

June 2003: Day one on the trail**God is near**

We live deluged in distractions, rushing head-on at the Holy Scriptures and then at worship and then at community grasping for quick fixes. If confronted we'd deny every minute that faith offers quick fixes and easy answers. Our lives, however, betray such lip service.

Introductions take time and space, rarely mixing well with presumption. But what if we stopped long enough to listen and look more closely. We'd hear the relentless and rhythmic echo of the Living Word. We'd hear God; we'd see our creator.

God is near. God's presence opens my eyes to see the Transcendence on the one hand and the jagged edge of my sin on the other. Tension mounts.

Psalm 139

It is true. The world is vying for our attention. We live surrounded by mind-shaping images. But it is equally true that we relish the low cost of staying distracted. Its bargain basement living. There is fleeting gratification in such a posture. If we were to grow more aware of the nature of God's presence, changes would swell, forming into tidal waves, rushing out of our heart.

Isaiah 46

The Psalmist is meditating on the constant presence of God while Isaiah questions our crowded hearts. God's presence is barely felt in our overindulgence. On the one hand, we, with the Psalmist celebrate God's undying presence in our life. Yet, as the prophets of the Old Testament have a penchant for doing, our divided and unfaithful hearts are fighting to stay hidden and covered up. We are torn asunder.

I'm certainly caught between these two truths: my idolatrous heart, infatuated with so many things and my desire for God. It comes out this way...

*Where can I hide from you, God?
I'd die to be found by you like this
I'd die to be left alone, here.
A book or a friend, anything,
Not your gaze*

*Look now God!
My crowded hands reaching for you
Grabbing for more
You are my hope*

You are God! I am god...

So, we come to Scripture to meet our maker. More than teachings or theology, Scripture is God's sacred voice, his Word, whispering to us. Our prayers, like the one I offered, like the book of Psalms, are our responses to the God who is near.

The God of Jacob is relentless. Wrestling, comforting, and naming. That is redemption. That is Jesus.

His all-consuming presence in our life makes demands and restores. God is invading, hovering over the chaos (see Genesis 1:1), coming as a baby in Bethlehem, and finally, returning to lay claim to what belongs to God.

That which belongs to God, does not recognize God, the one who is near:
He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. (John 1:10)



June 2003: Day two on the trail

God is strong

By now you have faced weakness, a vulnerability that is normally tucked nicely away. If not the lack of oxygen or the stock pile of lactic acid in your muscles, then you've faced fears on steep descents or in the face of a stranger. You may have, by now, been wondering why you paid for this instead of getting paid to do it!

Our limitations are corridors. Instead of dead-ends to avoid, we'd do well to see in our limitation an entry point into real life, into worship. Or, as is often the case, limitation is the stage upon which we turn to self-help and image bolstering. Those distractions we spoke of yesterday show up, more often than not, when we reach the precipice of our comfort zone. Our faith in God shrinks or deepens in such wilderness experiences. The nation of Israel passed out of Egyptian bondage, into the lonely and sparse desert, before they reached the land of "milk and honey."

Jeremiah 2:1

Early in relationship, when the vast empty, unknown spaces abound (What does tomorrow hold?), trust flows out of us like the breath in our lungs. It seems *natural*. As time passes in the "wilderness" of creature-comforts and in the "deserts" of assurances, trust doesn't seem so *natural*. "Where is God?" we wonder.

Jeremiah, like Isaiah, was asking the people to remember. Remember when you followed God like a bride follows her groom? To which Jeremiah might have answered: "God hasn't changed. The desert continues to unfold like it did in those days. *You've* changed."

Coming to terms with God's steady gaze and his relentless presence isn't always pleasant. At times it's like having someone wrestle you all night long (i.e. Jacob), or being left in the desert to die (i.e. Israel). Sometimes you want to scream, "Leave me alone, God!" while at other times you're choking on the tears, "Where are you, God?"

God's strong, unpredictable, unfathomable presence stirs ambivalent in us. We shudder and dance before the One from whom our life flows. We sing and tremble. While uncomfortable, we have hope – our *only* hope.

In the vast, open, lonely places, in the deserts, we must refuse striking out on our own, turning our back on the Groom. C.S. Lewis reminds us that "In the end that Face which is the delight of the terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression of with the other, either

conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shames that can never be cured or disguised" (C.S. Lewis, *Weight of Glory*).

Psalm 104:27-32

Truthfully, you and I are not self-sufficient, self-sustaining. Sure, we can get along for a few days, but our starting place, our existence wasn't our idea. Our days didn't begin with stirring ourselves up out of the primordial mud. Life comes into us from something larger, outside of us. Though a bit more sophisticated than the birds of the air or the lilies of the field, we are numbered amongst creation; we are not the Creator.

