

**Experiencing God**  
***The Invitation***  
**August 8, 2021**

Good morning everyone! Whether you're here on campus or watching online I'm so glad you're with us today.

If this is your first time with us or your first time in a long time, as Shannon said, we are in a series of messages right now that are designed to help us "experience God."

And we're talking about that because it's very easy – especially for Christians – to become so focused on ...

- What we *believe* about God ...
- And trying to *answer our questions* about God (especially if we have doubts

about God) ...

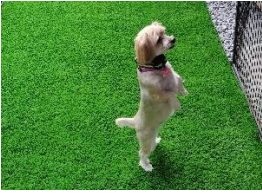
... that we forget that what Christianity is really all about is *our relationship* with God.

Christianity at its core isn't about theology or "the best way to live" – though it does have a theology. And Jesus *did* say that His way of life *is* the best way to live.

Christianity at its core is about our relationship with God and then, how that relationship plays out in every area of our lives.

Now, whenever people are in a relationship, they experience each other. They're aware of each other's presence and activity.

**That's true even with our dog, Zoey, who only *thinks* she is a person.**



- She knows when I or Jetta come into the house, and she responds by running around and jumping up and down.
- We say, "go to bed" and she runs up the stairs.
- We sit down to eat, and she looks longingly at our food.

We have a relationship with her.

But ...

- How do you have a relationship with a *spiritual* Being?
- How do you experience Someone who

isn't flesh and blood?

- How can you sense the presence and activity of God in your life?

That's what we're talking about in this series.

And in the first message two weeks ago – which you can watch, listen to, and even read if you'll go to the media section of our app, website, and podcast ...

In the first message two weeks ago, we saw that a big reason we don't sense God's presence and activity is that we're *not looking in the right places for the right things*.

And that's because a lot of times we think of Jesus as an add-on to an already full and stressful life. Jesus comes to save us from our sins (of course) and then His role, we think, is primarily ...

- To enable us to accomplish our goals and our agenda
- And to help out in the areas of life where we're struggling, or we encounter obstacles and mean people who keep us from living our best life now.

But that's not exactly how God sees it.

Instead, while it *is* true that Jesus *does* come into *our life* and *does* help us because He cares for us, a fuller and more complete picture is that we are coming into *His* life.

We are joining up with God and God's agenda ...

- An agenda on which He has been working long before you and I existed ...

- And an agenda on which He will *continue* working on long after you and I cease to exist.

In whatever it is that God is trying to accomplish in this world, if you're a Christian, God intends for you to be a part of it.

One of the greatest days in my life – and this was long before I became a pastor; many years ago, when I thought my career would be in software design and development, which is what I had gone to college for ...

One of the greatest days of my life was the day I discovered this truth.

At the time, I didn't know exactly what it would mean for me *long-term*. It probably would have terrified me if I *had* known.

But it was a radically re-orienting thought

which affected how I saw myself ...

- As a man
- As a husband
- As a father
- And, yes, even as a geek working for Bell Labs.

“God wants to use me, Rick McGinniss, and my life in some way to help carry out His agenda in this world.”

But not just me and my life.

This is true for every person who believes in and follows Jesus because, as one of Jesus best friends and earliest followers ...

**Peter once put it:**

<NOTE: Leave this slide up until I get all the

way through it >

*You ...*

And in the original Greek text, that word is plural meaning "all of you."

You – all of you – who believe in Jesus and follow Jesus ...

*... are a chosen people ...*

Meaning that Jesus came into your life not only because *you* wanted *Him* but because *He* wanted *you*.

"You – all of you – are a chosen people," Peter says ...

*... a royal priesthood ...*

... which means that "regular people" – moms and dads and students and kids who



know Jesus – are priests in God’s service, not just ...

- People who work for the church
- Or people who went to seminary
- Or those who are ordained.

“All of you are a chosen people and a royal priesthood,” Peter says ...

... *a holy nation* ...

... which means that you are spiritually united with other Christians (who are *also* chosen and *also* priests) ...

