

## EXPERIENCING GOD

by Elaine Poproski

One night in August a bunch of years ago, a couple friends and I stayed up all night lying in the middle of a dirt road in nowhere Manitoba. We watched as hundreds of stars fell from the sky. It was one of the most spectacular things I've ever witnessed. It was truly awe-inspiring. It felt like we were right in the middle of it – like the stars were showering down on us. Like it was impossible that there could be any stars left in the sky.

The reality is, they weren't falling stars. They were meteors – bits of rock and dust that had dislodged from a passing comet and entered the earth's atmosphere, leaving a trail of glowing hot air as they plunged toward our planet. These meteor showers happen pretty predictably about six times a year, whenever the earth's orbit around the sun collides with a comet's orbit around the sun. It's interesting. There are people who find it so interesting they spend their lives studying these kinds of things. Our own Jen Laing is studying these kinds of things as we speak. But as interesting as the facts and the knowledge are, they cannot compare to the experience of lying all night on a dirt road as hundreds of meteors streaked through the dark.

God created us to be thinking people. He created us with intellect and curiosity. It is in our nature to want to understand – to find order in things. God's creation is all about order. People have been inspired for thousands of years as they observed and hypothesized and tested theories about the nature of things. The wise men who visited the baby Jesus came because they'd spent years studying the sky – watching the stars – tracking heavenly phenomena. In Paul's letter to the Romans, at the beginning of chapter 12, he invites them (and us) to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we can discern the will of God.<sup>1</sup>

But we're not just thinking people. We're also feeling people. We see, hear, touch, taste, and smell things. We experience the world God made. We experience the God who made the world.

Look at this short sermon Peter preached in Acts 10. He starts with the intellect: "You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ." You know the message. You know the content. You know what was said. And you know it because it spread all through Judea beginning with John baptising people.

But listen to how Peter talks about that message. He's not just giving a bunch of facts. He's pointing to things that happened – things that people experienced.

God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. People saw it happen. They witnessed his baptism. They experienced that power of Jesus for themselves.

Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil. (v. 38)

They witnessed it. (v. 39). They saw it. They heard the sounds of people suffering and the sounds of people freed. They felt the press of the crowds as they followed him.

"They put him to death by hanging him on a tree." (v. 39). They saw it. They smelled it. They grieved it.

“God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.” (vv. 40-41)

Peter isn't just preaching a bunch of facts. He's telling them about all sorts of things God did – things he and others experienced – things they saw and felt and touched and smelled and heard. And then, even before he's done, look at what happens. They don't just talk amongst each other: *What he says makes sense; he's convinced me; I think I'll give this following Jesus thing a chance.* That's not what happens. Look at what happened (it's in verse 44): “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.” And then if we jump to verse 46, we discover that they were speaking in tongues and extolling God (worshiping God). Hearing all sorts of things God did and then experiencing the Holy Spirit for themselves, things happened.

That's because God does things. He didn't just create the world, set it in motion, and then move on. He keeps doing things. He keeps being actively involved in the world he created – in the lives of the creatures he made – in our lives. I don't know about you, but this is why I have hope. Even when the world seems like it's falling apart – when things seem to be getting worse and worse – the fact that God is actively involved gives me hope. And I know he's actively involved because that's what the Bible says over and over again in the stories and history and laws and poetry of its pages. But it doesn't end there. God didn't stop being actively involved in the world when the Bible ended. He's still actively involved in the world. People are still experiencing his presence and his power.

Over in the back corner of this room we have shelves upon shelves of books written by people who've experienced God's presence. Check out any one of the 92 books in our biographies section. They're all stories of people's experiences of God. But we don't have to go to the books. We have experienced God. Many of us in this room have experienced God's activity in our own lives or in the lives of people we know. Maybe we've experienced healing. Maybe we've experienced some kind of release from captivity. Maybe we've experienced hope when everything tells us we should be without hope. Maybe we've experienced inexplicable peace in the midst of chaos. Our faith isn't just based on intellectual arguments or logic. Certainly, that's part of it. And for some people it's a bigger part than for others. But our faith is also based on experiencing God acting in the world. Even if we can't point to something in our own lives, the very centre of our faith – the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus – is God acting in the world. One of the names Jesus was known by was the name Emmanuel. It means God-with-us.

