'm not hungry for more, I probably don't have much in the first place!

God wants to delight us with more wonders but we're nervous about that, like the early Jewish believers were anxious about all those new gentile believers and the wonders God was doing through them! We like the wonders we have.

We pray for revival, but we want a nice, safe, comfortable revival. What about when revival gets out of hand? What if God takes over and we're not in control of how the worship service goes? What about if God decides one day that worship isn't going to end at 11:30 or even at noon or at 2:00? What if God brings people to worship who experience God's presence and expect that some new thing that's happening is the way things should be and will be in the future?

My friend Larry was the pastor of a church that decided to have an outreach campaign linked to a revival. People were all for it – they'd had revivals before and thought they knew what to expect. Revivals were, in their experience, fun weeks when everyone had a great time, did a lot of singing and a lot of eating and listened to some interesting speakers. It was a fun, safe experience. Well, it didn't turn out that way!

They got a team that was recommended to them to lead the revival. The team wasn't from that church and they didn't know that the revival was supposed to be like revivals the church had in the past. They had this strange idea that God was supposed to show up and do something and that people's lives and the church itself were supposed to be changed!

Well, guess what? God showed up! It was an amazing week. Larry told me that the first night seemed fine – not that big a deal, except there were more people than usual – the leadership team they'd brought in had them do a lot more advanced publicity and a lot more advanced praying than they usually did. In addition, there was also a higher level of excitement. But it wasn't extreme or anything.

From there, though, it took off and soon was completely out of control. Many of those who came who weren't from the church actually believed the team when they told them that God was doing something amazing and that their lives would be changed. They didn't know better; didn't realize the revival was supposed to be a safe, comfortable, familiar experience; didn't know that they were supposed to maintain a certain level of decorum and civility.

The services got very exciting.

The end result of the revival was a lot of people – including some of the regular members of the church – who had experienced the presence of God and had been changed. Well, guess what? They assumed and expected that church would continue to be life changing and people would continue to experience the presence of God in worship and in activities. They expected that they'd continue to "have access to God in boldness and confidence" as Paul put it in Ephesians 3:12.

Well, some regular members didn't like it at all. Larry had an incredible amount of trouble due to that revival. People complained. Many long-time members ended up leaving – they didn't like the new attitude or

people messing up their church. Worship wasn't comfortable anymore. This new thing went beyond their comfort zone. The church changed... and became a powerful presence in the community – a bold, effective, transforming presence. They were on fire!

It is easy to tell when something is on fire, isn't it? It ignites other material nearby. A fire that doesn't spread eventually goes out. A church without true revival – a church that doesn't fulfill the promise – is a contradiction in terms, just as a fire that doesn't burn is a contradiction.

We need a hunger for that fire, for the presence of God... and we have to hunger for it now – it's not enough to be satisfied with memories of spiritual meals we've had before!

There was a very popular photograph of John F. Kennedy, Jr. as a young child playing underneath his father's desk when President Kennedy was in the Oval Office one day. The photo showed that John Jr. had access to the most powerful person in the United States in a way no one else did. He had access even the president's closest friends and advisors didn't have. Why did he have such intimate access when leaders of entire countries couldn't even get in the place? Because of some special power he had? Because of his abilities and strengths? Because of his wisdom and understanding? No! Because he was the president's child!

We're God's children. We have that intimate kind of access to God. We can approach God in a way that isn't granted to us by power, ability, wisdom, authority or influence. In fact things like that can keep us from seeking God's presence. The more advantages we think we have, the less we hunger for. Mary said in Luke 1:53 that the prophecy would be fulfilled in Jesus that God *"has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty."* The more we think we have, the less we are willing to reach for.

I'm sorry if this convicts or offends you, but let me say this straight out: it's Biblical and basic to the Christian faith that if you are truly experiencing God's presence in your life you'll want to be in the presence even more and you'll want to bring others to that presence and you'll be working to bring people to experience God's presence. If you're living on past experience or on other people's experience, you won't be doing those things.

If you haven't had that experience, I want you to know that God wants you to have that kind of access and that God is inviting you, here and now, into his presence.

A few years ago I heard a speaker talk about a moving incident that happened in a Christian camp where he once served. One of the campers was a boy who had spastic paralysis – he had difficulty moving without tremors shaking his body and could only speak in a broken, halting way. You'd think that at a Christian camp he'd experience acceptance, but instead, he was the object of constant ridicule. One night his cabin group chose him to speak during the devotions for the entire camp. It was just one more effort to have some "fun" at his expense. He was supposed to sum up the teachings of the day and the message that he had learned – a difficult task for the best speakers among the campers. Unashamedly he stood up, and in his strained, slurred voice - each word coming with enormous effort - he gave his testimony about God's love. In that halting, tortured message those young people encountered the truth of God and conviction fell on them. Many began to cry. Revival gripped the camp. The rest of that week was amazing! To this day, that speaker still meets people who are pastors or missionaries, who came to Christ that night because of that testimony.

Revival breaks out when God's love is shared. It doesn't depend on the abilities, talents or gifts of people or the polish of the presentation – it depends on wanting to be touched by God... being hungry for God's presence... being unwilling to settle for having a memorial service remembering where God has been or settle for going through the motions.

