

Experiencing God
First Things
August 1, 2021

Good morning everyone. I'm so glad you're joining us whether you are here on campus or watching online.

A couple of things before I begin this message ...

First of all, for those who are on campus – specifically, those of you here in the auditorium ...

You should know that this little video bumper that's been playing before the message for the past month or so is going to be a regular feature of our services from here on out.

And I can tell there's still a little confusion

about this so I'm just going to be very clear: whenever it plays, that's my cue to come onstage and your cue to go ahead and have a seat.

So, you don't need for me or anyone else to say it, just go ahead and sit down.

Second, I'm sure you're aware that Mayor Lucas has issued an order that, beginning tomorrow ...

Everyone in Kansas City over the age of five – vaccinated or not – must wear a mask in all places of “indoor public accommodation” which, obviously includes this building.

And, in my weekly email that went out on Friday, I said that I would address our position on that as part of the service today.

That will happen after the song that happens

after this message.

So don't leave or turn off the livestream during the song or you'll miss it. OK?

Here we go ...

As Shannon said, today we're continuing in the series called *Experiencing God*, which we began last Sunday.

And the reason we're doing this series is because so many of us said in the "doubt survey" we took back in May that one of the greatest struggles we have is sensing the presence and activity of God in our everyday lives.

And that inability – the fact that God isn't more "visible" to us – makes us doubt from

time to time that God is real and really there.

Even though we do have plenty of evidence that Jesus of Nazareth really *did* live and really *did* say and do the things recorded in the Gospels ...

And we have enough evidence to believe the claim that He really did die and then rose and then crossed over into the realm that we know as "Heaven."

Even though ...

Oh, by the way ... if you're not a Christian and you wonder why I say, "we have evidence" of all these things, I should probably point out that contrary to what you may have heard or been told ...

Christian faith does not require you to ignore reality and "just believe." It's not about

“believing anyway” in spite of having no evidence.

That’s how fairytales work.

But Christianity is not based on a fairytale. It’s based on a real person who lived in a real place at a real time.

And while it *does* require faith to trust in that person (Jesus) as our savior and to make *His* ways *our* ways (which is to follow Him) ...

That faith is not *blind* faith.

It’s faith that’s based on *evidence* that you can examine for yourself – if you’re willing to take the time.

And, if you want to do that, I encourage you to go to the media section of our app and website and check out the messages from the

“doubt series” which came before this one.

But my point was ... even though we have strong historical and even scientific evidence that points in the direction of God being real and involved in His creation ...

What we really want to know and *need* to know is ... where is the evidence of God’s presence and activity in *our* lives *right now*?

How can we “see” that? How can we sense and discern that?

That’s the purpose of this series.

Proper Perspective

And last week we started out by talking about why God sometimes seems hidden to us.

And we saw that there are several good

reasons for that, but *the main reason* is that we're typically not looking in the right places for the right things.

In other words, we tend to look where God *isn't* for things that God *does not do*.

And the reason we typically do that is because in our thinking ...

- God is merely an add-on to our lives; part of a collection of things that includes family, career, hobbies, etc.
- "And God's primary job ... God's main role ... God's *agenda*," we think, "is to help us manage those things; specifically, to step in and fix the problems that come up in those things that we cannot."

And so that's what we look for.

And when God doesn't do that ...

- When our job doesn't work out ...
- When our home is vandalized ...
- When our marriage blows up ...
- When our kids have trouble at school ...
- When friends disappoint us ...
- When something we desperately want doesn't come our way ...

... that's when we start to think: "I invited Jesus to be my savior ... God's a part of my life (and maybe even a big part) ... so what's wrong? Why isn't it – Christianity – working?"

In reality, *nothing* is wrong ... other than our

understanding of God's role and our perspective of God's position and our own.

The reality is that ...

- God has His own agenda which is far greater than yours and mine ...
- And God has been at work on that agenda long before you and I existed ...
- And God will *continue* working on it *long after* you and I cease to exist.

