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Matthew 28:20b, NRSVue.

“Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

To the end of the age.

At the very end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus commissions the eleven surviving Apostles. This is what Jesus says to them:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

When Jesus says that he is with the Apostles, to the end of the age, that is a promise that we inherit. Jesus is conferring these words on the Church, to everyone who chooses to follow him and join in the propagation of the Word from generation to generation. And indeed, Jesus is always present with us, through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The problem that a lot of us face in our daily lives is that it can be very hard for us to truly feel the presence of God in our lives. Let’s look at what we can do to enhance our sense of God in our lives. Consider Psalm 16:8:

*⁸ I have set the LORD always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.*

This verse makes a very powerful statement. It says that we control the presence of God. We can place God right before us. This Psalm is attributed to David. He was being hunted by King Saul who wanted him dead. Even under the greatest, the most immediate threat, he felt the presence of God.

Or perhaps that's the problem. We need to feel God near us at all times. It's easier to sense God, to turn to God with confidence when we are in physical danger or when something truly traumatic is happening. Our goal here today, though, is to look at how we can bring God into our daily lives, to always feel the protection, the love, and the eternal promise of our God. We have a triune God. Over the centuries since the crucifixion of Jesus, the interpretation of what it means to have three Gods in one has varied significantly. The New Testament speaks repeatedly of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit but it does not in any semi-formal fashion define just what this means. We did inherit a strict monotheistic notion of God from the Israelites, and so it is an important question. It was really the Creeds, like the Apostles Creed, that cemented this notion of three Gods in one, and these developed hundreds of years after Jesus was crucified. There was a lot of early debate about whether it is three separate Gods that somehow form one, or if perhaps we are talking about three different aspects of the same, single God. For us, this academic argument isn't the point.

What matters is that the Holy Spirit is indeed God, and we know, from many passages in the Old and New Testaments, that the Spirit lives within each of us. That is my first suggestion for keeping God present and visible every day of our lives: the Holy Spirit. Consider the following from Ezekiel, Chapter 43. I have abbreviated this:

***43** Then he brought me to the gate, the gate facing east. ² And there the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east; the sound was like the sound of mighty waters, and the earth shone with his glory. And I fell upon my face. ⁴ As the glory of the LORD entered the temple by the gate facing east, ⁵ the spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple.*

This is a vision of the Prophet Ezekiel. Remember that the King of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, ordered the destruction of Jerusalem and of the great temple of Solomon. Ezekiel was one of the Israelites taken into captivity in Babylon. In this vision, he sees the Temple restored and he prophesizes the eventual restoration of Israel. Notice that in his vision, God is compared to the sound of “mighty waters”. Ezekiel is in the Temple, the restored Temple, and the Spirit, that is the Holy Spirit, lifts him up and places him in the inner court – and that is when God fills the Temple around Ezekiel. We see this flow of logic repeatedly in both the Old and the New Testament: the Holy Spirit leading people directly to God. So that is my first suggestion. Remember that you have the Holy Spirit living within

you. Turn to the Holy Spirit and let the Spirit make God real and present for you. That is something that you can do any day at any time.

A lot of people tell me, as a chaplain, that they are spiritual but not religious, that they don't find God in a church: they find God in nature. As it turns out this is very biblical. We are told repeatedly in the Bible that a good way to connect with God, to make God more present in our lives is to walk among God's creations. Consider the first verse of Psalm 19, a Psalm attributed to King David. In this Psalm, the author focuses on the true meaning and depth of human life within the greater scheme of God's creations. Here is the first verse:

*¹The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.*

This is my second suggestion. We can walk in the mountains, among the trees, rocks, and streams, to sense the presence of God. If we get away from the world of things made by humans, buildings and freeways and factories, and surround ourselves with the things that God has made, it is far easier to connect with God. Nature itself declares the glory of God. I grew up in Southern California. I don't miss the traffic, the gunshots, the smog, the hours that it takes to go anywhere to get a task done. But I do miss the ocean, and that is because walking along the bike path that wound through the sand and gazing at the waves breaking

reminded me of God. It was a powerful sensation. I don't know why the beach specifically did that to me. Perhaps it was simply because it was the only true, raw nature around me. I would drive a distance to get to the ocean to do my daily run, because it also made me feel the power and the eternal nature of God.