... you are spiritually united with other believers in and followers of Jesus in a way that supersedes ...

- Your country of origin

- Your political party
- Your race
- Your gender
- Your economic status
- Even your sexual orientation.

Everything you think defines who you are is now subordinate to this new union and unity for which God has chosen you.

And given the divided world in which we live (and the world in which they lived, too), this is a radical, revolutionary, and mind-blowing idea that could change everything ...

... which is why, despite what you may have heard, Christianity isn't the problem. It's actually part of the solution.

“You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,” Peter says ...

... *God's special possession* ...

And with all that, I think it's pretty obvious. This is a pretty special deal you're involved in.

“You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession,” Peter says ...

... *that you may* ...            *l*  
*Peter 2:9 (NIV)*

Well, we'll get to that in just a minute – what it is that you and I “may” accomplish for God.

... because, as we saw in last week's message ...

**The sequence of experiencing God is *not* ...**

1. God is always at work around you on *His* agenda (which is the first reality of experiencing God)

And then ...

2. God *invites* you to become involved with Him in His work, in that agenda.

Instead, there's something that comes in between those two realities, which is that ...

**God pursues a continuing love relationship with you that is real and personal.**

Before God invites you to accomplish anything for him, He wants you to *receive* His love and *rest* in His love and then *respond* to Him out of a heart of love ...

... which is what we talked about in last Sunday's message.

In fact, if the relationship you have with God is not rooted in love, nothing else I say today and nothing that is said in the coming weeks will be of any value to you. In fact, it will probably mess you up.

So, if you weren't here last Sunday, I highly recommend you go back and watch, listen to or read the message because it's so important.

## **God's Agenda**

But, assuming that's in order, we can now talk about whatever it is that God wants us to be a part of as his "chosen people, royal priesthood, holy nation and special possession."

**We can talk about the "that you may" part of what Peter wrote.**

“You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession ...”

### **That you may ...**

*... declare the praises of him  
who called you out of  
darkness into his wonderful  
light. 1 Peter 2:9 (NIV)*

Now, why would God want that from us – to declare His praises?

Actually, what *is* that in the first place?

Is Peter saying God wants Christians to gather together and sing about God like we did earlier in this service?

Is he talking about standing on street corners and yelling at people about how good God

is?

“Hear ye, hear ye! Jesus rocks! God is awesome!”

I don't think either one of those are what Peter is talking about.

To really understand what he *is* talking about, we need to go back and answer the question that's been left hanging for two-plus weeks which is ... *what exactly is God's agenda in this world?*

After all, if we're coming into God's life and God's agenda as much as (or even more so) than the other way around, we need to know what it is.

And there are lots of ways to describe God's agenda – actually, the whole Bible is a description of it – but I'm going to try and keep

it simple and show you just one very short statement from the Apostle Paul.

Paul, who was probably the greatest theologian of the early Christian movement, once explained God's overarching agenda like this ...

**He wrote:**

*God was, in Christ,  
reconciling the world to  
himself, no longer counting  
people's sins against them.*

If you want to understand what God is working on – and never stops working on – that's it. God is working to reconcile the world to himself.

See, the big picture of human history is that because of sin, all of us – every single person who has ever lived – have been separated



from God.

But because God so loved the world – because you matter to Him, and I matter to Him, and the people we don't like and who don't like us matter to Him ...

Because God so loved the world, God did not abandon the world.

Instead, He has been actively involved in human affairs throughout history, orchestrating history to bring the world – all of us and all of creation – back to Himself.

Everything that God *has been* doing and *is* doing in this world works to that end.

God was, in Christ – in how Jesus lived, died, and rose again – in all of that, God was reconciling the world to himself.

That's the big picture. That's God's agenda.

But it doesn't stop there because, remember, God wants to involve those who believe in Jesus and follow Jesus in that agenda which is, as it turns out ...

**... exactly what Paul writes in the very next sentence.**

*God was, in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them.*

*And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.*

*2 Corinthians 5:19 (NIV)*

*To us.*

*To us ... who have been called out of darkness of sin and death and condemnation into the wonderful light of freedom and*

eternal life and forgiveness ...