So, a more accurate understanding – and this is key to being able to sense God's presence and activity ...

If you're a Christian, a far more accurate understanding than "I invited Jesus into my life so He can help with what I am doing" is "Jesus invited me into *His* life so I can participate in what He is doing."

A far more accurate understanding than “God is part of *my* life” is “I am part of God’s life and God’s agenda on which He is always working.”

And that probably sounds strange because we live in such a “me-focused” culture where we are told over and over that everything – even God! – is all about us.

But that’s completely backwards.

Jesus said ...

“You did not choose Me, but I chose you. I appointed you that you should go out and produce fruit and that your fruit should remain.” John 15:16 (NIV)

We’ll talk about what “fruit” is in a later message, but the point is ... *the* agenda in our lives – if we’re believers in and followers of

Jesus – is God's, not ours.

This is why, many years later, one of Jesus' followers ...

The Apostle Paul would write ...

It is God who is working in you

...

Ok, that's good. That's great. That's what I want, Paul. So, what's God doing?

It is God who is working, Paul writes ...

*... enabling you both to will
and to act for His good
purpose. Philippians 2:13
(NIV)*

God's primary work in your life (if you're a Christian), Paul says, is to give you the motivation ("the will") and the power to carry out, not *your* good purposes, but *his* good

purpose.

One of Jesus' closest friends and earliest followers, Peter, later described for others who were believing in and following Jesus exactly what had happened to them using a very vivid metaphor.

He wrote ...

*As you come to him, the living
Stone ...*

... referring to Jesus.

As you join up with Jesus, Peter says
– and not the other way around ...

As you come to Jesus, the living Stone ...

*... you also, like living stones,
are being built into a spiritual
house ... 1 Peter 2:5 (NIV)*

In other words, God is taking you and your life and putting you and it into a very specific place in whatever it is He is building.

Now, if you're getting this picture clear in your mind – and I hope you are because it's so critical ...

If this perspective is making sense, it would seem that what you must do next (if you want to experience God's presence and activity in your life) ...

If that's your goal, it would seem that what you must do next is figure out ...

- What is it that God is building? And where do I fit?
- What is God's agenda? And how can I be part of it??

It would seem that way but just because it seems that way doesn't mean it is that way.

Because, again, God's way is not our way.

In God's way, there's something else that comes before that.

What's (Really) Next

Jesus once told a story about a father who had two sons.

Even if you're not a Christian or haven't spent much time in church, I'm sure you've heard of it ... which is kind of interesting because you never would have heard of it if Jesus's followers hadn't written it down and they wouldn't have written it down if he had been killed by the Romans and that was it.

But I digress.

Jesus says that this father has two sons.

And everybody knows the part about the first son – the younger son – the prodigal son, so to speak.

And Jesus says that the son takes his share of the father's inheritance, leaves home and wastes it all – every last shekel of it.

And then he comes to his senses and comes back home to find not shame and judgment but grace and forgiveness.

The father – who is the epitome of the reckless love we sang about earlier (in fact, “prodigal” actually *means* “reckless”) ... the father sees the kid way off in the distance and starts running to him and embraces him and welcomes him home.

And then he invites the whole town to come to a huge party to celebrate. And they do.

Meanwhile, Jesus says ...

*“Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields ... working.
Luke 15:25 (NLT)*

Who was he working for? Whose property was it?

It was the father’s property. He was carrying out his father’s agenda not his own ... kind of like what we’re talking about today.

Jesus says that ...

When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, and he asked one of the servants what was going on. Luke 15:25-26 (NLT)

"Dude, your brother's back! And your dad is so happy that he is alive and that he's safe. And that's why we're celebrating."

At this, Jesus said ...

The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father even came out and begged him! Luke 15:28 (NIV)

... but he replied ...

"All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to.

"And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends.

"Yet when this son of yours

*comes back after
squandering your money on
prostitutes, you celebrate by
killing the fattened calf!"*
Luke 15:29-30 (NLT)

Wow, what a harsh reaction!