Many people tell me that their faith becomes more tangible, more real if they read the Bible frequently, and that is my third suggestion. If you feel distant from God, but you rarely sit down and read God's Word, then I suggest that you remember the first verse of the Gospel of John, the Gospel written by an Apostle who shared Jesus' ministry. It tells us that the Bible isn't *about* God, it *is* God. Scripture is where you find God. But you do need to read consistently. It can be a little bit each day. That's my third suggestion. You could read a Gospel, for example, over the course a week or a couple of weeks. If you read the Bible on an ongoing basis, there is something about the cadence of the ancient, inspired writers, something about the blessed message that they repeat over and over that begins to become a part of you. After a while, you'll find yourself tucking a Bible into your bag or backpack or car or desk, wherever you find that you have quiet moments. You will begin to look forward to using that time to get back into those words - THE WORD - that brings you peace. Just remember this verse:

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

An obvious fourth suggestion is to pray. Here's a way to pray if you aren't comfortable sitting in a quiet place and silently opening your mind to God. Sit in that quiet place by yourself, but don't be silent. Talk to God. Consider the words of Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew, just before he tells us to pray the Lord's prayer. We tend to remember the prayer, but not remember the very important advice that comes before that prayer:

⁵ "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."*

⁷ "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

Prayer is between you and God. It's easy to forget that when reciting group prayers in church. I am a big believer in literally talking to God in a plain conversational way. Use your voice. Remember that you are in a secluded room or on a walk in an isolated place or perhaps you are simply whispering so that no other human can hear. By forcing yourself to get over that self-conscious sense of talking to God, you will find it easier to pray, to unburden yourself. Tell God what scares you in life, what regrets you are carrying, why you feel let down or like a failure. Do this

frequently: do it every single day. Let prayer become something you become so used to that it becomes a part of your routine. After a while it will feel odd to you if you do not pray. Remember that God answers quietly, not with a voice, and often not immediately. As praying becomes natural to you, two things will happen. First, the simple act of talking to God will give you solace. Second, you will find God answering you, often in unexpected, surprising, and very powerful ways.

Here is my fifth suggestion on how to more powerfully feel God's daily presence. Make a practice of deliberately living in an overtly Christian way. Don't hide your faith in public. If the subject of faith comes up, tell people that you are a Christian, a believer. Remember what Paul wrote to the faithful in Philippi:

³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.

It's important to remind yourself daily of the primary way in which we live as Christians, and that is by being humble people who truly care about others. We are the recipients of God's grace, and since we receive this grace every day, we make a point of passing that grace on to others every single day. Find people to be kind to. Make a point of being gracious with folks in public places. Also keep in mind the two great commandments, given to us by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew.

These are the commandments that supersede and encompass all there is to know about being a true person of faith:

“ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Love God every single day – and tell God that you love him. And then show that love by passing it on to all those around you. That brings God toward you.

There is more to making a point of living like a Christian. Let others be good to you. Don't be afraid to ask someone for help if you need it, even if it is just to talk something through. When someone helps, it lifts them up, and it might bring them closer to God, as well. An important person to accept help from is God. And be sure to accept forgiveness. In fact, forgiveness is something that is important to give and to take. After all, in the Gospel of Matthew, right after Jesus teaches us the Lord's Prayer, he reminds us of this:

¹⁴ “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Here is a sixth piece of advice. If you have anything that reminds you of God and also has personal significance to - keep in close. Put it in a place where you see it every day, many times a day. I have my father's rosary in a ceramic box on my desk at home. I do not pull it out very often, almost never, in fact. But my eyes fall

on that box, and I know what is in there. It makes me think of my father and of God. That rosary is a simple, inexpensive one, but I saw it in my father's hands many times. There is something about the dual nature of an artifact that reminds you of a loved one or some place that made you happy or some beautiful event in your life, and also has a Christian aspect to it, that can make you think of God. Those thoughts might be almost subconscious. You might not even stop and think about your faith. But having it near you can help bring God near you.

My seventh and final piece of advice is to consciously treasure the gifts God gave you. As you experience those gifts, think about God, think about the source of the things you have: your home, your assets, and most importantly, your family. Psalm 68:6 tells us this: *⁶God places the lonely in families.* Families aren't accidental. They're not just a way to keep the species going. Our family members are gifts from God. The next time you embrace a spouse, a child, a sibling, a family member who is related by marriage and not by genetics, think consciously about why you have loved ones in your life. God. God is the source of all gifts.

So, to sum up, if you feel distant from God, there are things you can do to fix that. It might take time - but be patient. Remember Psalm 40:1 –

*¹I waited patiently for the LORD to help me,
and he turned to me and heard my cry.*

Give it some time and try these things: grab hold of the Holy Spirit, go among nature, read the Bible, pray, live deliberately like a Christian, keep artifacts that remind you of God near you, and treasure your family. All the while, keep God in your mind. Please pray with me.

God, bless us, lead us, heal us, forgive us. Most of all, help us truly feel your presence in our lives. Help us get to the point where every time we find ourselves in a moment of quiet and silence, instead of feeling lonely or bored or nervous, let us sense you and know with total confidence that you are real and you are our God. Amen.