**Curious Faith – When it feels like God isn’t there**

**6/30/24**

Last week started with a confession, this week starting with a question, I’m curious

* No right or wrong answer
  + How many of you believe you felt the presence of God at some point in your life?
    - Put it in chat – “I’ve felt God’s presence”

Now another question for those in the room

* How many would say they felt the presence of God today?
  + And a follow up
    - How do you know?
      * Were you overwhelmed?
      * Get a tingling?
        + Sometimes I do
      * Were you overwhelmed with emotion, maybe cry?
        + Sometimes I have
      * Did you feel unusual, like heavenly peace even if your life is chaotic?
        + Is that how you know you’re in God’s presence?

Because God’s presence can give you a tingly feeling?

But I get a tingly feeling just sitting next to my beautiful wife

It’s true

* God’s presence can make you cry
  + And so can a really touching YouTube video, right?
* God’s presence is incredibly peaceful
  + But some would say that about a bubble bath with a candle and a little Michael Bublé music
* So, how do you know when you feel the presence of God?

One more follow-up question

* If you didn’t feel God’s presence today in worship, whose fault is it?
  + Whose fault if you didn’t feel God?
    - God’s fault?
      * Was He holding back on you?
      * He revealed himself to the person standing next to you but not you
    - Was it your fault because you weren’t paying attention, or you weren’t ready?
    - Or was it Kevin’s fault because he didn’t pick your favorite song?

What do you do when you want to feel God’s presence, but you don’t feel God’s presence?

* Some people seem to experience His presence all the time
  + But you may not experience it that often or maybe never at all
* If you don’t feel him, is he there?
  + Is he real?
* We’re going to answer those questions today – let God’s words answer them
  + And the title of today’s message is “When God feels far away”

Prayer

Let’s start by telling the person sitting next to you, “God is with you today”

* I love hearing your stories
  + Some of my favorites are the ones about people who are drawn to Joy Church, driving by, and feeling God bring them into the parking lot and into the church
* Kathy and I have heard that story from several folks
  + Wondering if God is real
  + Wondering where He is
  + Wanting to experience Him, but not sure how or even if they can experience Him
    - Can’t feel Him

Maybe some of you can relate

* What do you do if you don’t feel the presence of God?
  + ***I want to tell you that if you don’t always feel God’s presence, you’re not alone***
    - If you draw near to Him and don’t always feel some kind of supernatural moment, you’re not alone at all
      * In fact, the Psalmist in the OT – Psalm 88:13-14 wrote about this
        + You can almost hear the pain in his writing when he says to God, “***But I Cried to you for help, Lord; in the morning my prayer comes before you. Why, Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?”***

“God, I’m doing what you want me to do

I’m seeking you in the morning

Crying out to you

Believing You’re there

Why can’t I feel your presence?”

So many of our Bible heroes have felt the same way and their feelings, through their writing, are in the Bible

* King David, the one who often says, “I did experience God” is the same one who said, “I was running for my life from my enemies, God, and I can’t find you anywhere. Have you forgotten me? Do you hear the cries of my heart?”
* The Apostle Paul who came to Jesus after being blinded by a heavenly light and Jesus speaking to him, said, “I just want to preach”
  + But he finds himself wandering for 3 years and working in obscurity for 14 years building tents
    - Saying, “God, I thought we were going to reach the world. And I’m just working day after day, not seeing any lives changed”
* The most poignant one, to me though, is Jesus
  + The one who walked intimately with his Father and did his will
  + His whole life mission was to glorify God in every way
    - And he’s obedient, even to death on the cross
    - And he’s hanging on the cross, naked and beaten, being shamed
    - And he becomes sin for us
      * And in some mysterious way, God pulls back, or God looks away
      * I don’t understand all of the theology behind this
        + God is too holy to look at sin
        + I can’t explain it all

But Jesus – the Son of God – who’s done nothing but the Father’s will cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

“Where are you God!”

If you’ve ever wondered why you don’t always feel the presence of God, you’re not alone

* I can’t fully answer every question you might have about these scriptures or about why you feel like God isn’t present with you
  + I do want to give you some possible scriptural reasons why we don’t always feel God
    - We’ll look at 3 different reasons of why we don’t always feel God

If you ever asked, “Why am I not experiencing the presence of God?”