What's wrong with this son? Why such bitterness towards his father?

What's wrong ... and the reason he is so bitter ... is that he has been working for his father – "slaving" and "never refusing" he says ...

He's been working for his father ... carrying out his father's agenda; his father's purposes ...

But he doesn't love His father. And he doesn't believe that his father loves him.

And that's how it works with our parents, right?

If we don't think they love us and we don't love them back, then doing what they ask of us produces bitterness.

If the relationship is not right, then whatever we do will eventually feel like slaving and being treated unfairly.

And it works the same way with God ... which is part of the reason why Jesus told this story.

It was meant as a warning to those who were so committed to *doing* the will of God (in this case, the Pharisees – the religious teachers and spiritual guides) without *loving* the God of that will.

And this is why, when it comes to the seven realities of “experiencing God” that we’re looking at in this series ...

The sequence is *not* ...

1. God is always at work around you (which is what we talked about last week)

And then ...

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

That's not the sequence.

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 do anything for him, he wants you to *receive* His love for you and *rest* in His love for you and then *respond* to Him in love.

God wants your heart before he wants your help in whatever His agenda might be.

And this is where so many Christians get messed up with God (and so many non-Christians misunderstand Christianity) because, in the way our world works, you're not loved until you do something and do it well.

So, we think the order is ...

1. God is always at work (which is what we talked about last week)
2. God invites you to become involved with Him in His work.

And if you do enough of the work ... and you do it *good* enough ... THEN and ONLY THEN ...

3. God pursues a love relationship with you.

And – wow – that sequence is a prescription for spiritual bitterness and disillusionment because we're talking about *God* and *God's standards* here ... standards to which we can never measure up.

... which is why so many Christians carry around a hopeless attitude of "I'm never good enough ... I've never done enough ... God must be mad at me."

It's why, for so many of us, our interactions with God become legalistic and transactional.

"Ok, God, I did *this* for you, now you owe me *that*. I *slaved* for you in the field, now I want *my party* with *my goat* with *my friends*."

And if that's where you are ... if that's how you feel about God and how you see your relationship with God, I'm so glad you are here today or watching online because the good news is ... that's not how it works!

Before God invites you to do anything at all for Him ...

- He pursues you ...
- Because He loves you ...
- And He wants to have an ongoing relationship with you that is real and personal.
- And that relationship – that love for you – is independent of your “doing.”

Not that God doesn't want you to do things –

even great things – for Him. He may.

But first, before any of that, God wants you to *receive* his love and *rest* in his love and then *respond back* to Him in love.

So, if you've been a Christian for a long time and you haven't been able to sense God's presence and activity in your life, it's worth asking yourself:

“Do I know that God loves me just as I am?”

If you're a Christian and you're not experiencing God, this is the reality to focus on.

You must be absolutely convinced of God's love for you because everything about your life as a follower of Jesus, everything about knowing God and experiencing Him depends on the quality of your love relationship with

God.

If this relationship is not right, nothing in your life will be in order.

So, how do we know that God loves us?

We know because he has pursued us ... just like the song said.

The overwhelming, never-ending

Reckless love of God

It chases me down

Fights 'til I'm found

In the story that Jesus told about the two sons, did you notice that, in both cases, the father goes out?

He sees the wild-living, hell-raising son on the

road in the distance and runs to him: "Come home! Come home! All is forgiven!"

And he sees the rule-keeping duty-driven son standing outside of the party, bitter and angry.

And he goes to him, too. "Come in! Come in! You're forgiven, too!"

Paul writes that ...

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures.

Like the younger son in Jesus' story, some of us were wild-living hell-raisers.

We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.

Like the older son, some of us were duty-driven, bitter rule-keepers.

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. Titus 3:3-5 (NIV)

While we were *still* wild-living hell-raisers or duty-driven, bitter rule-keepers ...

God's kindness and compassion went out looking for us. God's love pursued us.

