

Tuning in: Jesus in the ordinary

Have you ever had an experience like this?

A few years ago, we were going to purchase a vehicle, and we were considering car colours. Of the few that were offered, white stood out to us as a possible option. But I thought, who owns a white car? No one I know owns a white car. Will we stand out? And then I started looking. It turns out that half the population drives white vehicles. They had been driving past me all these years and I just simply hadn't noticed.

Now, take a look at the images on the screen. Did anyone notice these in the lobby? Or can you see any now in this space?

So, we all do this—walk past things without noticing, only to recognize later they were in plain sight all the time. We're not always tuned in.

I want to take you back to my childhood, and particularly the technology of my childhood. Let's go down to the basement where we had our TV. On top of it sat a brown box with a dial on it. It looked exactly like this. It's called a rotor, or rotator and when you turned the dial, the antenna on the top of your house would make a low buzzing-hum sound as the motor rotated the antenna in the direction of the dial. As the youngest in the family, I was often designated to stand by the TV and slowly turn the dial until the picture went from fuzzy static to a clear and crisp image.

The idea behind all this is that there are invisible signals being sent out into the air which the metal contraption on our roof had the capacity to receive and translate into...Hockey Night in Canada or Little House on the Prairie. The antenna allowed us to tune in to the show we wanted to see.

Now, take a look at this verse, written by Paul from 2 Corinthians 4:18

So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

Or consider one of the phrases Jesus often ended his teachings with, "Whoever has ears, let them hear." He continually pointed people through his images, stories, his parables to an invisible kingdom of God all around them. He'd invite them to really listen, lean in, open their eyes and see the message that was in his stories and in the objects and spaces they lived in.

Joseph of Arimathea, one of the Pharisees, who would eventually tenderly care for and bury the body of Jesus after his death, was said to have seen Jesus, recognized him for who he really was—God's son, the Messiah, while many of his companions missed this.

And the reason why he saw and knew Jesus as Messiah? In the book of Mark we read it was because he was on the lookout for him. He had his eyes peeled. He was tuned in.

Now this idea of an invisible, present reality that co-exists in real time with our everyday lives, that I could either miss or tune into, is intriguing to me.

But what I keep coming up against is that it can sometimes feel hard to tune into this God-reality.

I'm sure there are many reasons for this, but two of the problems that come to mind are...

God is invisible

And

I'm distracted -with my mind on all sorts of other things, I can miss seeing this invisible God.

The rest of my talk today will be about how to tune in. How to receive the signals of God in our everyday lives. Something I've been experimenting with.

To keep it simple, I'm going to group the ideas into 3 areas:

Open up space

Pay attention

Remember.

Open up space

I had this experience recently in the photocopying space at my work. There was some kind of larger fan set up, and the loud sound immediately grabbed my attention. Then I got talking with another employee and over the course of our conversation I got used to the noise of the fan and basically forgot about it. However, once I exited, I realized how loud it had been in there. I breathed a sigh of relief as I entered the quieter hallway. The noise had taken up a fair bit of space, and it was a relief to have it gone.

Our culture and our lifestyles can sometimes be full....of physical noise, mental noise of pressures, of appointments, and obligations—and it can carry the same kind of tension as the background noise of a loud fan.

As I've been preparing for this talk, I've become hyper aware how some of the spaces in my life are very much filled, rather than open. On the way out to the car after work the other day, I noticed my brain flip seamlessly between sorting out the problem of an adjective clause rule (I teach English) to making a mental list of the details I needed to talk to with my mom about on the drive home. There was no space. And I felt the tension, almost the heaviness, or wear of the constant strain of processing something.

Opening up larger spaces like afternoons and weekends is an important goal, but today I want to focus on creating micro-spaces, tiny moments throughout the day where we intentionally open up airtime for God. Again, he's invisible, so this is not always intuitive!

I have 2 examples of how we might do this:

1) Turning off physical noise

I like words—books, audio books, podcasts, music, BBC shows. But these words—written or spoken, as much as I love them, can feel overwhelming at times because they're ever-present.

