

Good Morning Church,

It's good to be here together with one another, in the presence of God. For many of us, I know that the month of September signals change. Kids and grandkids heading back to school. Harvest is happening in earnest. Last trips to the lake before closing up the cabins are planned. In the past, much of my own life has centered around September rhythms. After finishing college at Providence, I was hired in Student Development, and September marked the arrival of new students and work beginning in earnest. It's happening again in my life for the first time in five years as Junia started Kindergarten on Friday.

With all this newness in the air, it feels fitting that we start something new in our church life this week too. Our service this morning marks the beginning of a new eight week Worship series that is centered around the themes and ideas of this book, *Faithful Presence*, by Dr. David Fitch. Dr. Fitch is a friend of the Mennonite church and was the speaker at the 2018 ADS. Our own MC Sask leadership have created this worship series and I'm very excited to see where it will lead us. Even in just preparing for my sermon this week, I found my own understandings of how we "do" church being challenged. I fully expect that there will be some things in this series that will very much resonate with you and some things that rub you the wrong way. Hold on to those things. Talk about them with me and another. Get curious. These are some of the ways we can welcome the presence of the Holy Spirit in discernment to what God is calling us to be as the church and as manifestations of his presence in our community. My sermon this morning may feel a bit like a book report as we're talking about a lot of the concepts in the book. This is important, I think, to help lay the groundwork for the coming weeks. Just pretend for this week that you're back in class.

A W Tozer once wrote, "God's presence is the central fact of Christianity." From the beginning of creation, God has been with his people, seeking connection and longing to restore right relationship between him and all people. We see this in the Genesis narrative when we are told that God walked in the garden with Adam and Eve, we see it in the story of the Israelite nation when God was present as pillar of cloud and of fire as they wandered in search of a home. We see it in the rise and fall of Israel as God dwells amongst them in the tabernacle, and we see Israel running away to false Gods and into exile. And we see it most clearly in the arrival of

Jesus Christ, of Immanuel, God with us. Immanuel-the fulfillment of the hope that God would come to us. 1 John 1:1 tells us, "In the beginning was the Word (Jesus) and the Word was with God and the Word was God." And now, that Word had broken through the fabric of heaven and earth to be with us in food and drink, in laughter and in sorrow, and in life and death. "My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees. They will live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where your ancestors lived. They and their children and their children's children will live there forever, and David my servant will be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. Then the nations will know that I the Lord make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever," it says in Ezekial 37:24-28.

In Faithful Presence, Dr. Fitch writes, "The scriptures from beginning to end tell the marvelous story of God returning his presence to all creation. It always was God's intent to be with his creation in the fullness of his presence."

And we see that permanent presence both here in our church and extending into every part of our world in the Gift of Holy Spirit. Acts chapter two, starting in verse one." On the day of Pentecost all the believers were meeting together in one place. Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm, and it filled the house where they were sitting. Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability." Jesus promises us at his ascension into heaven that even though he is returning to the Father, he will send his Spirit to be with us and empower us to be his witnesses."

What a beautiful, and exciting gift we have received in having the presence of God among us. But, this begs the question, shouldn't we "see" more of the presence of Christ in our lives, in our church and in our world? More peace. More healing. More community. More reconciliation. More awareness of this Immanuel-this God with us? If God is making all things new and turning us towards his Kingdom, how can we participate in that? Shouldn't the church be a true source of community, connection with one another and with God? One key challenges to this is that our

society sets us up for failure. We're told, in Western society, that independence is the ultimate. Make your own money. Own your own house. Raise your nuclear family and launch them successfully on our own. You need only yourself...and your boot straps to make a good life.

Have we lost sight of something here? Dr. Fitch, in his book, would indeed argue that we have. He writes, "The stunning loss of presence in our society is glaring. But God is still there, and we still long for presence with God and with other people. We long to be truly known and to know someone. We long to be with someone on a journey that means something. We groan in the depths of the night-groaning for God's presence."

For me personally, this idea of God's presence feels very nebulous. I could name times where I experienced God's presence or saw things happening in my life or the lives of others that could hold no other explanation than God's presence at work. Dr. Fitch, again, "Throughout the Bible, the Kingdom of God is located wherever people come together and submit to His rule over their lives. Ephesians 1:22-23 tells us, "God has put all things under the authority of Christ and has made him head over all things for the benefit of the church. And the church is his body; it is made full and complete by Christ, who fills all things everywhere with himself."

So, what are some things that hold us back? Our story may not be all that different than the people of Israel as they moved closer to or further away from the Presence. Is it fear? Why did God bring us out here to this desert to die? Is it holding on to sinful desires or patterns? Who could stand unworthily in the presence of the Holy of Holies? Is it anxiety about intimacy or commitment to God, his work and his people? Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? Is it our own ideas of how church should or should be like or what a church should or shouldn't do that holds us back?