*To us ... who are (undeservedly) chosen ... who are (unknowingly) priests ... who are (unexpectedly) citizens of Heaven because of our faith in and love for Jesus ...*

*To us ... who are all of those things and have received all of those things ...*

*To us has been given the invitation to join with God by declaring His goodness and love – the message of reconciliation to the people around us.*

*“You are the light of the world,” Jesus once told his followers.*

*“So don’t hide it. Live in such a way that others will see your light and be drawn to and reconciled with the Father, just as you have been.”*

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Now, if you've been around church for any length of time, this probably isn't news to you.

In fact, this is how God has always worked in this world.

**God has always invited men and women to be involved in carrying out his redemptive plans.**

- When God wanted to save His people from a severe famine, He revealed to a young man named Joseph that a drought was coming.
- When God wanted to save His people from a widespread massacre, He raised up a young woman, Esther, to the royal throne.

- When He was preparing to send the Messiah into the world, God commissioned John the Baptist to prepare the way.
- When Jesus laid His life down for our sins, the Father prompted a businessman, Joseph of Arimathea, to make his own tomb available for Jesus' body.
- When God wanted to spread the good news about Jesus to the non-Jewish world, he knocked Paul off of his horse and said, "you will be my witness to the Gentiles."

And the list could go on and on because everything in the Bible is, ultimately, about that ...

... which, by the way, is very helpful in

understanding the Bible.

Because it's so big and covers such a huge time frame, it's easy to think of the Bible as a book full of stories about unconnected individuals.

In reality, however, it's actually a story *about* God – specifically, a story about God's work in the world and how He uses people to accomplish it by inviting them to join Him in His activity.<sup>i</sup>

But that's not just a "Bible thing." God still does that even today ...

... which is why, in order to experience the presence and activity of God in your life, you must focus on God's purposes not your plans.

**You have to have it in mind – in every situation – that ...**

- “God wants to reconcile this person with Himself through Jesus” (if they’re not already a Christian)
- Or (if they are a Christian) “God wants this person to more fully experience that reconciliation” ...

... which is to be more aware of it and changed by it into the person they were meant to be.

That’s what God is up to, ultimately, in the life of every person that you come into contact with.

That’s what He’s up to in the life of your spouse and your kids.

That’s what He’s up to in the life of the person sitting next to you or in front of you or behind you today.

And He wants you to be involved in that in some way.

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Of course, some might say, "Rick, that's awfully narrow and simplistic."

- Doesn't God want peace on earth?"
- Doesn't God want justice for the oppressed?"
- Doesn't God want freedom for people who are enslaved?"
- Doesn't God want people to have an abundant life? I mean, Jesus actually said that."

So, shouldn't Christians be working to bring



about those kinds of things?”

Yes ... and no.

God *does* desire all of those things for this world.

But all of those things – peace, justice, freedom, and abundance – are the fruit, not the root.

In other words, *the reason* we lack peace, and justice, and freedom, and abundance is because of a much deeper problem: the world is lost and captive to the power of sin and death.

The root of the problem is our sin and alienation from God ...

**... which is, again, why ...**

*God was, in Christ,  
reconciling the world to  
himself, no longer counting  
people's sins against them.*

See, as much as God wants us to work for peace and justice and freedom and so many other good things in this world, at the end of the day ...

*He has committed to us the  
message of reconciliation.*

Christians are called by God not only to serve the world, but to serve *with a redemptive purpose.*

Because when people are truly reconciled to God and fully living their lives from that place ...

- Peace follows

- Justice follows
- Freedom follows
- Abundance follows
- Everything right and good that we long for follows ...

... which again, is why Christianity isn't part of the *problem* in this world. It's part of the *solution*.

## Invited

Now, with all of that said ... with at least some clarity (I hope!) about what God's agenda is in this world ... let's back up just a bit and ...

**... look at the three realities of Experiencing God.**

1. God is always at work around you on His agenda.
2. God pursues a continuing love relationship with you that is real and personal.
3. God invites you to become involved with Him in His work.