And God's mercy saved us when Jesus went to the cross for our sins and made the relationship possible.

And again, everything rises and falls on this knowledge, this experience of being loved by God.

And if you're struggling with this, I encourage you to pray for God to make His love for you and his pursuit of you in what Jesus did real and personal because that is something only God can do.

I can tell you about it, but I can't make it real in your heart and spirit.

Loving God

So, God wants you to *receive* his love and *rest* in his love but then He wants you to *respond back* to Him in love.

And, according to one of Jesus' best friends, a guy we know as the Apostle John, you can't separate those two anymore than you can

split a coin in half.

He wrote:

*We love [Him] because he first
loved us. 1 John 4:19
(NIV)*

Side A of the coin is "God loves us." Side B is
"we love God."

So, what does that look like? How do you do
that? How do you love God back?

Well, I think there's a lot of similarities to how
you love anyone back.

For example, when you love someone, you
feel it. Maybe not all the time but there is
some level of emotion there.

And you tell them. You verbalize it in some
way.

And you can do that with God.

That's part of the purpose of singing in our service. It's an opportunity to feel love for God and verbally express it to Him.

So, I was thinking about that – the similarities – and I thought about ...

- How a husband loves his wife and how she loves him back.
- How parents love their children and how children love them back.
- How we love our friends and relatives and other significant people in our lives, and they love us back ...

And I came up with five things that we do – almost without thinking about it – simply

because we love.

And I realized that all of these things are ways that we can love God, too.

So, if you're trying to do that, maybe these will help you.

When you love someone ...

1. What matters most to them begins to matter more to you.

Most of you know that I am a long-suffering Kansas City Royals fan.

And there is a lot of suffering going on this year.

But I love baseball and I love the Royals and I probably watch at least part of 90% of the games because I believe they're going to turn it around.

Jetta does not. And she does not love baseball.

But she loves me and she knows that the Royals matter to me.

And so she will act like she is interested and ask me questions and listen to my replay analysis.

What matters most to me matters a little more to her.

And the same thing happens with God.

If we love God, what matters most to Him – and we're going to talk about that next Sunday – will matter more and more to us.

When you love someone ...

2. You often defer to what they prefer.

Jetta loves Mexican food. I do not.

And when we go out to dinner, I know in advance where she will want to go.

And even though I don't love Mexican food, I love her. So I defer to what she prefers.

What does it mean to defer to what God prefers?

<If you love me you will obey my commands>

"Don't take my name in vain."

I can try to excuse it or say it's just words but hey, it seems like God doesn't really like for people to do that and I love God, so I won't.

So, if you love someone ...

- What matters most to them begins to matter more to you.
- And you often defer to what they prefer

But how do you know what matters most to someone? How do you know what they prefer?

Well, if you love them ...

3. You stop, look and listen.

You take time – literally – to sit down and listen. You stop talking about yourself and listen to them.

You pay attention to what they do and say,

and you start drawing conclusions based on what you're seeing and hearing.

What does it mean to stop, look and listen to God?

<Bible>

When you love someone ...

4. Making them happy makes you happy.

Bringing them joy brings you joy.

If you have children, you know that the best part of Christmas morning is seeing their reaction to the gifts you've given them.

Because you love them and value them, you feel great joy over their joy.

It works the same way with God. When you

love God, it pleases you to please him and so you want to do that.

And your effort isn't covered in the bitterness of the older son who felt like he HAD to do something.

When you love God, you feel like you GET to do something for Him.

And that pleases Him and you at the same time.

Finally, when you love someone ...

5. You give up so they can go up.

You take less so they can have more. You become less so they can be more.

Bottom line, when you love someone, you put *them* before *you*.

What *they* value, what *they* prefer, what *they* delight in takes precedent over what you value, prefer and delight in.

Again, if you have kids, you know what this is like. You give up time and money and sleep and privacy so that they can develop into all that they're meant to be.