* ***One possibility is maybe you’re over-sensationalizing God’s presence***
  + You’re looking for something supernatural, something awe-inspiring
    - The presence of God can be that
      * But it’s not always that
    - In fact, in John’s gospel (John 6:30) Jesus was explaining this
      * The context is that some people always want a sign
        + They want something big
        + They want to see lights
        + “Give me something special, God”
    - Some people want a sign
      * So, they asked Jesus, “What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you?”
        + “What are you going to do to impress us?”
        + To prove you’re God”

“Give us a sign/show”

“Give us something!”

* + - And a lot of us crave that
      * I know I do
        + Maybe we’re trying to decide about something like, “Should I change jobs?”

“OK, God, if you want me to change jobs, just send a camel in my room right now”

“If a camel walks into my room, I’ll know it’s your will”

Sounds silly, but I’ve done stuff like this

But I don’t always feel God’s presence, don’t always see a sign

* Do you want to hear what some of my most intimate moments not feeling the presence of God?
* Might not sound very ‘pastor-ly’
  + As a teen, knowing Jesus
    - Meetings on Friday night – ‘Fire Escape’
    - Everyone else so emotional and (at least appeared to be through my eyes) feeling God’s presence
      * And I didn’t
  + My ordination
    - Such a holy moment in life, expectations were high to see the heavens open up and a dove descend just like Jesus baptism
      * But it was nowhere close to that
      * It was prayer by very Godly people
      * And words spoken by very Godly people
        + And then a reception
      * But I have to be honest and tell you that I didn’t feel His presence at that moment!

So, if you wonder, “What’s wrong with you? Why don’t I feel the presence of God?”

* ***I can tell you that feelings aren’t the only evidence of God’s presence***
  + Matter of fact, if we always felt God, we wouldn’t need faith
    - Feelings aren’t the only evidence of the presence of God
      * For example, being a pastor is about as holy as you can get
        + Meaning – being a pastor my job is about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit and stuff like that
        + And I can count on one – maybe both – hands the supernatural experiences of God that left me awestruck

Most of the time it’s just Tuesday

Come to work, do you work, go home after work

Maybe if you don’t feel like you’re experiencing the presence of God – you’re over-sensationalizing it

* Maybe you’re looking for a sign while Jesus has displayed the depth of his love for you on the cross
  + I would argue that none of us need a sign greater than his love for us dying on the cross

Second reason you might not be experiencing God is that maybe your heart is hardened

* Maybe your heart has gone cold toward the things of God
  + In fact – Matthew 13 – Jesus was quoting a prophecy from Isaiah, and he said this, “You’ll ever be hearing but never understanding”
    - “You’ll ever be seeing but never perceiving”
      * Why?
        + “For this people’s hearts has become calloused”
        + Their hearts have hardened

“They hardly hear with their ears, and they’ve closed their eyes”

Why don’t you always experience the presence of God?

* Maybe you’re a Christian, but you’ve allowed your heart to harden
  + It could be that somebody did something to you
    - Church hurt is real
  + They hurt you and you closed off your heart toward people or toward God
* Maybe you had a disappointment and you thought, “I can’t really trust God”
  + And you’ve closed off your heart to God
    - Praying for someone and they died

I would say that the most likely the number 1 cause of a hard heart is what I would call ongoing sin

* It’s when you allow a sin, something that displeases God, to rule and reign in your heart
  + And you’re not confessing it
  + You’re not doing war against it
    - You’re kind of accepting that sin and your heart starts to grow hard

A hard heart feels kind of like when it’s freezing outside and super cold

* So, you bundle up
  + Biggest coat
  + Gloves
  + Long underwear
  + Hat
  + Scarf
  + Boots
    - The whole thing
* You’re covered
  + You go outside and guess what?
  + You can’t feel the cold
    - Because you’re covered in clothes
* In the same way, if you’re covered din sin, you can’t feel God because our sin separates us from Him

So, I respectfully say – in the same way I would say to myself – if you don’t really feel like you’re experiencing God’s presence, I would ask you, is there a sin that you’ve gotten comfortable with?