Now, what I want you to see next is that just *knowing* God's agenda in the world is not the same as *being invited* to join Him in any given situation.

And the best example of this by far is Jesus himself.

**Jesus once said ...**

*"I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself. He does only what he sees the*

*Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son also does.*

*For the Father loves the Son and shows him everything he is doing." John 5:19-20 (NLT)*

Now, here's an interesting question to think about.

Do you think Jesus understood His Father's agenda in the world?

Obviously, right?

After all, in him God the Father was reconciling the world to Himself! Jesus knew why He was here.

And yet, he says, He didn't act on his own. He didn't look around and come up with a five-step plan of how He was going to spread the

Gospel.

Instead, He says, He only did what the Father was doing ... *already* doing.

**When He saw what the Father was already doing, Jesus took that as the invitation to join Him.**

And the Father did amazing things in and through Jesus which Jesus knew to be the work of His Father.

And it works the same way for you and me.

It's only when see what God is already doing that we are invited to join Him.

Let me state that a little more directly.

**When you actually see God doing what only God can do, that's your invitation to adjust your life and join Him in that work.<sup>ii</sup>**

Now, obviously, knowing God's agenda in this world helps you to know *where to look* for God doing what only God can do.

But not until you see God *actually doing* what only God can do, are you invited to do anything.

And there are many stories in the Bible which illustrate that, but I want to share with you how I came to learn this the hard way ...

... because this isn't just a "Bible thing" – this is a "thing thing." This is how it works even today.

Many years ago, Jetta and I and our two daughters moved here from NJ when I was changing careers and I needed to go to seminary ... which I did at MBTS over on North Oak.

Through the providence of God, it took just two weeks for me to find an amazing job as a youth pastor at Park Hill Baptist Church over on Highway 9.

So, I was going to school and working part-time and, at about two years in, I heard about this church in Chicago that was doing some amazing things in reaching many, many people who didn't go to church.

And it soon became apparent to me that God had placed a calling on my life to be part of a church like that. And I was anxious to get going on it.

- So, because by nature and spiritual gifting, I'm somewhat of a visionary and a leader ...
- And because I just couldn't get it out of my mind that Park Hill Baptist could do



that, too ...

I convinced my boss – the senior pastor – and our music pastor that, not only *could* we do that ... we *should* do that.

And because both of them were humble guys, they actually allowed me to design and communicate to the whole congregation of about 350 people ...

- How our church could change to better reach the people around us who didn't know Jesus
- How we could better declare the praises of Him who called us from darkness to light

Now, here's the kicker.

What I proposed was basically the same

strategy that we have followed here at NHCC since the day we launched in 1994 ...

... a strategy which, over the years, has led hundreds if not thousands of people who didn't know Jesus to believe in Him and follow Him and become part of His Kingdom and this church.

But at Park Hill ... even *just communicating* that strategy was a disaster.

- People were mad. Feelings were hurt.
- It was so bad that some even suggested that I be fired and that my ordination credentials be revoked!
- People said terrible things about the senior pastor – that he was letting his staff run wild (meaning *me*) and that he had lost control.

It was the worst two years of my life.

And I thought many times about quitting and going back into the tech world.

And the reason it was so bad is that *what I was doing was not what God was doing.*

Oh, I understood God's agenda in this world. And I was right about the fact that some churches ought to do what I was proposing.

But God was not inviting me or that church to do that, which is why it was a train wreck.

"How do you know that Rick?"

Well, let me tell you the rest of the story.

A couple of years later (I was still on staff at PHBC), as I was outside working in my yard

one evening, my neighbor Kevin was sitting on his porch.

I could hear him talking with some friends. They were laughing and having a good time.

And I wasn't sure, but I thought I heard them mention God a couple of times, which was odd because I knew Kevin wasn't a Christian.

But then at one point, he called out to me. And I'll never forget what he said.

"Hey Rick, this is your department. We have some questions. Come over here and talk to us about God."