When God came to earth he committed himself fully – to the point of sacrificing himself for us! God won't go through the motions and he won't put up with it when do.

Let me tell you – God is willing to pull a rabbit out of the hat right here! God is ready! God knows what is coming and how it's going to get there. Don't expect things to happen the way they always have. The only question is, are you hungry enough? Will you be part of it, will you be where God is going or be satisfied with remembering where God was?

If you want to be part of it, what should you do? Well, here are five steps to take:

1. Accept Christ or Boldly Renew Your Relationship with Him. Romans 5:9-10 says, *“For since we were restored to friendship with God by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be delivered from eternal punishment by his life. So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God--all because of what our Lord Jesus Christ has done for us in making us friends of God.”* Believing isn't enough: after all demons believe in God. Lots of people believe in a general sort of way... that just isn't enough.

God meant for us to have a relationship with him and the closer that relationship gets, the more you'll hunger for an even deeper relationship. Luke 12:21 says, *“...a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God.”* Nothing we can imagine having can be more fulfilling than a deeper relationship with God in Jesus Christ.

2. Go All Out for the Presence of God – Not just some remembrance of it. Ephesians 3:12 says, *“Because of Christ and our faith in him, we can now come fearlessly into God's presence, assured of his glad welcome.”* You may have had some very special experiences of God's presence and those can be a warm and wonderful memory and a great encouragement. I've had lots of those experiences. I've had moments when the presence of God was as tangible to me and as genuine to me as _____ there or as _____ or _____ or any one of you. I think back on an evening at our camp at Pocono Plateau when I was a youth, on a chapel at Blue Mountain Christian Retreat a few years later, on the time when I attended a Walk to Emmaus Weekend, and so many other times. Those experiences were wonderful, but they just wetted my appetite for more and that desire for God's presence and the pursuit of God's presence works to deepen my relationship with God more and more.

But it's not just an individual experience thing – our congregation must pursue the presence of God in everything we do and acknowledge that God is here with us! Ephesians 1:22-23 says, *“God has put all things under the authority of Christ, and he gave him this authority for the benefit of the church. And the church is his body; it is filled by Christ, who fills everything everywhere with his presence.”* When we celebrate his presence and show our love for him it builds up our strength, our hope, our maturity in our Christian life, our ability to cope, to reach out to others, to trust. Hebrews 10:22 says, *“Let us go right into the presence of God, with true hearts fully trusting him.”* That brings us to the third step:

3. Make a Commitment to Foster the Presence of God - in worship, in our fellowship, in our community. It's not just for ourselves as individuals. We can special experiences and feel strengthened – and that's great for us as individuals! – but if we allow our life as a congregation to just be business as usual with no expectation that God's presence is going to break out here in a tangible, astounding, even uncomfortable way and if we aren't doing our best to allow that to happen then we've missed our purpose as a local church. John 4:23-24 says, *“But the time is coming and is already here when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for anyone who will worship him that way. For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.”*

And we can't let it be confined by these walls – it has to break out of here so that the community can see it happening and can see the presence of God reflected by each of us. 1 Peter 3:14-16 says, *“But even if you suffer for doing what is right, God will reward you for it. So don't be afraid and don't worry. Instead, you must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if you are asked about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it. But you must do this in a gentle and respectful way. Keep your conscience clear. Then if people speak evil against you, they will be ashamed when they see what a good life you live because you belong to Christ.”* It says *“if you are asked about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it”* but why would they ask if it isn't obvious to them that something interesting, exciting and meaningful is happening in your life? The fourth step, then, is:

4. Bring Someone Else to the Presence of God. Romans 1:5 says, *“Through Christ, God has given us the privilege and authority to tell [unbelievers] everywhere what God has done for them, so that they will believe and obey him, bringing glory to his name.”* It's not enough to have the experience of God's presence as individuals. It's also not enough to have that experience as a congregation. It's not enough to just to lead a good life so that others will see our lives as Christians and maybe ask us about it. It goes much further than that: *“God has given us the privilege and authority to TELL...”* them *“what God has done for **them**...”* Not

just recount our experience, but help them apply that experience to their own lives and make them hungry for God's presence by putting it into terms they can understand.

1 Corinthians 9:19-20 says, *"...I am not bound to obey people just because they pay me, yet I have become a servant of everyone so that I can bring them to Christ. When I am with the Jews, I become one of them so that I can bring them to Christ. When I am with those who follow the Jewish laws, I do the same, even though I am not subject to the law, so that I can bring them to Christ."* Paul adapted the way he shared his message to the people he was speaking to. He didn't use terms they wouldn't understand or talk about it in some way that they couldn't relate to. He made it real to them by relating it to what they understood.

So how do you start? **5 Start Right Now with Covenant and Communion.** We're going to celebrate communion today and during that time I'm going to give you an opportunity to pray to accept or renew your relationship with Jesus, to experience the real tangible presence of God in that moment, to commit yourself to sharing that experience of the presence of God with one another and with our community.

Worship isn't worship without the presence of God.