* Kind of made friends with it
* Rationalized it

And it might not be one of the ‘big sins’ that you might think of here

* Jealousy?
* You’re jealous of her
  + Her perfect hair
  + Perfect kids
  + Instagram perfection
    - On top of that, she’s got more shoes than Oprah
* Or unforgiveness
  + Someone just ticked you off
  + You’re not going to forgive so you just live in bitterness and unforgiveness
    - And your heart grows hard toward the Lord
* Sin of lust?
  + You just look and lust and look and lust and you try to tell yourself, “Well, at least I’m not doing something worse”
  + But the reality is you’re caught in a prison, and you can’t get out
    - And your heart grows hard

Perhaps, if you’re covered in a sin that you’re not dealing with before God

* Maybe you don’t feel the presence of God because of that

Or it could be the flip side of that

* You come to know Jesus and start with Bible studies, small groups, you stop cussing, drinking and running around
  + Don’t smoke, drink, or chew
* You work really hard at stopping those big sins
  + And you find that before long, in the middle of all these good activities, you aren’t really experiencing God’s presence
    - It wasn’t that there was sin blocking
      * But somehow it became more about performance than about God’s presence

Suddenly it is more about religious duties than a genuine devotion to God

* Maybe you’re over-sensationalizing
* Maybe your heart is hardened, ongoing sin or leaning on religious duties

Or number 3 (my favorite)

* Maybe God wants to draw you closer
  + Closer to Him
* Acts 17 – context Paul is preaching in Athens
  + In verse 26, he said this, “From one man God made all nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in histories and the boundaries of their land.
* Now, why did God do this?
  + Verse 27 – “God did this so that they would seek Him”
    - And perhaps reach out for Him and find Him
* Good news?
  + “He is not far from any of us”

Why does God feel distant?

* God uses those feelings so that we would reach out to him, seek Him
  + Maybe God may let you get to a point in your life where you crave Him
    - You seek Him
      * And sometimes it’s the hard times that make you seek Him even more than the good times

Have you noticed that?

* How the challenges and suffering often produce the best in you spiritually?
  + And have you noticed the opposite?
    - How comfort and ease and prosperity produce the worst?

What does deprivation do?

* If you don’t feel like you’re close to God, deprivation draws out desire
  + What happens when you don’t eat?
    - What do you get?
      * Hangry, give me something to eat!
  + What happens when you don’t drink enough water?
    - What do you get?
      * Thirsty, give me something to drink
  + And when you don’t feel God’s presence, guess what?
    - You want Him all the more
    - You want him, need him, long for Him
    - You thirst for Him, hunger for Him

You want the presence of God!

* And here’s the cool thing about God – He wants to be pursued
  + He wants you to want Him
  + He’s a relational God
    - A jealous God
  + He wants your heart, your devotion
  + He wants your passion
    - If fact, He gives us an incredible promise in Jeremiah 29:13
      * “You will seek me, and you’ll find me”
        + It’s a promise

If you pursue God, He will reveal Himself to you

* “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart”, God says
  + “I will be found by you”
* When you draw near to Him, pursue Him, crave Him, when you hunger for Him
  + He loves to reveal Himself to you
    - He loves you so much, so if you don’t feel God – remind yourself, just because He feels distant doesn’t mean He is absent
* Just because you don’t feel Him doesn’t mean He’s not there
  + Don’t believe everything you feel
    - Your feelings will fool you
    - Your feelings are not facts
  + Know the difference between ‘feels’ and ‘reals’

Sometimes we have to get out of our feelings and activate our faith

* You just have to believe – by faith – that if I draw near to God, He’s there
  + It’s not a ‘woo-woo’ feeling all the time – if it were, would I need faith?
  + Sometimes you don’t feel love in your marriage
    - But you didn’t walk out
    - You rekindle the fire
  + Sometimes you don’t feel love for your kids
    - You know you love them deep down but you’re just like ‘eh’
    - But you don’t put them up for adoption
    - You pursue them, love them
  + If you don’t feel God, you don’t walk away
    - You don’t blame God
    - You step into Him
    - You want more out of Him

