

Some people go on retreats to get close to God. Others plan a vacation. They take time off from work and get away from the daily routine in order to get in touch, or back in touch with God. You may remember, I have mentioned to you that I have a small cabin on the Pee Dee River near the South Carolina, North Carolina border. If you were to drive down the long, dirt driveway, through the woods to see it, you wouldn't think much of it. Purchased by my father in 1990 for a dollar, love, and affection from his mother, it's just an old cinderblock house with jail bars covering up the windows and doors, a screened in front porch overlooking the river, and on the inside is where all of our old furniture and household essentials have gone to lay to rest.

Growing up my father would take me there to cut the grass, fix the plumbing, or check to see if the water heater was working. Or God forbid, make sure none of the pipes froze over during the cold winter and burst open. That seemed to be our biggest problem in our father son enterprise. Although I loved working alongside my dad, it did seem that going to the cabin was always a trip to do manual labor. But to my dad it was complete and utter bliss. I remember he would say to me that it was his “happy place”. I never could quite understand it.

My father, a man who for some time late in his career worked on Wall Street and rubbed shoulders with the Goldman Sachs Group, would laugh and tell me those people who would yell and shout at one another across big boardroom tables would never come close to having what he had. He had his “happy place”. Mentally he would go to the cabin and find peace whenever he was being chewed out by some corporate execs. When he was home and not traveling on business, and I was on break from school, he would ask me, “son, when do you want to go to the cabin? I’m missing it.” Now that I’ve inherited it, I think I’m beginning to see what he saw, and feel what he felt. The tug and pull of the everyday routine of life takes its toll, and you begin to lose the sense of God’s presence. I think the cabin was my dad’s place of bliss, simply because

that is where he would go to spend time with God. As a pastor it is assumed that is what my job is, spending time with God. But just like anyone else with a job, pastors can sometimes lose themselves in the work, and miss the sense of God’s presence completely. As silly as it may sound, pastors can get so involved, that there is not enough time to be with God.

As the retired bishop of the North Alabama Conference, and former dean of Duke Chapel, Rev. Will Willimon has said, sometimes we’re called to “times of voluntary disengagement by way of Sabbath, retreat, meditation, subtraction, or sanctuary. In such times, we step back, take stock, reassess our lives, look at things from a new perspective.” But just as there are times of “voluntary disengagement,” there are also times of “involuntary disengagement.” In other words, there are times in our lives when the daily hustle and bustle is brought to a screeching halt. Those of you who are inclined to like everything planned out and tend be in control, do not do well when plans don’t go accordingly. In these times of involuntary disengagement, we didn’t plan for our lives to be interrupted, but they were. And with the time that we’re given we have the rare opportunity to learn a new and important truth. In these times of mandatory, involuntary retreats, we are made to step back, take a look around, and reassess.

Throughout my life, I’ve heard many of stories of people who have had all kinds of near-death experiences. Anything and everything from drug over-doses to car accidents. I for one am not a stranger to surviving near death experiences, and the mental reversal they can have on a person’s life, if the accident was extremely bad. It’s as if we, who cheated death, have woken up to what’s important in life. Our lives are forever changed to praising God for the precious and fragile gift that is life. It’s the best thing that could’ve happened to us, being woken up to the truth.

Even in those confined places of our lives, when we’re trapped, with nowhere to escape, even in times when we’re not quarantined, we are pushed close to God and to what really matters in life. Take for instance, all the material written by those key figures who found themselves in confinement throughout history – by Paul’s letters while imprisoned in Rome, by John’s book of Revelation while in exile on the island of Patmos, by Martin Luther King Jr.’s Letter from the Birmingham, Alabama jail, or by Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s many letters and papers he wrote while imprisoned by the Germans in WWII.

Eugene Peterson believes in life there are also times of “forced imprisonment.” We go through some great loss – loss of a job, loss of a loved one through death or divorce, or loss of freedom. And all the loss of happiness that comes through the grieving process. “It is like exile, as if we are being forced to move out of our accustomed home into an unaccustomed new place. Not that these circumstances produce new life and good by themselves, but it is amazing how they can be the condition necessary for new life.” In other words, what we deem as loss, God makes it abundant. What we view as confinement, God makes our minds and souls free. What we consider dead and departed, God makes it revive and come alive.

