

“The Gift of Presence”

Isaiah 7:10-14; Matthew 1:22-23

December 10, 2023

In the sterile, dimly lit room of Gaston Memorial, now known as Caromont Health, I found myself in a situation that every parent dreads. There, amidst the relentless beeping of monitors and the hiss of oxygen machines, lay my son Ben. His tiny frame seemed almost lost, dwarfed by the medical equipment that surrounded him. IV lines snaked across his small arm, and an oxygen mask covered his face, a stark reminder of the fragility of life. As an inexperienced father, the sight filled me with a paralyzing fear, a deep-seated terror that clutched at my heart. I was alone in this sterile, impersonal space. My wife, shouldering her own burden of worry, was at home with our daughter, leaving me to navigate this daunting ordeal by myself. The weight of the world seemed to press down on me, and I felt suffocated by the enormity of what might lie ahead. The uncertainty of the future, the fear of loss, and the overwhelming sense of helplessness swirled within me, creating a storm of emotions that I could scarcely contain. It was in this whirlwind of fear and despair that Nurse Wilson entered. Her arrival was like a calm breeze in the midst of a tempest. She moved with a quiet grace, her eyes reflecting an ocean of understanding and compassion. Noticing my distress, she approached with gentle steps and offered a moment of prayer. Her voice, soft yet clear, cut through the cacophony of hospital sounds, creating an island of serenity in a sea of chaos. As she began to pray, her words seemed to weave a tapestry of peace around us. One line from her prayer resonated with a power that transcended the moment: *"In our weakest moments, we are cradled in the strongest arms."* This simple sentence struck a chord deep within me, echoing through the chambers of my anxious heart. It was as if each word carried a weight of truth that was both comforting and profound. In the wake of her prayer, a remarkable transformation occurred. The room, once a place of fear and uncertainty, became a sanctuary of peace. I could almost feel the very air change, becoming thicker, as if charged with a divine presence. It was an ethereal, almost tangible sensation of being enveloped in an embrace far greater than anything human. The fear that had been my constant companion began to dissipate, replaced by a sense of divine companionship and strength. This feeling of peace was not just an absence of fear; it was a presence - a profound and overwhelming sense that, despite the uncertainty and the daunting reality of our situation, we were not alone. In that sacred space, cradled by a presence far greater than us, I found a strength I didn't know I had. It was a moment of clarity, a realization that even in the darkest of times, there is a light that no shadow can quench. As Nurse Wilson's prayer concluded, and she quietly left the room, the sense of divine comfort lingered, a gentle reminder that *in our moments of greatest need, we are held, supported, and loved by forces far greater than we can see.*

Friends, as we journey through the tapestry of scripture, we encounter a recurring theme that resonates at the core of our faith – *the dynamic interplay between God's presence and the times when He seems distant.* This theme is not just a theological concept; it's a reflection of our own spiritual journeys. We've all experienced those mountaintop moments where God's presence feels as real as the air we breathe, and yet, there are valleys where He seems as distant as the furthest star in the night sky. But let's hold onto this truth: *"In our weakest moments, we are cradled by the strongest arms."* This isn't just a comforting thought; it's a promise that threads through the narrative of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. As we delve into the scriptures, let us remember that in every story, every verse, we are not just reading history; we are uncovering the layers of our relationship with a God who is constantly reaching out to us, even when we feel most alone.

In the rich tapestry of the Old Testament, we find vivid depictions of God's undeniable presence. One such moment that leaps off the pages is the story of Moses and the burning bush, as described in **Exodus 3:2-4**. Picture this scene: Moses, amid his daily routine, encounters a bush ablaze, yet not consumed. The text tells us, *"There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, 'I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.' When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, 'Moses! Moses!' And Moses said, 'Here I am.'"* In this moment, God's presence is not just a passive observation; it's an active engagement. It's a divine encounter that disrupts the ordinary, transforming a simple bush into holy ground. This

scene is emblematic of how God often reveals Himself to us. *He meets us in the mundane, in the everyday walks of life, and transforms them into something extraordinary.* The burning bush was not just a miraculous spectacle; it was a signal to Moses—and to us—that when God is present, even the most common elements of creation can become conduits of His glory. And notice, God didn't just appear; He called out to Moses, inviting him into a conversation, into a relationship. It's a reminder that God's presence is personal. He knows us by name, just as He knew Moses. In our lives, amid our daily routines, God still speaks. He still calls. In the midst of our own 'burning bushes,' whether they be moments of joy, or trials, or just the daily grind, God is there, calling our name, waiting for us to respond, *"Here I am."*

Let's hold onto this truth: "In our weakest moments, we are cradled by the strongest arms." The burning bush is not just a story of a moment in Moses' life; it's a testament to the enduring presence of God in all our lives, calling us, guiding us, and embracing us with His unfailing love.