Jesus draws striking parallels in our creature status. If not for God's open hand, or face turned toward us the Psalmist says, then terror would fill our days; death would be immediate. Confession, then, begins here. This is the truth.

It must include admitting our revolt against God and our vile spilling out on others; but confession is first an admission of the truth, of our dependency upon God. Note the sweep of the confession in Jesus' prayer in Matthew 6:

*Give us today our daily bread
And forgive us our debts,
as we forgive those who are in debt to us.*

I need food and forgiveness and everything in between. My revolt is my attempt to live without God's gracious hand; it is me looking for sustenance, life, hope elsewhere. That is living apart from God; that is sin. Confession brings me back to this elemental Truth.

Speaking of being in the desert for a long time, Moses led the people out of Egypt at God's prompting (he fought hard against the idea initially: see the burning bush story), only to stand on the Jordan River disallowed to enter. A seemingly small revolt against God resulted in Moses dying in the desert instead of the Promised Land. In all honesty, the punishment doesn't seem to fit the crime. I shudder at the thought that God doesn't seem fair to my sense of justice in this story. Will he treat me similarly?

Moses' prayer: Psalm 90

I am weak. If it is true that I am distracted from the awesome power of God's presence; it is truer still that I am weak in this world and find myself in need at just about every turn.

And sometimes, in my finer moments, I find that God is near; He is strong.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10.

Strong in what ways, though?

How is God strong in my weaknesses?

How do I celebrate in my sorrow?

**June 2003: Day three on the trail*****God is abundant***

Apparently, then, our lifelong nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside, is no mere neurotic fancy, but the truest index of our real situation. (C.S. Lewis, Weight of Glory)

Boredom is to our spirit what numb extremities are to the person suffering hypothermia. Managing to apply more stimulation and input into our overloaded senses is like merely warming your fingers and toes. The real problem in hypothermia is that your body temperature is falling, slowing the metabolism of your body. Warming your fingers is just the start.

Similarly, our natural response to feeling bored is to find something to do, hear, see, or even taste. In other words, fill the void. This journey you have been on thus far in God's untamed creation, hopefully, has shown you, amongst other things, how well you do with so little. Simplicity, you are coming to find, is not only sustainable but desirable. It is the best counter to our overindulged, bored souls.

Instead of raising the volume levels at the first hint of boredom, what if we slowed the input? What if we turned down the volume and strained to hear (because we are hard of hearing) God speaking.

Turning down the volume is difficult for me. I hear myself preaching and teaching this and yet struggling to make it a reality in my own life. I like the flood of stimulation too much. When I push back, silence my surroundings, go for a pre-dawn bike ride, I feel the hunger pangs of living in a strange land. I begin to feel homesick at home. And, as odd as it may sound, I react to desire like it is some sort of poison instead of God's image radiating in me.

Because in the daylight hours I'm running so fast, God often drags me out of bed early in the mornings (or late at night – depending upon how you look at it). I've started getting up instead of fighting it.

Psalm 16

I just read this passage for the first time, again. It's been a while. I just read it during one of those dark, quiet, sleepy hours. Sleep up until I was awakened was more like torment than relaxation. I had so much going on in the daylight that my mind could barely slow to sleep...the thing I felt I needed most. Apparently, though, what I really needed, more than sleep,

was time in Psalm 16. I read the prayer with tears running down my cheeks.

*Therefore my heart is glad,
My tongue rejoices;
My body will also rest secure,
Because you will not abandon me to the grave,
Nor will you let your faithful one see decay.*

What if we walked head-on into the emptiness and, in that quiet space, found God? As much as I needed sleep tonight, God met me and strengthened me, and woke me up to his wild and vivid activity all around me. In the silence, awareness breaks through like the sun bringing the daylight. I'm filled.

The Spirit makes us wide-awake to the battles and the beauty in this world. Far from the shiny, happy, zombie-like Christians seen or portrayed in the media, with their tension-free melodies and squinty prayers, the fruit of the Spirit's filling is born out of the silence and opens our eyes to the blazing mystery of God.

I run after God like a man climbing a mountain, straining towards its peak.

*I have set the Lord before me.
Because of his right hand,
I will not be shaken.*

Desire is a gift from the Creator. It's in our fabric, an essential part of who we are. I want so much more than this world has to offer. I'm not perfectly content. Instead, I'm hungry, wrestling with my pangs. Seems Lewis is right. Desire is the truest index of our real situation.

The real shame comes in our desire being fed with more noise and junk from this world instead of on God. Our desire, in the end, will either lead us into the sanctuary or into the cemetery. Discipleship is knocking, asking, seeking. Jesus said as much in the Sermon on the Mount.

What do you want? God is an abundant treasure.