

November 12, 2023
Life in the Most Unlikely Places
John 10:10

When I was thirteen, my family and I went to France. Among other places, we visited the Bretteville-sur-Laize Canadian War Cemetery. It contains the graves of almost 3000 Canadians who died at D-Day and shortly after.

At the cemetery, I had chills up and down my spine. I had never been to church and never known anything about God. There was a Presence (with a capital "P") that, as a young Canadian, I'd never known before. Half of me wanted to run away and keep running as far and fast as I could. Half of me was irresistibly drawn to know What and Who was here. I found myself aware of Someone I knew was very real and very present.

Silence.
Presence.
Silence.
Silence.
Tingles down my spine.
Something – SOMEONE – is here.
There is a Presence in this place.
Silence.
Stop.
Be still.
Listen.
Silence
Tingles down my spine.
Something – SOMEONE – is here.
There is a Presence in this place.

A mental health professional might have worried about me, but if you have genuinely met God, you know what I am talking about. To be honest, I was worried, too. I was what you might call a nerd. I was rational, logical, and intellectual. While I had this very intense "spiritual" experience, I didn't really like it. I didn't want it. It upset me. It actually set me on a path to disprove God's existence. Rather naively, it never really occurred to me that anyone else might have tried to do so. Even if they had, I was sure I could do it better.

Around the same time, I began to read the tiny little King James Bible my grandmother had given to me. After all, if you're going to disprove God's existence, reading the Bible seemed like the rational, logical – and intellectually honest – place to start. There's nothing worse than the critic of the book/movie/whatever who's never actually read/seen the book/movie.

This was a problem. God became real to me through the Bible, too. It was very annoying.

Partly out of frustration, I found myself praying to God, even though I didn't really believe in Him. I just couldn't help it. Somehow, some way God was real in my experience, despite my best efforts to argue against His existence and to push Him away.

Where was this coming from? In hindsight, God was calling out to me. This was absolutely the Holy Spirit, the power of God, at work in my life, even though I had no idea of who He was. Any of us who has come to faith in Jesus has only done so because God has already been at work in us, long before we were ever aware of His presence.

The Spirit was making me aware of the emptiness of my life as I did not know God. I was trying to figure out who I was, and, without reference to God, it was a bleak picture. Life had little value. I was trying to figure out my goals, meaning, and purpose. Again, without God, life seemed rather painful and pointless. I was trying to figure out my values, ethics, and how I wanted to live my life. I knew I wanted more than what I could find without God.

Several months later, when I finally got to Ecclesiastes in the Bible, I would identify with this: *"Everything is meaningless," says the Teacher, "completely meaningless! What do people get for all their hard work under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth never changes. The sun rises and the sun sets, then hurries around to rise again. The wind blows south, and then turns north. Around and around it goes, blowing in circles. Rivers run into the sea, but the sea is never full. Then the water returns again to the rivers and flows out again to the sea. Everything is wearisome beyond description. No matter how much we see, we are never satisfied. No matter how much we hear, we are not content.*

"History merely repeats itself. It has all been done before. Nothing under the sun is truly new. Sometimes people say, 'Here is something new!' But actually it is old; nothing is ever truly new. We don't remember what happened in the past, and in future generations, no one will remember what we are doing now." (Ecclesiastes 1:2-11)

When I began to know God (as I read the Old Testament) and later Jesus (when I got to the New Testament), I discovered what God had been trying to get through to me for years. His is real. All my flustering, blustering, and stubbornness couldn't change that. I had to decide how I would handle that. In the end, I figured, *"This is getting too annoying. Why don't I run an experiment. I'll TRY living as if God were real and see how it goes."*

It's interesting trying to start living as if Jesus is real. I noticed a couple of things:

First, I began to understand who I was/who we all are. God loves us. He created us good – very good – with inherent value and dignity. He created us for fellowship with Himself, other people, and all His good creation. Yes, we all have the capacity to sin, disobey God, and hurt others. But each of us is personally, lovingly, perfectly created by God. We have "original grace" as much or more as "original sin." When I met Jesus, I discovered God forgive us, save us, and restore that perfect relationship with God for which we were created.

We are created with a "homing" instinct for God. A restlessness only God can fill. It's only as

I have come to know and love God with my heart, soul, and strength that I truly find myself.