Now, I have no recollection of what their questions were or what I said. All I remember is being totally shocked – like "is this really happening?"

But from that day on, my thought was “what kind of a church would it take to reach Kevin and his wife, Diane?” And, out of that singular thought, North Heartland was born.

Amazingly, Park Hill Baptist put up \$100,000 to help me hire staff and get the thing rolling. (Some said it was well worth \$100K to get rid of me).

And Kevin and Diane?

They came to church, accepted Jesus and I baptized them both in Smithville Lake.

Now, eventually, they moved away, and I lost touch with them.

But several years ago, Kevin actually moved back to KC and – in the ultimate irony – became a member of Park Hill Baptist Church!

I think he even became a deacon.

God obviously has sense of humor.

## **God at Work**

Now, the point of the story is that God was already at work in Kevin's life, and I just joined Him which is why the result was so different – literally “far beyond anything I could have ever asked or imagined.”

And, I know some of you are thinking, “Ok, Rick, that's great but, again, how do you *know* that God was at work in Kevin's life but *not* at work at Park Hill Baptist (at least not in that way)?”

I know because God was doing in Kevin what only God can do. And I saw it, which was God's invitation for me to get involved.

## **Jesus once said ...**

*"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them to me." John 6:44 (NLT)*

What that means is that people don't search for answers or seek God on their own initiative.

## **In fact, Paul literally says that in one of his letters.**

*There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, there is no one who seeks God.*

*Romans 3:10 (NIV)*

So, if someone *is* seeking God or asking questions about Christianity – like Kevin was that evening, that's God at work. That's something only God can do.

**And there are several things like that that only God can do.**

For instance, Jesus said that God ...

- Draws people to Himself.
- Causes people to seek Him.

And, also according to Jesus, the Holy Spirit ...

- Reveals spiritual truth to people.
- Convicts people of guilt regarding sin.
- Convinces people of the righteousness of Jesus.
- Frees people from fear of judgment.

And whenever you see those things happening in the life of someone around you, that's God at work.

And that's your invitation – if you're a



Christian – to declare the praises of Him who called you from darkness to light.

That's your invitation to be part of the reconciliation that God wants everyone to experience.

Now, that might mean that ...

- You talk about your experience with Jesus.
- Or invite that person to come to church with you.
- Or simply love on them and shine light on them in some way.
- Or something else that God shows you in the moment.

The point is ... when you see those kinds of

things happening, your response should be "OK, God, I see you at work and I want to join you. So, show me what you want me to do."

And God will do that. He will direct you.

And we'll talk about how *that* happens next week.

## **A Current Challenge**

But there's a couple other things that only God can do which, when we see them happening, are our invitation to join Him.

And I want to close out this message by talking about them, because this actually has a very current application to all of us who consider NHCC to be "our church."

And I know you're tired of hearing about this issue and I'm tired of talking about it but it's

such a great example of what we're talking about today.

So here goes.

**Last Monday, we discovered that Mayor Lucas' mask mandate exempts churches.**

Maybe you already knew that, but we didn't because it was buried way down near the end of the order; so far down that even the news media missed it.

No local TV channel mentioned it in their initial reporting nor did the KC Star, which is why we were unaware of it when I said last Sunday that we would follow the mandate and asked everyone to mask up beginning today.

So, on Tuesday, our pastors had a very intense discussion over what we should do in light of that discovery.

And it was intense because, as I have said many times, our staff is very diverse just like our congregation. All sides of this COVID issue are represented among us.

So, we argued about two options.

**Option 1 is to say ...**

We believe we discerned God's intention for NHCC last week. Therefore, even though we are not required to do so, we will follow the masking mandate until the mayor rescinds it.

**Option 2 is to say ...**

Our policy since the beginning of COVID has been to follow the mandates of KCMO. We are not included in this mandate. Therefore, everyone should make their own decision about masking.

After many, many words, we finally made our choice.

And then we agreed to pray about it and sleep on it and see if we felt good about it the next day ... which is our custom when making major decisions.

But I could not sleep because the more I thought about what we had decided, the more uneasy I felt.