Since the passing of my dad, I bought my mom a book by Duke Divinity professor, Kate Bowler entitled, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I’ve Loved*. In it she chronicles her battle with stage IV cancer while in search of the answers to life’s hardest questions: How to live life while facing death? Is there a master plan? Does everything happen for a reason? Does God never put more on us than we can handle? Her conclusion is profoundly simple: Life is hard. Life is beautiful. It’s fascinating how often life’s difficulties and our faithful resilience to overcome them bring about experiences of new beauty found only by the power of God.

It takes time and space, and a place for God to work in our lives. In a way, it's rather sad that we have to wait for this “involuntary retreat, this unwished-for, but badly needed, Sabbath.” Maybe this pandemic, this time off, says to us that we ought to be more intentional about seeking out times, places, and opportunities for this practice of presence with God. Maybe in this pandemic we've been shown that we are creatures full of resilience and hope, that no matter what life throws at us or where life takes us, God is close beside us.

Earlier in our reading of Acts, Paul preaches to the Athenians to help them understand that the unknown God they worship is the God he knows well, and he knows God well because that God is transcendently near to all. Quoting one of the Athenians' own poets, and accepting the same truth – we are all God's offspring. The problem however is that we don't know it. We don't know our true identity as a beloved child of God. We don't even know that God is transcendently near to us. The point Paul makes, theologian Richard Lischer captures well, saying, “God is so transcendently close we cannot see [God], and so woven into the fiber of things that [God] remains hidden, like the key ‘lost’ in plain view.”¹ Therefore, God is present, even when we are unaware. God is present, even when we can't seem to find God. God is present, even in our sufferings. God is present, in the Advocate, the Spirit of truth, (the CEB says “Companion”) when the world is in disbelief. No matter where we are, the Holy is present.

Even in these times of searching, of longing to be near to the presence of God, during a global pandemic in quarantine, we must be disciplined to question, is God near to us? What is God doing now? Is this time of suffering also a time of potential *kairos*? That Greek word meaning “God's time,” where time as we know it, “*chronos*”, becomes God's time, “*Kairos*”. In

¹ Stations of the Heart: Parting with a Son (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 230.

other words, is this “involuntary time” that has sprung up on the world a time when God is setting us apart in order to get closer to us? I’d like to think so.

Paul affirms God’s closeness to us saying, “God, who made the world and everything in it, is Lord of heaven and earth. He doesn’t live in temples made with human hands. Nor is God served by human hands, as though he needed something, since he is the one who gives life, breath, and everything else. From one person, God created every human nation to live on the whole earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their lands. God made the nations so they would seek him, perhaps even reach out to him and find him. In fact, God isn’t far away from any of us. In God we live, move, and exist. As some of your own poets said, ‘We are his offspring.’

“Therefore, as God’s offspring, we have no need to imagine that the divine being is like a gold, silver, or stone image made by human skill and thought. God overlooks ignorance of these things in times past, but now directs everyone everywhere to change their hearts and lives. This is because God has set a day when he intends to judge the world justly by a man [Jesus] he has appointed. God has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

We can find hope and put trust that God is not only transcendent, but is very near to us always, because of the words John tells us through the man God appointed for resurrection. Jesus tells his disciples, “Don’t worry I will be with you. Trust me. If you love me, then keep my commandments and I will also send another Companion (helper) who will be with you forever. God will send you this Companion, the Spirit of Truth, whom you know, because he lives with you and will be with you forever. I will not leave you without guidance to love one another, I will come to you to help. Soon the world will no longer see my love, but you who believe in me will see my love because I live in you. On that day you will know that I am from God, and that

you belong to me, and I belong to you. If you love me, you will keep my commandments (the greatest to love one another). If you love me you will be loved by my Father, and I will love you in return and reveal myself to you.”

In other words, the presence of God, Jesus Christ, and the Companion are all revealed near to us simply through love. By grace, God is taking us into our “happy place,” which is the very life of God.

Not only is God near to us, but we also live in God and God lives in us. We have been invited to enter into the very heart of God’s life.

We come from the God of love – we are love’s offspring – and we find our truest identity in relationship to God as children of God becoming who we are meant to be. Now we see in Jesus our destiny: To live forever in God’s life, to live in the very heart of God’s happy place. Good news indeed. Amen.