As we continue to explore the manifestations of God's presence in the Old Testament, we turn our gaze to another profound moment: the presence of God in the Tabernacle. **Exodus 40:34-35** paints a vivid picture: *"Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle."* This scene is not just about a physical manifestation; it's a profound illustration of the intimacy and immediacy of God's presence. The cloud, representing God's glory, didn't just hover above the tabernacle; it filled it completely, leaving no space untouched. *It's a powerful reminder that when God makes His presence known, it's all-encompassing, leaving no aspect of our lives unaffected.*

Think about the Tabernacle, a place designed for meeting with God. It was the heart of the Israelite camp, the center of their community. God's decision to dwell there, in the midst of His people, speaks volumes about His desire for closeness, for a deep and personal relationship with each of us. It's as if God is saying, *"I am not a distant deity, but a God who is near, who chooses to dwell among you, to be present in the midst of your lives."* This imagery of the Tabernacle is a powerful metaphor for our own lives. Like the Israelites, we are invited to experience God's presence in our midst. In our daily lives, with all their routines and challenges, God's glory is waiting to fill our spaces, to transform our ordinary tents into places of divine encounter. And so, let us remember, *"In our weakest moments, we are cradled by the strongest arms."* The same God who filled the Tabernacle with His glory is present with us today, filling our lives with His love, His grace, and His overwhelming presence. He is as near to us as He was to the Israelites, inviting us to experience His presence in every moment of our lives.

In the journey through scripture, we come across passages that pierce the heart with their raw emotion, passages that speak not of God's presence, but of His perceived absence. Such is the cry of the Israelites in Psalm 137, a poignant expression of profound loss and longing. *"By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?"* Imagine the pain in these words. The Israelites, torn from their homeland, exiled in Babylon, their hearts heavy with grief. The rivers of Babylon, where they sat, were not just streams of water, but rivers of tears, rivers of shattered dreams and lost hopes. Their harps, once symbols of joy and praise, now hung silent on the poplars, mute witnesses to their despair. This psalm is a raw portrayal of the human soul feeling abandoned, crying out in its loneliness and pain. It's a cry that echoes in the heart of anyone who has ever felt the sting of God's absence, who has ever wondered, *"Where are You, Lord, in my darkest hour?"* The Israelites' lament is our lament too, in moments when God seems distant, when our songs of joy turn to dirges of despair.

But, friends, even in this heart-wrenching cry of absence, there's a glimmer of hope. For we know that the story doesn't end in exile. We know that God hears the cries of His people. And here's the truth that brings comfort to our aching hearts: "In our weakest moments, we are cradled by the strongest arms." This isn't just a comforting phrase; it's a promise that finds its ultimate fulfillment in Christ.

Through the incarnation, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we are given the assurance that we are never truly alone. Christ's Holy Spirit, present with us always, ensures that the pain of separation, the anguish of exile, is forever banished. In Christ, we find not just the promise of God's presence, but its reality - a presence that fills our lives, that comforts us in our pain, and reminds us that we are always held, always loved, always cradled by the strongest arms.

In the sweeping narrative of scripture, from the whispers of God's presence in a burning bush to His glory filling the tabernacle, there is no moment more transformative, more awe-inspiring, than the Incarnation. Let's immerse ourselves in the profound truth of Matthew 1:22-23: *"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' (which means 'God with us')."* This, beloved friends, is the heartbeat of our faith, the crescendo of God's love story with humanity – Immanuel, God with us. This isn't merely a chapter in a holy book; it's the eternal Word stepping into time, the Divine entering the human story. In Jesus, God didn't just send a message, a prophet, or an angel; He came Himself, in flesh and blood.