And as I was getting ready the next morning, I realized, "I cannot stand before the church in good conscience and say what it is we have decided on."

And I prayed, "Lord, what am I going to do?"

And a particular scripture came to mind.

Now, here's what's fascinating.

Mica, our executive pastor, who was on the other side of the issue from me (in fact, her option "won") ... also could not sleep.

And so, she was praying, "Lord, what are we going to do?"

And a scripture came to her as well ... *the same exact scripture that came to me ... just out of the blue.*

**This one, which Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount:**

*"If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles." Matthew 5:41 (NIV)*

Now, we'll talk about this more next week, but whenever you pray, you should always watch and listen to see what happens next because

only God can answer a prayer.

And when He does, that's his way of speaking to you, and inviting you to join Him.

And when *two people on opposing sides pray* and the same scripture comes to them, that's not just God speaking.

That's God pounding on the door saying, "LISTEN UP!"

So, at our meeting on Wednesday, we both shared our experience – and our shock – with the rest of the staff.

And then, as a team, we tried to discern what that verse means in this situation because there are two ways you could take it.

Back when Jesus first said it, a Roman soldier could force a person to carry his pack for a

mile. That was the law.

And what Jesus saying was “if you’re my follower, I want you to *do more* than what the law requires of you. And do it so that the soldier will be impacted by your graciousness. Do it to be a light to the world.”

And because of that, I thought it meant that we should go with option 1.

“Even though we’re not required to wear masks, we should do more than what the law requires. Let’s ask everyone to continue following the mask mandate at church until the mayor rescinds it - even though we don’t have to.”

But there was another interpretation that was much better because it was much more in keeping with our policy of not being political and remaining squarely focused on our



mission in this community to everyone regardless of political persuasion.

I mean, we don't want to be labeled as a pro-mask church or a no-mask church because *we are not about masks!*

We are about Jesus and seeing the world reconciled to God through Him.

And the better interpretation of "going the extra mile" is about *that* and not masks.

That became obvious to me when our Advisory Council looked at the two options and, to a person, said "You know, I'm option 1 *personally*, but I will do option 2 (or vice versa) for the benefit of our congregation and our community."

What they were saying was that they would go the extra mile for people on the other side;

they would do what “the other side” thought was best even though they didn’t have to and didn’t necessarily like it or agree with it.

**Paul wrote that in God’s kingdom ...**

*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, [masked or unmasked] for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:20 (NIV)*

And that, friends, is clearly something that only God can do.

So, when man-made barriers fall and people with significant differences can agree to live together in peace, that is God at work.

That’s God bringing about reconciliation, and we should join him.

**And so, our decision – our recommendation as**

**pastors – is for *you* to do whatever requires you to go the extra mile, and by so doing be a light to the world around us because of our love for one another.**

So, if you think “I don’t believe these masks make a difference or I’m just sick and tired of it,” maybe for you, wearing the mask in church is the extra mile.

Some of you may be taking an overly cautious approach to this thing – maybe for you, the extra mile is being here and wearing a mask and keeping your distance.

Some of you who have been staying home and watching online because well, honestly, you’re just lazy - maybe you literally need to go the miles that it takes to get here.

I don’t know what it is for you but I challenge you to figure out what it looks like for you going forward.

And I know it would be much easier if I said “option 1 or option 2” but walking in the Spirit – discerning and following the prompting of God – isn’t always easy. It’s a lot easier to just hand down a law.

But we are people who are lead by the Spirit so let us keep in step with the Spirit.

## **Closing**

Now the way we’re going to close this morning is by singing a song together that is actually a prayer that God fill us with His Spirit and use us to accomplish his purposes and plans in this world.

So, let’s stand together and do that, OK?

Here we go.

# Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Blackaby, Henry T.; Blackaby, Richard; King, Claude V.. *Experiencing God* (2021 Edition) (p. 130). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>ii</sup> Blackaby, Henry T.; Blackaby, Richard; King, Claude V.. *Experiencing God* (2021 Edition) (p. 133). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.