So I've taken to being more intentional about sometimes turning them off. And I notice the effects. For instance, when the car is completely silent, thoughts come to the surface that would otherwise be pushed down by someone else's words flowing into my head.

It's not that I never listen to audiobooks or podcasts. I'm just careful to also make spaces of full silence.

I have a friend who used to commute to Mississauga every day. One time he told me that he decided to make a habit of turning off his podcast when he saw the Fruitland Road exit on his commute home and take that time to pray, to talk to God about his day. If you're not a long-distance commuter, maybe there's another way to make silence a regular part of your day.

It can be the extra moment you sit before going out the door, or taking the time to look up at the birds before going into a building, where you direct your thoughts intentionally toward God. And although it might feel pointless, and even counterproductive (I need to get somewhere), over time it can help develop a deeper habit of pausing and opening up space.

2) Letting go of the need to always be productive

I've noticed how, when I'm on the phone or doing dishes or folding laundry, I sometimes feel the need to also be doing something else.

Like for you, does it feel like a waste of time if you're not talking on the phone while you're driving? Or if you're at home, then chopping vegetables for dinner while you talk? Multitasking is good—and essential—sometimes. These multitask hacks can be lifesavers for accomplishing what we need to get done, but they can also sometimes overfill our lives and become the norm. So, every once in a while, I force myself to simply wash the dishes (and not listen to a podcast) or have a thoughtful conversation with someone on the phone while just sitting on the couch.

If we want to hear God, we need to open up spaces for him to speak. And the result is that we not only make space for God, but for the people around us as well.

Pay attention

C.S. Lewis once wrote...

"... the world is crowded

with [God.] He walks everywhere incognito.... The real labour is to remember, to attend. In fact, to come awake. Still more, to remain awake."

— C.S. Lewis, Letters to Malcolm; chiefly on prayer

If God is somehow undercover all around us, then the idea of learning how to pay attention becomes an essential task.

And to consider that the potential to connect with God exists not only in our sanctuaries and during our set-aside quiet times, but also in the ordinary potato-peeling moments of our lives.

So how can we train ourselves to pay attention?

In the past, perhaps in some ways, we were more likely to just pay attention naturally. We had to pay attention; it was a necessity.

We had to pay attention to our driving routes, and when to get into the turning lane, and which exit to take. To memorize facts like our times tables because there was no phone that we could use in place of our brain when we needed to know something.

Okay, so here are some practical ways that we might build these practices of paying attention back into our lives:

1) Memorizing

This spring, I've set my mind to memorizing a prayer written in the style of Psalm 61. It's from a devotional book I've been reading. I chose it because I found myself coming back to read it over and over. The process of memorizing has been challenging and time consuming, and I have asked myself, why am I doing this? I can look at it anytime. I could take a picture of it and have it on my phone for reference. But the very act of memorizing has made me pay attention to the words in a way that I would never have done by simply reading it. Maybe there's something God wants you to pay particular attention to right now, and it's more likely to get into your mind and heart if you've internalized it through memorizing.

2) Copying out

My husband, Randy's tried something in a similar vein. As he reads a passage of scripture, he picks out a few sentences that stand out to him and writes them out longhand. It gives him the chance to sit with the words a little longer. And it means that over the course of 20 minutes, he's taking in fewer words, but the repetition gives him time for closer attention. And even the act of using a good pen and slowing down our writing can help us grow in this practice of paying attention.

3) Journalling

For some, I know there's a resistance to journalling. Not everyone likes writing. So, I just want to mention another approach. I am gas receipt journaler. I do have the traditional coil-bound diary books that I go to, but I'm also a jotter. One of the key reasons why I click "yes" to the paper receipt after I'm done pumping my gas is so that I have a scrap of paper in my car. When a thought comes to me, I take a moment to write it down—a small observation or something that struck me. These notes may go into my pile and be recorded on a Word document (for no particular purpose, or to write about further), or they may get recycled. It almost doesn't matter. The purpose is to pay attention. Rather than just letting the thought pass, I very briefly, sometimes illegibly, bookmark it in my mind.

I figure if Jesus was serious when he said God sends his spirit to guide us, then perhaps at least some of these thoughts are cues from my maker. By writing them down, I draw my own attention to them. I practice paying attention.