My former church, in Kleefeld, Manitoba, was a Baptist church-a member of the Canadian Baptists of West Canada, to be precise. It was mostly filled with rural people, many of whom worked in construction and education, and most of whom had grown up attending a church. One Sunday, shortly, after we began attending, we learned, in somewhat dramatic fashion that Marilyn, one of our Pastors, had the gift of speaking in tongues. It happened, as it often did, during singing. Having never experienced this, I was immediately uncomfortable and alert. What

happens now!? Do we all just sit here? Should someone say something? Ed, the other pastor, and Marilyn's husband, calmly stood up, faced the congregation and asked, "Does anyone have an interpretation for this?" And around the room, people offered thoughts, phrases or ideas they felt God impressing on them. Once all these had been offered, we thanked God together for his presence and his speaking to us. It was always a beautiful and electric experience.

Some months later, I asked Ed and Marilyn what it was like, the first time it had happened. I shared how uncertain I'd been the first time. Ed laughed his warm, rich laugh, "You were uncertain!? Think of how we felt!" and then he said, "When this all first started, Marilyn had been feeling these words for quite some time. Just below the surface. But she had been hesitant, not sure how the congregation would handle it. She shared this with me, and as we prayed, it became clear that if she felt these words from God, we should not hold them back. And so the next time she felt this way, she let the words out. We didn't know exactly what to do, so we prayed, we asked God to give us the meaning, and each time He has. But it still feels scary each time."

Opening ourselves up to the presence of God can bring up feelings of fear, anxiety, and even dread, just as Moses felt before the burning bush. And yet, it is only in this opening up that we can be witnesses to God's life-altering presence to this world. Fitch, again, "Down through the annals of church history, under the pressure of keeping the church going, time and again, we Christians have lost the call to be God's faithful presence in the world. "

So then, what are some of the practical ways that we as people of God can do to get out of the way and allow God to work in our churches, our relationships and our world? That, my friends, is exactly what we hope to explore together during the next seven weeks of this worship series.

In the coming weeks, we will explore seven disciplines, or practices, that can help to shape us into people of his Presence. Fitch again, says, "The church, I contend, is built on disciplines like this. The church is more than space where individuals gather to affirm they believe in something. It is a place where God's people discern his presence and submit to Christ's concrete rule. He has given us disciplines for doing this." Some of these disciplines may seem abstract or perhaps out of reach for our congregation, but I'm reminding myself that God is working, and he knows the nature, character and culture of LMF. "God's works is necessarily

two-fold. God first is present and active in the whole world. But God' also chooses to become present in and through a people locally. He, in essence, completes his work in the world in the concrete lives and circumstances of a people though the real presence of Christ," again quoting from Faithful Presence.

We, the church, are uniquely positioned to bear witness to the transforming presence of Christ in our lives, in our church and in our relationships once we start seeking to notice God's work and indeed the ways that God is present in the 7 practices that we will explore together. Fitch, again, "The difference between the church and the world there is not spatial, that is, between where God is and where he is not. There is no in here and out there when it comes to the church. Instead, the church ins essence experiences God's presence visibly now, ahead of the time when God shall visibly reign among the whole world. The difference between the church and world is just a matter of timing. The Church experiences the kingdom ahead of time. The rest of the world is heading; they just don't know it yet. " We are getting a foretaste of the Kingdom now, in this faith community, how much more joyful could it be to offer that foretaste to others in our lives.

To help us better understand the practices that we will cover in the coming weeks, I'd like to touch briefly on the 3 Circles model; this is helpful for imagining the unique ways that God is present. The first is the "Close Circle". This is when Christians gather in worship and around the table to recipients of God's hospitality. Jesus is the host, we picture it here in our sanctuary as the communion table. The second circle is the "Dotted Circle", a place to gather with other Christians, but also newcomers who are curious about this God with us. In those spaces, we are acting as host. We are bearing witness to the way Christ welcomed us to his table. We imagine it here in our sanctuary as the "Family Meal Table". The third and final circle is the "Half Circle". These are the places in our lives where we are guests, not hosts. Here we submit ourselves to the hospitality of others, and the question hanging in the air is not is Jesus present, but will He be recognized? Here are places to see Christ at work, where we may least expect. And here in the sanctuary, we imagine this our coffee shop table.

We've covered a lot of ground this morning, so I'd like to close with a summary as well as call to Hope. God's presence is central to our Faith. Immanual-God is with us in our lives, our homes, our churches, and in his good world. We've perhaps lost sight, as the boarder church, of God's

presence among us, and all that entails. We are called to step out in humility, submission to Christ, and in the work of re-imagining to become, once again and more fully, people of his presence. This worship series will explore 7 practices that will invite us into God's presence. Dr. Fitch, "The church's location therefore cannot be seen in terms of the in here and out there. It is an entire way of life."

I'll close with these words from beloved author, Madeline L'Engle, "There is nothing so secular that it cannot be sacred, and that is the deepest message of the incarnation." And the hope that is rooted in Christ alone, that "Surely, I am with you. Even to the very end of the age."

Amen.