Second, God helped me find a sense of purpose and meaning to life. We are made for each other. As well as being created to know and love God, we are formed to love our neighbour as ourselves. From the beginning, the Bible is not just a “me and God” thing. From the first paragraphs, it’s clear God created a community of persons, equals, in partnership with God and with each other. Each of us is a beloved “whole” person in our own right, but we’re also persons-in-community, intimately related to others and responsible for them. The Bible holds together the personal and social aspects of human existence.

Created as we are, in the image of God, we don’t live solitary lives. We value ALL people as equally created in the image of God. Every person has inestimable value. We seek justice and reconciliation for all people, of all ethnic and social backgrounds. We care for all people as God cares for all people – with grace, mercy, compassion, justice, and love. We care for people’s physical needs. Spiritual needs. Social needs. And emotional needs.

Third, we are created for the purpose of tending and caring for all of God’s creation – certainly other people, but the rest of His good creation, too. As a person who loved the outdoors and would go on to study geography, one of the themes that struck me from the beginning was this: *“The Lord God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it”* (Genesis 2:15). We care for His creation as God cares for His creation – with grace, mercy, compassion, justice, and love. When I started going to church. I was surprised how little emphasized this theme is in Christian circles. It’s a key part of God’s original plan for His people, create in His image. It’s probably pretty important.

Fourth, as I ran this experiment of living with God, I want people to meet Jesus in the same personal way that I have. To use the angels’ phrase when they announced Jesus’ birth, I wanted everyone to know the Good News of great joy: God loves us. He has come among us. He is with us. He forgives us. He gives us new life. A new identity. A new purpose. A new way of living. Loving God, neighbour, and God’s world changes everything.

The experiment was not turning out as I anticipated. Instead turning away from God, I was completely drawn to God. Paul, who, like me, kicked back against God for a long time, eventually gave in as well. He wrote, *“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – and I am the worst of them all. But God had mercy on me so that Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners”* (1 Timothy 1:15-16).

One of the stories about Jesus I find most compelling is a story of when some religious men bring a woman caught in adultery to Jesus (John 8:1-11). Somehow the man involved is given a pass. The righteous – self-righteous – Pharisees want to *“trap him into saying something they could use against him.”* They’ve seen Jesus’ compassion. They also know Jesus, if He is God, should condemn the women (the Old Testament punishment is stoning).

What will Jesus do? Jesus replies, *“Let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone.”* And the angry men left. First the oldest. Then the youngest.

Unwittingly, these brutal men did something good. They introduce a person to Jesus. *"Where are your accusers?"* Jesus asks her. *"Didn't even one of them condemn you?"* "No, Lord," the woman said. Jesus went on, *"Neither do I. Go and sin no more."*

Meeting Jesus changed everything in her life. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners and I am worst of them all. This is our Good News of great joy.

Jesus says, *"God loved the world so much He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16). "Eternal life" does not just mean everlasting life with God in the future. It also means a quality of life now, as we rediscover a bit of the life for which we were created. This is our Good News of great joy.

Jesus also says, *"I have come that you may have life and have it to the full"* (John 10:10). A "full" life rediscovers an open, free, personal relationship with God. An open, free relationship with others as persons-in-community. And a love for God's good creation, all around us. This is our Good News of great joy. This is how I want to live my life.

God called me, speaking deep into my heart and soul through experiences like that one in the Canadian War Cemetery in Bretteville-sur-Laize. Yes, I did make a decision at a point in time, to believe in God and follow Jesus. But that was only the beginning.

I am realizing, more and more, we are never a finished product. We are on a lifelong journey to know God better, to become more and more like Jesus, to care for people better, and to live wisely in God's creation. Over a lifetime of learning, growing, and daily decisions, that unfolds with the help of God's grace, partnership with others, and our own best efforts.

The call God has given me is to talk about Jesus. There are a lot of other things that pastors and churches get caught up in, from the politics of the day to theological debates. But I want to keep Jesus front and centre. This is my prayer for each of us. That Jesus would be what we are really all about. We live with His love, compassion, and grace.

"I pray for you constantly, asking God to give you spiritual wisdom and insight so that you might grow in your knowledge of God. I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the confident hope he has given to those he called ...

"I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you 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. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God" (Ephesians 1:16-18, 3:16-19).