Get out of your feelings and activate your faith

* Will you ever feel the supernatural presence of an awe-inspiring, overwhelming God that will drop you to your knees?
  + The answer is sometimes, you will (I promise)
    - If you continue to pursue Him, there will be times when He will show up and show off and stun you
      * Goosebumps
      * Tinglies
      * Tears
      * Flat on your face

But often, I experience Him in the ordinary, everyday, simple moments of life

* Maybe you open your Bible in the morning and your devotion for the morning was meant for you for today
  + And you say, “Oh, there’s God, that’s exactly what I need”
* Or you’re having one of those days and your friend just reaches out and says, “Hey, God put you on my heart and I’m just reaching out to you”
  + You say, “Oh, there’s the presence of God”
* Or you hear a song, and it was like the Holy Spirit wrote that thing just for you
* Or you don’t feel like coming to church on Sunday, but you do anyway
  + And the pastor preaches a message like he’s been in your living room all week long
    - You needed that message

What God tells you is this, “If you seek Me, you will find Me”

* Sometimes you have to get over your feelings and activate your faith
  + The faith that He is the God that will never leave you
  + He’s the God that will never forsake you
    - When you don’t know what to do, He is with you as your guide
    - When you’re hurting and life is falling apart, He’s you comforter
    - When you feel all alone and you don’t know where to turn, He is with you as a friend who sticks closer than a brother
    - When you can’t sleep and you’re overwhelmed with anxiety, He is with you as a heavenly peace that goes beyond your human ability to understand
    - When you’re covered in sin – as we all often are – He’s Immanuel – He’s with you as your Savior

Jesus didn’t die for us so that we could get tingly feelings, he died for us to be transformed

* Jesus Christ – the lamb of God – who gave his life so we could be forgiven
  + God in the flesh
  + God with us
    - So, if you don’t feel God
      * Maybe you’ve over-sensationalized it
      * Maybe you’re heart’s grown hard along the way
      * Maybe God wants to draw you closer

The question is, what are you going to do?

* Draw near to Him
  + Call on Him in day-to-day situations
    - When you’re at work making a sales presentation, ask Him for His grace and presence
    - When you feel all alone
    - When you’re hurting
      * Cast all your cares on Him because He cares for you
        + When you’re overwhelmed, cry out the name of Jesus

Call out to God

And the good news is that no matter what you’re going through

* No matter what you’re facing
* No matter what the weight feels like
* No matter how overwhelming the moment seems
* If you seek Him, if you draw near to Him, His word is true
  + You will find Him
    - Because when you draw close to God, He always draws close to you
* And you may end up being just like David who says, “I know the Lord is always with me. He will never leave me. He will never forsake me.”

Prayer

Lord, we ask that You reveal yourself today

* Maybe you’re saying, “I want to experience even more intimately the presence of God.”
  + Would you lift your hand?
  + I hope every hand goes up
    - “I want to experience even more intimately the presence of God”

Father, thank you that You’re always faithful

* Whether we feel it or not, we want to pursue You with all of our hearts
  + We’ll open the Word to see you
  + We’ll open our hearts to cry out to you
  + We’ll open our lives to let you in, to let your Spirit guide us
* I pray that there would be times where we’d be overwhelmed by the power
  + Stunned by your presence
* And I pray there would be an infinite amount of times where we see you in a sunrise
  + We’d sense your presence in a relationship
  + We’d see you working in our small group/church
  + That we’d feel you as you use us to bring a word of encouragement to someone who is hurting
    - Or feel you when someone encourages us
* Help us to see you and experience you in big ways
  + And help us recognize You’re always with us even in the small, seemingly meaningless times
    - You will never leave us
* As you reveal yourself to us, direct our hearts to do your will in everything we do
  + Help us to know you
  + Help us experience you
  + Help us draw close to you
  + Because we seek you, we know that we’ll find you

Salvation prayer

He’s a relational God

* Not just up in heaven
* Wants to be pursued, pursues us
* Wants our hearts