

Where is God in your world?

Lent 2, Year A

Lenten Series – God is Closer than you Think – John Ortberg

This Lenten season we are looking at a special series called *God is Closer Than You Think* based on the book by John Ortberg. It is a series that helps us realize a very intimate relationship with God. The whole parish is going to be involved. There are several small groups meeting during the week, including one adapted especially for families. These groups will watch a short video and then discuss it together. We are also going to use our sermon times during Lent to speak on this subject. And finally, the Sunday School lessons will also be adapted so that the children (even the very young ones) will be able to participate in this series as well.

We are already into the second week of Lent, so I want to do a quick review of the first week which we missed with Bishop Mary's visit. Even though we did not give her the subject of our Lenten Series, her sermon actually fit the subject quite well. Bishop Mary talked about our relationship with God and how many times we pull away from it or do not even recognize when God is close.

The first week of the series looks at God's great desire. To illustrate this, look at the picture in/on your bulletin – the two fingers reaching towards each other. This is a snap shot of Michelangelo's painting of God and Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The full picture depicts the figure of God striving to reach Adam while Adam is sitting back, his partially extended arm just resting on his knee. God is the one who is eager to close the gap; Adam seems ambiguous, not sure if God will make the first move, dare he move towards God first? Or is he indifferent? All he has to do is lift his finger and the gap is closed.

This picture speaks of God's great desire to be with the human beings he has made in his own image. This picture reminds us that God is closer than we think. And Scripture bears this out. The story of the bible is not primarily the desire of the people to be with God BUT it is the desire of God to be with the people. We were created to be companions, not servants. God wanted to walk in the cool of the garden with Adam and Eve – not have them serve him.

And the promise of the bible is not "I will forgive you" but it is there. It is not primarily the promise of life after death – but it is there as well. No the promise that we see over and over in the bible is the promise that God will be with us. The five words "I will be with you" is in scripture over 150 times.

- It is in the story of Noah and the covenant of the rainbow – I will be with you always
- It is in the story of Abraham – go the land I will show you and I will be with you
- It is in the story of Jacob and Joseph
- It is in the story of Moses – God was with the people in the wilderness – as a column of fire by night and a column of cloud by day
- Psalm 23 – "you are with me..."
- Through the prophets he told His people – I will be with you wherever you go

- And saving the best for last – Jesus – God’s son is to be called Immanuel – God with us. This is the promise throughout the bible – God is seeking to be with us!

So this week we are looking at how we experience God in our world. How close to Christ do we really feel from day to day?

This isn’t always easy. Sometimes I want to lift my finger and touch God – and sometimes I don’t even think about God. Sometimes it seems like God is poking me with his finger and I just don’t seem to feel it. Sometimes I search for God and it seems like He is hiding. Does this happen to you too?

And don’t we just wish we’d get the signs like those in the bible? A burning bush would be nice. Or I’d love to see Jesus coming towards me walking on water. But it is not that simple. God is there, but He doesn’t force himself on us - we have a choice.

- We have a choice to lift our fore finger – to reach out to him.
- Or, we can pull back and go at it on our own and leave God behind.

Pie Chart

So I have this pie chart. You’ll notice six different wedges on it. These wedges represent different ways we experience how close we are to God in our life.

On some days we have those moments where everything just works out perfectly. We were in the right place at the right time and we see how God has been a part of that. We hear God clearly speaking to us through scripture or a song, or we happen to come upon a sunset at just the right moment when the clouds are shimmering in such vibrant reds and pinks and you just know, you just know, God created that moment just for you. These are called **Rainbow days.**

There are other times though when maybe we are busy, too busy, for God. The last thing we want is for God to see what we’re doing – or maybe not doing. One of my moments like that is when I get end up playing Sudoku on the computer when maybe I should be working. So I try to hide from God. I label this wedge: **God who?** This is where we hide from God, deliberately, either because we are doing something wrong or because we just want to be left alone.