Pause and ponder the wonder of this miracle. In Jesus, the infinite God embraced the confines of a human life. He felt the warmth of human love and the sting of human betrayal. He experienced laughter and joy, wept in sorrow, and navigated the complexities of human relationships. This is God not just overseeing from a distance but participating in the very fabric of our daily existence. But the Incarnation is more than just God taking on human form; it's a resounding declaration of His unfailing commitment to us. In Jesus, God's presence is not a fleeting visitation; it's a permanent indwelling. He dwells not just among us but within us, sharing our journey, carrying our burdens, feeling our pain. This is the ultimate act of divine solidarity with humankind. And as we bask in this truth, let's be overwhelmed by the joy and comfort it brings: *"In our weakest moments, we are cradled by the strongest arms."* In Christ, those arms took on flesh and reached out to embrace humanity in its entirety. This is not just a comforting thought; it's a jubilant celebration of our reality. In Jesus, God's presence is no longer a distant concept; it's a living, breathing, tangible truth. Immanuel – God with us – is not just a name; it's our assurance, our hope, our unshakeable foundation. It's the promise that in every trial, every joy, every tear, and every laugh, we are accompanied by the Divine. God WITH us – in every struggle, in every triumph. In Jesus, we are never alone; we are eternally accompanied, eternally loved, eternally held in the embrace of the One who created us, who redeemed us, and who walks with us every step of the way.

During World War II, amidst the chaos and brutality of conflict, a soldier found himself enduring the unimaginable. This soldier, who later retired as a Navy captain, was recognized for his resilience and strength in the face of brutal treatment. His experience, akin to swimming in the deepest, most turbulent waters, was a test of faith and endurance. Picture this scene, similar to a swimming pool, where all the noise and chaos are at the shallow end, filled with fear and confusion. In contrast, the deep end is marked by a quiet discipline and confidence. This soldier, in the depths of war, found himself in the 'deep end' of life's pool. It was in these depths that he experienced a profound sense of God's presence, guiding him like an experienced swimmer who trusts in their training and their leader. In the midst of war's horrors, where fear and despair could easily overwhelm, this soldier discovered an inner strength and peace that seemed almost otherworldly. This was not just a testament to his training or mental fortitude; it was a clear manifestation of God's presence, offering guidance, strength, and an unwavering sense of direction amidst the turmoil.

His story is a powerful reminder to us that even in our darkest and most challenging moments, when we feel like we are in over our heads, God's presence is with us. In those deep waters, where our own strength and skills are insufficient, we can find a divine assurance, a calm amidst the storm. It's in these moments that we truly understand the meaning of the promise: *"In our weakest moments, we are cradled by the strongest arms."*

Ernest Shackleton's Antarctic expedition is one of the most remarkable survival stories in the history of exploration. In 1914, Shackleton set out on the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition with the goal of making the first land crossing of the Antarctic continent. However, his ship, the Endurance, became trapped in ice and was eventually crushed, leaving Shackleton and his crew stranded. For months,

the men survived on the floating ice, enduring extreme cold, hunger, and despair. Eventually, the ice floe broke up, forcing them to take to the lifeboats. They made a perilous journey to Elephant Island, a remote and uninhabited place. Realizing that rescue was unlikely, Shackleton made the bold decision to seek help. With a small crew, Shackleton set out in a lifeboat, the James Caird, on an 800-mile journey across the treacherous Southern Ocean to South Georgia, a whaling station. This journey, considered one of the greatest feats in navigational history, was made in horrendous conditions. Miraculously, they reached South Georgia after 16 days at sea. However, they landed on the uninhabited side of the island. Shackleton and two others then had to cross the mountainous, glacier-covered island, a feat never before attempted. After a grueling 36-hour trek without proper mountaineering gear or maps, they finally reached the whaling station. Shackleton's leadership and unyielding commitment to his crew's survival were critical throughout the ordeal. He managed to rescue all of his men, bringing them back home without loss of life, a testament to his extraordinary leadership and the crew's resilience. Reflecting on this incredible journey, Shackleton famously said: "When I look back at those days, I have no doubt that Providence guided us, not only across those snow-fields but across the storm-white sea that separated Elephant Island from our landing-place on South Georgia. I know that during that long and racking march of thirty-six hours over the unnamed mountains and glaciers of South Georgia, it seemed to me often that we were four, not three. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

