

God's Touch

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What are you missing the most right now?

What part of your pre-coronavirus life do you find yourself most longing for right now?

Maybe it is a loved one, family, a friend, who you long to embrace.

Maybe it is a familiar ritual, a favorite coffee shop or restaurant, or activity.

Maybe it is a moment's quiet, and some time to yourself.

Staying at home looks different for all of us.

But for everyone of us, there are things that we have lost. Things left behind our old lives, before this virus took hold.

What are you missing the most right now?

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Many of us have found creative ways to recreate some of these experiences, video calls, leaving sidewalk chalk messages outside the home of a friend, hanging messages of hope and love in our window, singing on our porches and balconies with neighbors, coming to church online.

But it just isn't the same. As much as these things are all making our lives more bearable right now, they are still a degree abstracted from the real thing.

Because as much as we may know in our minds and our hearts the love that our family and friends hold for us. As much as we may trust that a community holds us in their care.

We were made to express that love in-person. Our brains are wired to build connection and trust through presence and touch.

There is a spark in our souls when we behold another human face before us, that is dimmer when that face is on a screen.

Our hearts are reaching their limits to experience love and connection in the abstract.

We want it to be physical and real again.

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Psalms 23 is likely the most well-known and often repeated passage in the whole of scripture.

Many people, even those who have long ago left behind the faith of their childhood, continue to find profound comfort in these words.

I am often asked to read them at funerals, and more often than not, without any prompting, people join in and say it along with me.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

And I think one reason why this Psalm is such a source of comfort for people, particularly at moments of grief and struggle, is that it is not abstract.

It offers images of God's love that we can see, and taste, and feel in our bodies.

The notion that God cares about you and loves you can seem hopelessly abstract when your world is falling apart.

But what about God lying you down in lush grass, beside a gentle stream.

What about God lavishing fragrant oil on your head.

What about a fine feast spread, a cup dripping over the brims and down the backs of your hands.

This Psalmist is reminding us that the presence of the Holy is no abstract notion. It is something we can encounter, not just with our minds, but with our bodies.

These are not metaphors to be interpreted, but sensations to be experienced.

Scripture is trying to point us toward what it truly feels like to feel the very real presence of God.

Try this.

Take your tongue off the roof of your mouth and let your jaw relax.

Let your smolders drop.

Take a long, deep breath... and let it go.

Let down your guard.

Feel God lay you in the lush grass.

Feel God's hand on your forehead, oil dripping down.
Hold your hands like this (in a cup)

And feel the generosity of spirit as your live overflows with God's grace. Feel it run over the edge and down the backs of your hands.

God's presence is no abstract notion. It does not live only as a thought in our mind, an explanation of the world, or a comforting idea.

We can feel God's presence, really feel it. Even when we are alone.

Maybe not every time. Maybe not this time. But God's presence is not abstract. If you practice making even tiny moments of space in your life, to let down your guard, and let something mysterious wash over you.

Today we are inviting each of you to join us at this Communion Table, by using food and drink from your own homes to become a sign of Christ's presence.

This is no abstract thing. Jesus knew what he was doing in giving us something to do with our bodies to remember him.

Taste and see.

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It will be easier to know that love is not abstract when we can reach out our arms to one another again. When we can hug those we love. And stand in the physical presence of our community.

It will be easier to encounter Christ in this meal when we can share the bread and the cup heart to heart and hand to hand.

But you can also feel it now. You really can.

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The poetic peak of this Psalm are the words that lie right at its heart

“Even though I walk through the valley of death's shadow.”

Or your heart may know older words.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.”

A reminder, that all these stunning images, and profound sensations of God's presence and love do not come as the cherry on top of an already perfect life.

They meet us in the valleys of despair. They meet us in the face of death.

Our hearts, our bodies even, can truly reverberate with an unmistakable sense of God's presence even amidst the worst the world has to offer.

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I want to invite you this week to open yourself to this kind of sacred presence. It means carving out a little space, it means letting your tense body uncoil, and letting your racing thoughts slow.

And these images from this beloved Psalm point us toward the sensation we are seeking.

Lush grass. Still water. Oil. A cup overflowing. An ample feast.

You don't have to think your way into experiencing God. You can feel your way into it.

Because God's presence is just as real now,

as it ever was,

and as it always will be.