In John there's a story about a man who'd been blind since birth. Jesus healed him. When the religious leaders found out, they asked the man over and over how it had happened. Perhaps they wanted to know exactly the steps Jesus had taken. Maybe they were trying to catch him in some act of witchcraft. We know they were looking for ways to discredit Jesus – to ruin him. So they kept asking this man how he'd been healed. They wanted the scientific explanation. They wanted it to make sense intellectually. But the man didn't have those kinds of answers. All he knew was what he'd experienced – he'd been blind and now he could see. And when he encountered Jesus again, Jesus asked him if he believed in the Son of Man (meaning himself), the man asked who he was talking about, Jesus said he was talking about himself, and immediately the man

worshiped Jesus. Jesus didn't convince him with clever arguments or history lessons. He healed him. And that experience is what led to his belief and his worship.<sup>ii</sup>

Samuel was one of the earliest, most celebrated of Israel's ancient prophets. It was Samuel who appointed Saul to be Israel's first king and David to be their second. He went to live at the temple from the time he was a young child. While he was still a child, he had an experience of God before he even knew God. We read about this experience at the beginning of our service today.<sup>iii</sup> You'll remember that God called out to him, but Samuel didn't know it was God and assumed it was Eli, the priest he lived with. It was Eli who finally realized what was happening and so was able to help Samuel know what to do.

I wonder if we expect God to act. I wonder if we expect people to experience God. I wonder if we expect God to convict people of their sin and lead them to repentance. I wonder if we expect God to reveal himself to people. I wonder if we expect God to speak to people.

I think we put a lot of pressure on ourselves to be able to answer everyone's questions about God. I think we put a lot of pressure on ourselves and on each other to be able to convince people that God exists or that he cares or that he's involved. A couple weeks ago, at one of our small groups, we found ourselves sharing our frustration at the task of evangelism. As one person put it: it used to be that we learned what to say and how to say it; we were taught the four or five steps to get someone to become a Christian. There was a logic to it. And we were convinced that if we just did it correctly, there'd be success. Which meant, if there wasn't success, it was because we'd messed up somewhere along the way.

The thing that's attractive about this method of evangelism, is that it kept us in control. If God doesn't show up, it's o.k. We'll be o.k. It's nice when he shows up, but our arguments and our proofs aren't dependent on him.

I'm not suggesting that this method never works. I'm not suggesting that some people aren't logicked into Christianity. That's the beauty of God – he can use anything. But consider Samuel's story: He was trained in the ways of his religion. Even as a boy, he knew things. But he didn't know God. It wasn't until God spoke to him that he truly started to become the prophet he would be. And having experienced God, Eli, his priest and mentor, was able to teach him things like how to respond when you've heard from God.

What would it be like if we expected people to experience God? What would it be like if we expected to experience God ourselves? What would it be like if we saw our role as that of (a) not getting in the way of other people's experiences of God, (b) creating the kinds of safe spaces in which people are free to experience God, and (c) helping people understand these experiences and respond to them? What if we saw our task as that of noticing God's activity in the world and in people's lives and then making ourselves available to be part of it – whatever *it* is?

What would a church – our church – be like if it was founded on the assumption that God is actively involved in the world and that our job is simply to notice it, to name it, and then to help people figure out what to do with the experience?

Have you ever experienced the living God? Have ever told your story of that experience? I'd like to encourage you to take some time this week to put your story on paper. Or record yourself

telling the story. Or tell it to someone and ask them to put it on paper. However you do it, make some kind of a record of your experiences of God. Figure out how to share those experiences with other people. If you haven't ever experienced God – if you feel like you're Samuel, having learned things about God but that you don't know God – as you go into this week, ask God to show you any of the things that stand in the way of knowing him – of experiencing our God who is living and active in the world around us.

Figure out how to tell your stories. Because just like the blind man's experience of Jesus healing him led to his worship of Jesus as the Son of God, so will our stories of our experiences bolster our own faith, and the faith of others.

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<sup>i</sup> Romans 12:2

<sup>ii</sup> See John 9 for the whole story.

<sup>iii</sup> See 1 Samuel 1 – 3 for the story of Samuel's beginning.