When it comes to loving God you "give up" but not so that God can go up. After all God is already as "up" as anyone can be.

You give up – you sacrifice – your agenda so that God's agenda can go up.

And I think this is what Jesus was getting at when he said ...

Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness ...

Give up your agenda so that God's agenda can go up.

Of course, the miracle of that – the experience of God's presence and activity is that when you do that – when you put God's kingdom first in your life ...

... and all these things will be given to you as well.

Matthew 6:33 (NIV)

Whatever you give up will come back to you at some point.

Well, those are some of the ways that we can love God.

And I hope this is helpful to you because, again, if you're a Christian and you want to be part of what God is doing in this world ...

... if you want to experience God and see God at work in your life and in the lives of others, this is the foundation.

Before God invites you to do anything for him, he wants you to first receive His love for you and rest in His love for you and then respond to Him in love.

God wants your heart *first* before he wants your help.

Let's pray.

=====

I pray that your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong.

I pray that you may have the power to understand how wide, how long, how high,

and how deep his love is.

May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully ...

And through that experience be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.

Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think.

Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever!

Amen.ⁱ

Ok, next week, we'll continue with the third reality of *Experiencing God* which is that

AFTER establishing a relationship with you God invites you to become involved with Him in His work.

And we'll talk more about what that work is ... because I know some of you are still wondering.

COVID Update

So, let's talk about Mayor Lucas' mask mandate which goes into effect tomorrow.

You've probably heard that there is some legal pushback at the state level, challenging the Mayor's right to do that.

I'm not a legal expert so I have no idea how that will turn out in the long run but, for right now, it doesn't really matter.

Beginning tomorrow – actually at midnight

tonight, we will be required by law to wear masks whenever an activity takes place in this building.

And I know that some of us believe that's a really good idea because it will slow or stop the spread of the Delta variant of COVID-19.

And we can produce data and expert opinions that support our belief.

Others of us think it's unnecessary because while the Delta variant spreads faster, the cases are actually milder.

And we too, can produce data and expert opinions that support our belief.

Some of us – especially those who have been vaccinated – think that “the only pandemic is among the unvaccinated” ... so why should we have to wear a mask for them?

If they'd "just do it," there would be no issue.

Some of us – especially those who are not vaccinated – are wary because the vaccines are still "experimental" and we don't think the government should be pushing us to take it. "My body my choice" I believe is how some put it.

And we're willing to let the vaccinated go unmasked and take our chances.

Some of us – especially those who have had COVID – are suspicious of the government's use of "the science" for policymaking when there is zero recognition of the value of natural immunity going forward.

And we can produce up-to-date data and expert opinions showing its value likely exceeds that of a vaccination and that, when paired with a vaccine, protection against

COVID increases 20-fold.

Some of us believe that the mask mandate is just another move towards increased governmental control that will eventually lead to more and more lockdowns and restrictions of freedoms in general.

Now, the reason I'm laying all of this out is simply to say that everybody around you has a reason for "thinking and doing" which makes sense to them.

And if you were sitting where they sit – if your experience was theirs, you'd probably be taking a stand where they take a stand.

So ... and this is my pastoral word to you if you're a Christian and NHCC is your church

...

Let's not judge one another.

Let's understand that none of us is infallible; that all of us are likely wrong about something in our opinions.

And let's love one another.

Let's remember that even though we might not agree with others, we can love them and want the best for them.

They are not their opinions.

Now, as to what we are going to do with respect to the Mayor's order, it's very simple.

We are going to follow it.

Beginning tomorrow and lasting through the end of the month, whenever there is a public activity in this building, we *will* require masking.

In addition, if at some point, there is a mandate to resume “physical distancing” we’ll do that, too.

However, if at some point, there is a mandate to close our doors like we did last year ...

I will not lead us to do that without substantial, indisputable evidence of a widespread, imminent life-threatening danger.

I will not lead us to close our doors “just to be on the safe side.”

And lest you think this is a political statement on my part or on the part of the pastors, nothing could be further from the truth.

