

When asked to describe how I experience God a few things sprung to mind and I couldn't quite decide where to focus. I tend to be long-winded and I was concerned that I would talk too much - well, its me, so I'll apologize up front and just promise that I'm trying to keep it short. For me I look for God most when I am experiencing uncertainty - whether its my health, my loved ones wellbeing, what's happening in the world, or my fears for the future. Some of you know that I have struggled with auto-immune health issues for over 20yrs, so its only fitting that my inspiration for how to tie my ideas together came to me while waiting in a doctor's office! That uncertainty, or fear can be crippling, but if I just slow down and open up my senses I can find God.

Opening my eyes - there is so much beauty in nature - My mother has a stunning garden and especially this year I have found that there is the most magical antidepressant in that garden. Just this week I came downstairs and saw that the sun was lighting on 2 of the roses bushes - it was like God herself was saying "look what I created". It took my mind straight off of pain, and straight onto beauty. Watching the flowers come up from seed, carried by the wind and the birds to be planted all over the garden - hybridizing to create new colors. Nature's magic is everywhere if we just look.

Opening my ears - listening to others, I find some amazing kindness. I Think of God as love and love can come from people we know, and people we don't know. I feel God around me when I'm scared in the hospital and a janitor smiles at me and tells me to hang in there, when a nurse pats my arm and tells me to hang in there, when my Doctor says "its not in your head, you don't deserve this" - all of these things seem to happen when I'm feeling alone. Telling me I'm not alone. When a friend calls on a low day, just seeming to know I need it. When I walk into this church and so many people say such wonderfully, welcoming things - I know I'm not alone. If I really listen - its like God is speaking through strangers, friends, my family. I'm not trying to take away from these people's own kindness - they are all fabulously wonderful people in their own right, but that light inside of them comes from the same place.

Opening up myself to the healing power of touch - now this is a big one. If God is love, then she lives in the magic of a HUG! Actually any kind of touch - that hand on my shoulder from my doctors, the hand on my arm from a kind nurse, that passing of the peace by all of you, the magical hugs I experience here. Then there are the hugs from my Godchildren and the other kids in my life - who aren't really kids anymore (some are so tall I need a stepstool) but their hugs heal my heart and just feed my faith. Then there are the hugs from my family - Can you tell I'm a hugger? - Aunts and Uncles who taught me how to love, My parents who have hugged me most days of my life - my brother, who would tell you he doesn't like hugs, but I know better - no one that doesn't like hugs, hugs that well. That passing of energy - that passing of love - that is where God is shining.

Don't worry, I won't go on about the last two.. though I could make an argument that God is speaking through the taste and smell of some amazing food... But I did promise to try and keep it shorter... I suppose it all comes down to this - when that fear, or sadness starts to take hold then God helps me slow down, open up my senses and realize that God is everywhere, Love is everywhere. Definitely alive and loud in this place and among you all, so thank you all for

showing me God's love all the time. And maybe when we talk about our "sixth sense" that's actually God's voice... through us all.

Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

9 If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

10 even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and night wraps itself around me,"^[a]

12 even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

13 For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.

15 My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.^[b]

17 How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!

18 I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end^[c]—I am still with you.

I absolutely love that Jenn began her testimony by saying, “I experience God’s voice when I experience uncertainty.” That statement alone is one of the most beautiful testimonies I’ve ever heard, precisely because it reminds me of why that word “testimony” is such an important word, and yet, my guess is that it comes with some baggage for many of us.

The word testimony, in a church context, is often associated with other words like “witnessing” or “evangelism” or “sharing our faith.” And often, the way Christians have gone about sharing our testimony is not exactly uplifting. Let me tell you a story.

Growing up in the heart of the Bible belt, I had several youth ministers who taught us that if we wanted to be good Christians, we need to tell others about Jesus to convince them to become a Christian. And the best way to do that was to share your testimony. But what they really meant by testimony is the story of how you came to believe that Jesus was the only Son of God and salvation only came through him so that the person you were talking to might begin to believe the exact same thing you believed and to experience the exact same thing you had experienced.

So as a good church kid, I decided to do what my youth minister asked me to do, even though it terrified me.

I decided I needed to witness to an exchange student from Germany who I will call Mark. He and I had become good friends and we were going bowling one night before he went back home and I brought up the conversation of faith. He was one of the few people in small town, Alabama who was open about the fact that he was an atheist. He didn’t broadcast it sort of as a show of rebellion but he didn’t try to hide it either.

I decided to tell him about a fellow classmate of mine who we believed had experienced a miraculous healing. Several years before, he had been diagnosed with a brain tumor and then shortly before he was scheduled to have surgery, the doctors did another scan and found that the brain tumor was gone. We believed our prayers had been answered. I shared that story with Mark to show him that God was real because God had healed my friend and he said, “RG, I’m glad he got better. But do you want to know why I don’t believe in God? My little sister also had a tumor – cancer – and I prayed for her. My whole family did. And she didn’t get better. She died.”