4) Creative tools

I've always loved photography, but I also see my camera as a tool for paying attention. It requires me to open my eyes to the details around me, to scan for beauty, sometimes in unusual places. My little concrete front porch can become a place of reflection as I zoom in on the chunky green caterpillar that decided to visit.

When we offer our attention to God, when we train ourselves to pay attention to the goodness in the world around us, we increase our chances of discovering him.

Remember

So I've talked about opening up space and paying attention, but how do we, from day to day, moment to moment keep these practices in mind.

I'm not a preacher, so I won't give you a word count on how many times the bible commands us to remember, but I do know it's a lot. And for good reason. Humans are forgetters.

One of my early formative influences around this idea of remembering comes from a monk who lived in the 1600s. I can't tell you how I came across the book, but some of you may also know it: *Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence. He wasn't a high-ranking monk. He was assigned kitchen detail for most of his time at the monastery, and then later, sandal repair. I've gotten back to reading this eclectic collection of conversations, letters and spiritual principles and realized that the content itself is not an obvious best seller. So, I wondered what was it that drew my 20-something self to this book?

I think this statement from Brother Lawrence gives a pretty good picture of the pull I felt:

"The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament."

There's something compelling about this picture of an integrated life—where a deep sense of God's presence while doing your daily work is possible.

So, for Brother Lawrence, after many years of simply calling Jesus to mind throughout the day (remembering), speaking conversationally with him while he scrubbed the pots, he eventually came to the state where,

"it's as difficult for me not to think of God as it was at first to accustom myself to it."

Remembering is tough, but Brother Lawrence's example is an encouragement that it's possible.

Two practical thoughts on this:

1) Physical prompts

Place physical prompts in the spaces around you. We have a wooden hand in our kitchen that reminds us of Randy's grandparents' dangerous journey to safety in Canada. They would talk about being guided by a higher hand. I'll be honest—it's easy to forget the significance of it sitting on our shelf, but having it there as a talking point when people come over or just moving these kinds physical reminders to another place in the house is one way to jar ourselves back into noticing again.

2) Verbal habits

I have developed the habit, prompted by one of John Ortberg's talks awhile back (some of you also listen to him) to say as I'm walking into a new space, "It's Jesus and me and my coworkers, or my students" to remind me of the reality of God's presence.

Another habit I've developed (although imperfectly) over the years to quiet my mind before praying, or even in response to an emotional shift (good or bad) that happens in my day, is to say the short line, "I'm here, Jesus" It may sound weird, but they're intentional words for me. To remind me of the ground beneath my feet (I'm here) and the idea that Jesus shares it with me.

I've taken you through some of the ways I've been trying to open up space, pay attention, and remember God in my everyday life. I'm going to invite you to experiment with me in your own way, that fits the stage and rhythm of your life right now.

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(Spiritual practice)

We're going to finish with two short practices this morning. The first is one that has been woven into my life (my drive to work usually) of Lectio Divina, a form of scripture meditation. I have been using the Pray As You Go app for several years now, and I've found it brings me into scripture in a prayerful and imaginative way, with pauses and questions that invite me to interact with the passage and absorb it more fully.

I'll be leading you in two verses—Romans 12:1-2 from the Message translation. I'll be reading them 3 times with pauses in between for reflection.

Immediately following our lectio time, the band will lead us in our 2nd practice. We'll continue with some of these words and themes by tuning into each other's voices as we sing without instruments. It's a simple, repetitive song: "We are walking in the light of God." Take this time to let the words sink in.

First, let's take a moment of quiet to set aside the thoughts that are moving around in our heads. Maybe some errands you need to do, a hard moment that keeps replaying or something exciting that's coming up. Give yourself permission to let them go for a moment. You'll have a chance to come back to them after.

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going to work and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you. Romans 12:1-2

Is there a word or phrase that catches you? Something that God might be underlining for you this morning? Sit with those words for a moment.

Listen again and consider—what does placing your life, your everyday life, before God as an offering look like?

Listen for a final time—Where has the culture around you quietly shaped how you see the world? What does "fixing your attention on God" look like?

SONG – We are walking in the light of God