It is not my job, nor is it the role of this church to “take a stand” for political rights and freedoms.

That's *your* job – if you believe it's necessary – as a citizen of this country.

Nor is that statement an indication of anything I or the other pastors believe concerning the seriousness of COVID.

It's not my job or the role of this church to be anyone's medical advisor.

Instead, we – the pastors of this church – have a different job.

Our job is to attend to the spiritual health and mission of this church and its members.

And what we learned from going through the "lockdown" last year, is that grave damage was done to both.

It was not good spiritually and emotionally both individually and collectively.

And quite frankly, we have not yet recovered from it, both individually and collectively.

And as grateful as I am that we have the technology to livestream our online services ...

As grateful as I am that those who need to stay isolated because of their health or the health of people they love can still watch and engage at some level ...

There is no substitute for being together.

And I don't mean that "the experience just isn't the same" though that is true.

What I mean is that it's theologically and spiritually impossible to be a church – and to be part of a church – without physically gathering with other believers in the same place ...

.... which is why Christians all over the world

throughout the centuries have risked life and limb to secretly meet when it was declared illegal by the powers that be.

In fact, all over the world this very day, thousands if not millions of Christians are doing just that.

And what COVID did - and not just to this church but to churches all over the world ...

What COVID did was to reinforce the “me-focused” distortion of Christianity ...

... which we've talked about in this series; where God is an add-on to my life, whose primary agenda is to help me through my problems and then basically leave me alone.

And church is just another podcast with good music at the beginning followed by a pep talk from a gifted speaker that I can incorporate along with all the others that I chose to watch

or listen to.

Now, please don't hear what I'm not saying.

- I want our music to be good.
- I want to use my gifts and those of the other pastors who speak to challenge and encourage you.

But "podcast church" is incompatible with our mission to be ...

- A church where Christians can use their spiritual gifts ...
- ... to build a ministry where non-Christian family and friends can come and experience a taste of God's grace.

It's incompatible with our mission to be a light to people in this community who need Jesus

and the good news.

And that's why – for the spiritual and emotional health of our congregation as well the health of our mission – we will do what is necessary to be safe (including masks and distancing if necessary) but I will not lead us to close our doors unless there is substantial, indisputable evidence of a widespread, imminent life-threatening danger.

Now, if it comes to that, will there be legal consequences? Maybe. Possibly.

I really don't know.

But what I *do* know is that closing down definitely will have spiritual consequences.

And we cannot again subordinate the spiritual concern to other concerns as important as they might be.

"Seek *first* the Kingdom of God," Jesus said.

Not your comfort ... not your rights ... not even your health.

Seek first God's agenda.

But all of that's down the road

And a shutdown mandate probably won't even happen.

I just want it to be clear what will and will not happen if it does and, most importantly, *why*. The reasoning is not political. It's spiritual.

So, as for next Sunday ...

1. Come to church and wear a mask.

2. And if you don't feel safe or you worry that you will endanger someone else, then watch online.

It's OK for you to do that in that case. That's why we have livestream.

But here's what's not OK. And this is going to really make some of you mad.

What's *not* OK is – and this only applies if you're a Christian and this is your church.

What's not OK is for you to say "I'm not coming next week because you're forcing me to wear a mask. You're taking away my rights and *I protest*. I'm not going to do it."

I understand why you think that way. And I support your right to protest.

But I would challenge you – if you are a follower of Jesus ...

If you're not coming to church over having to wear a mask, I challenge you not to go *anywhere* that requires a mask.

Don't stick a mask on when you go shopping because, "well, everybody needs to go shopping and so I *have* to do that."

That kinda looks like you believe shopping is more important than being part of the Body of Christ.

Is that really what you want to say?

Nah.

But the people who *do* show up need you to be here. Your presence matters.

The kids in Adventureland and the middle

and high-school students need you.

Seek first the Kingdom of God. Love God first.

Endnotes

ⁱ Ephesians 3:17-21