I told him I was very sorry and then I didn’t know what else to say.

You see, I thought the point of sharing my testimony was to give Mark certainty, to give him proof that God was real. But the truth is that life is too unpredictable to have any certainty about questions as big as, “Is God real?” or “If God is real, can I trust that God is good or that God will do good by me?” What I learned from this experience with Mark and what Jenn articulated so well in her testimony is that there is no certainty when it comes to faith. In fact, if there were certainty we wouldn’t really need faith anyway. Instead, the beauty of faith is that it embraces the uncertainty and unpredictability of life, or, to say it another way, faith is not dependent on life happening just like we would plan for it to.

In the United Church of Christ, we have a slogan called, “testimony not tests.” I was actually trying to give Mark the answers to the test rather than sharing a testimony. I was trying to tell

him exactly what to believe. But a testimony is about sharing our own experience of God's love in our life – nothing more and nothing less. And my experience of God might be different than your experience of God and that is not only ok, but it means our faith is so much richer because God is not limited to one way of working in the world or in our lives.

And so what a great way to begin this whole series with Jenn's words, "I experience the voice of God in the midst of uncertainty." Friends, that is such a great articulation of the hope of our faith. It's not that bad things won't happen. It's not that everything will always make sense. It's not that we can have complete and total certainty about too much of anything. Rather, our hope is that God is with us. That whatever life throws our way, that in our highest of highs and our lowest of lows, and everywhere in between, God is with us. In our times of clarity and in our times when we're not even sure God is real, God is with us.

That is the same hope the writer of our Psalm expressed in such beautiful poetry.

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Or where can I flee from your presence?

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and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

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11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
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12 even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day."

Friends, during this summer, we will be challenged to maybe hear God's voice in ways and through people we haven't heard it before. But here's what I want you to know, whenever our faith challenges us, it always does so from the place of God being with us, God loving us no matter what. And that's why anytime we are challenged, it comes from a place of deep love and deep grace rather than a place of judgment or shame. God is with us and God loves us. That is our starting point.

And so our starting point to proclaim that God is still speaking is to remember that God is with us in good times and in hard times. And friends, that's enough...sometimes.

But if I'm completely honest, there are times when it doesn't feel like enough. There are times when I want more. I not only want the promise that God is going to be with me, I want to know that everything is going to be ok. I want to know that the people I love won't get sick and the ones who do get sick will get well. I want to believe that we will reject division, will reject fear-based politics, will reject demonizing those considered "the other." I want to believe that wars can end and that it's not too late to save the planet. I want to believe that my kids will always be healthy, happy, and whole. I want to believe that everything will be ok.

If I'm honest, there are times when I wish faith did offer us this kind of certainty. But it doesn't. And that's why I think the rest of what Jenn said is so important. While God can seem very abstract, God comes to us in very concrete ways.

Jenn mentioned nature. My guess is she's not alone in experiencing God still speaking in the beauty of a flower or the view from a mountaintop or the sound of waves crashing on a beach. She mentioned touch and how meaningful it is to have a warm hug or a reassuring pat on the shoulder or shaking a hand during the passing of the peace. And she mentioned the support of community.

And that brings me to one final story. Another one of my friends I grew up with was Jerry. And when he was maybe 10 or 11 years old, his dad died by suicide. As you can imagine his whole family was devastated even though his mom, Dorothy, did a remarkable job of holding everything together. Now their family didn't go to church, but the long-time Baptist minister, Brother Melvin Salter, went to visit them. And you know what he did...he listened. He didn't pontificate. He was simply present.

You see, I know this because my mom also went to visit Dorothy and to bring her some food...because food is one of the best ways to show someone you care... and this is what Dorothy said to her about Melvin Salter's visit, "I don't have faith in God. But I do have faith in Brother Melvin."

What a statement!

We can bring hope to people by simply living out what the Psalmist says God does – by being with people in the highest of highs or the lowest of lows so that even people who don't have faith in God can still experience the love of God through us. I wonder if that is a way God still speaks even when we may have trouble believing God is real. God speaks not only to us but through us when we love, when we care for one another, especially when we're there for each other during hard times.

As Jenn says, "If I really listen – it's like God is speaking through strangers, friends, my family. I'm not trying to take away from these people's own kindness - they are all fabulously wonderful people in their own right, but that light inside of them comes from the same place."

Friends, the hope of our faith is that God is with us in good times and in bad times, but it's equally true to say that the hope of our faith is that we are with each other in good times and in bad times when we truly live out what it means to be church.

Friends, God is still speaking and that is good news. Amen.