Then there are those times when our lives are so chaotic due to illness, or the all coming work from our jobs, or the chaos that erupts in a family when someone is laid off. These are times we just don’t get a break. Somehow, God is able to break in maybe through a friend, a kind word, a new opportunity, and we see that God is there all along. A good church example is the time around Advent and Christmas. With all the shopping, decorating, parties, and church programs, by the time Christmas gets here we’re exhausted. But somehow in the midst of the chaos – we catch a glimpse of God – maybe in a Nativity scene in the window, or a Christmas card with just the right sentiment. This is called **Seeing God in the Chaos.**

Sometimes it seems that God is hiding from me. These times usually happen to me when I need an answer to something that is puzzling me – like what do I do next? Why am I stuck and can't move forward? Why is this happening to me? That's a good question that seems to go unanswered. That's when I need some help in finding God. I've labeled this **Need some praise music**. It's a strange title and it's one my friends provided for me. You see – this isn't the first time I've seen this pie chart before. Many years ago there was a time God seemed to be hiding and I remember being somewhat difficult to be around. My friends made me one of these charts to help me find some answers. And it was this wedge that was the most helpful. Music helps me get in touch with God. I would put in a cassette tape (which is what I had back then - oodles of them) – and I would be able to get close to God. It didn't bring the answers to my questions – but it was good to know that God was still there. I learned that often it was the struggle of the journey and what I learned about myself that was the answer to the question. God couldn't give me the answer because I had to live it to find the answer.

This fifth wedge is labeled **Ordinary Moments**. These are moments where God may be poking me but I don't even notice. I am busy living life as usual and not giving a thought to stopping to pay attention to God. I probably even have my regular prayer time where I automatically offer up my intercessions – but I don't stop to listen to God speaking to me. I have gotten use to a certain level of God in my life. I have put God in a box and only let Him out when necessary. For instance – maybe I only pay attention to God at church on Sunday – or when I read the Bible. I don't even stop to think God could or would speak to me during ordinary activities like driving to work, washing clothes, or even playing Sudoku.

The final wedge is labeled **Mountain Top Experiences**. John Ortberg calls these moments – “sitting at the feet of Jesus.” These are times that are so intimate, so profound, that they are hard to explain in English how meaningful they are. In Scripture this is the Transformation – when Jesus' divinity shown through his humanity on the top of a mountain – hence the name. Peter, James and John were stunned and did not know how to respond. These moments can be joyful or sorrowful – but so profound. I had one of those moments the other day. I am the Recording Secretary for the Board of Trustees for the Diocese. We start each meeting with a Bible Study using the *lectio divina*. The scripture assigned for last Thursday's meeting was Psalm 88. Psalm 88 is a Psalm of Lament and unlike all the other laments in the Psalms, this one does not end in praising God. It is the only one that does not. While we were reading the Psalm I was overcome by sobs. Key phrases like “all your great waves overwhelm me” or “will your wonders be known in the dark? Or your righteousness in the country where all is forgotten?” My son Eric lives in Tokyo – and I realized I was praying this psalm to God for Eric and the people of Japan. It was profound and it was healing in a sense – as it removed some of my anxiety over his situation. It was a time of sitting at the feet of Jesus – it was a Mountain Top Experience.

These are the six wedges of the Pie Chart. The theological word for the time we spend with God is called Piety. When my friends gave me this they had put it in an aluminum pie tin and called it my Piometer – something to measure my closeness to Christ. I also had this **arrow** to point out which wedge was closest to how close to Christ I felt.

God wants to be close to us. It is our choice. We can learn how to recognize just how close God really is. We can learn to take a break during the day to touch base with God. We can learn to see God in the ordinary jobs of the day. Brother Lawrence was a monk who celebrated and worshiped Jesus while doing the dishes – he saw God in every ordinary moment of every day. When we have a Rainbow moment, we should celebrate it. Those times on the Mountain are few and far between – but they are precious times to treasure in your heart. And even after we have such a profound experience – they very next day we could be hiding from God. Each day is new, each day God is there waiting for us to take our finger – lift it up – and close the gap.

I have something that will help you remember that Christ is close by. It is your very own Piometer. Stick it on your bathroom mirror or on your computer screen, or microwave. Make an effort to pay attention to the times God seemed very close – or very far. If he was far away – who moved – you or God? Each day take a moment to see how close to Christ you were. After awhile you will be able to recognize those times when Christ is close and your relationship with Him will grow even more. *Amen.*