

“How to be an MVP”
Series: God Is Closer Than You Think Week 7. Spiritual Pathways
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For those of you who know me as “that crazy Eagles fan!” you are not surprised by my attire. And who isn’t a fan these days? What a win and another SUPER BOWL CHAMPIONSHIP! I think Pastor Doug should get a lot of the credit – did you see he was wearing an Eagle’s t-shirt when he played in the band last week? Right??

Today in our God is Closer than you Think series, we’re looking at Spiritual Pathways – how we experience God’s presence.

My love of football and sports grew from a little girl’s desire to be close to her earthly father. My dad wasn’t much of a talker or sharer of emotions. But he did and still does love his Philly sports – especially his Iggles. And that pathway of sports was how that little girl spent time and got closer to her Dad. Many Sundays he sat in his La-Z-Boy recliner and I laid on the sofa, watching our Eagles battle the dreaded Dallas Cowboys and other rival teams. Talking about sports is still how I feel closest to my Dad.

How do you experience God? When do you feel closest to him? I had a rather unique experience recently – my family and I were skiing in the French alps – my husband Warren - recently retired and this was his bucket list retirement trip.

Everyone in my family is a good skier – except me! I am a cautious skier. And I hadn’t skied in 3 years. So I was JUST a bit nervous. And my family knew it. First morning I piled on all my clothes - it takes forever to get dressed for skiing - picked up my poles and skis and cautiously headed out to meet my family to start our day. Butterflies fluttering like crazy in my stomach.... As I walked up the hill, they yelled – look Mom. You’ve got this – Jesus is with you. I looked where they were pointing and yep, there was a guy with a beard, dressed in a long tunic leading a group of similarly dressed guys – Jesus and his disciples. If only I had pulled out my iphone to snap a picture. But since I was lucky to be standing.... You’ll just have to take my word for it.

Being in that environment - seeing those incredible mountains –wow – I felt the majesty of God everywhere. When I was swishing (Ok pizzaing) through some nice small hilly trails, the song “God of Wonders” played over and over in my mind – his stunning handiwork on display all around me.

When I was going down a more challenging hill, however, I literally started saying to myself – “Father, Son” as I planted my left pole and then “Holy Spirit” as I planted my right. And THAT friends is what got me down the mountain!! It took the trinity!

Our scripture passage for today is from the Old Testament book of Kings. The great prophet Elijah is feeling discouraged. Queen Jezebel is trying to kill him because Elijah is loyal to God, not to her and King Ahab. Elijah was lonely and depressed, wondering if he is the only person in the world still true to God. God leads Elijah to Mount Sinai.

1 Kings 19:11-13

“Go out and stand before me on the mountain,” the Lord tells Elijah. And as Elijah stands there, the Lord passes by, and a mighty windstorm hits the mountain. It is such a tremendous blast that the rocks are torn loose, but the Lord is not in the wind.

After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord is not in the earthquake.

And after the earthquake there was a fire, but the Lord is not in the fire.

And after the fire there is the sound of a gentle whisper. When Elijah hears it, he wraps his face in his cloak and goes out and stands at the entrance of the cave.”

Elijah immediately knew the sound of that gentle whisper was God’s voice. He realizes that God doesn’t reveal himself only in powerful, miraculous ways like fires or earthquakes or majestic ski mountains. God is also found in humble, quiet places.

The real miracle is Elijah’s very special relationship with God. God knows Elijah and makes his presence known to Elijah. And as we are studying in our sermon series, that miracle is still available to all of us -- many thousands of years later. God loves us and wants to have a relationship with each one of us.

God in his infinite wisdom created us all differently. The great Christian writer C.S. Lewis wrote, “Why else were individuals created, but that God, loving all infinitely, should love each differently.” Because God created us uniquely, he loves us differently. How I feel God’s love, feel his presence is very different from how you, you, and you experience God.

It seems almost crazy – but God has shown us over and over that he wants to be fully present with each of us. He wants a relationship with us – one that is unique to only us and corresponds to the wiring pattern he himself created in us.

Spiritual pathways are the way we most naturally sense God’s presence and experience spiritual growth. In a sense, spiritual growth is simply increasing our capacity to experience the presence of God.

We all have at least one pathway that comes most easily to us. We also have one or two that feel most unnatural and require quite a bit of stretching for us to pursue.

This morning we’re walking through seven spiritual pathways – often attributed to Christian author Gary Thomas and revised here by John Ortberg. See which pathways feel natural and which are more of a stretch for you!

The Relational Pathway

People on the relational pathway often find they sense God's presence when they're with others; involved in significant relationships. Jesus' words in Matthew 18:20 "where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them," make perfect sense to them.

Small groups are key to experiencing God for relational people. They are often small group junkies! They tend to hear God speak to them in a conversation, rather than from a book. Ah, my kind of people! People on this pathway tend to hear God speak to them more in a conversation than from a book.

Relational types have to guard against two key dangers – superficiality and trying to please others. It's possible to spread yourself so thin relationally that no one gets past your external self to really know and love you and challenge you deeply. The second is to become dependent on others so that you live as a spiritual chameleon – addicted to what others think, changing to please what others want of you.

The Worship Pathway

People on the worship pathway resonate with the psalmist who wrote, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go into the house of the Lord.'" Psalm 22:1, something deep inside them feels released when praise and adoration are given voice. When worshipping in church, they hope it will go on for hours – while the intellectual types are staring at the clock, wondering when the message will ever get started!

If you relate to this path, you need to worship often – Turn your car into a rolling sanctuary – sing your heart out to songs on K-Love or other Christian stations. Don't worry that everyone is staring at you from their cars – your joy will be contagious! I once was listening to some great Christian music as I was running probably a little too enthusiastically and a neighbor driving by yelled out his window, "Whatever you're listening to - I want some of that." I yelled back it's K-Love, but not sure he heard me!

A few cautions for passionate worshippers – don't judge people who aren't as outwardly expressive as you. Some people come from backgrounds where no one raises a finger - let alone a hand!

And guard against an experienced-based spirituality that has you always looking for the next "worship high."

We need to make sure we don't judge the worship in our churches superficially – always looking for a certain emotional response, wanting to hear songs we like, that speak to us. When I first came to Woodside, I would find myself disappointed if the songs weren't familiar. Worship is not about me, not about any of us. It's about God; it's our collective offering to God.

Intellectual

People on the Intellectual Pathway draw closer to God as they learn more about him. They can barely control their excitement when someone talks about "the life of the mind." Ideas are as alive to them as people. They love to study scripture, the more information, the better.

When faced with a crisis or spiritual challenge, they tend to go into analytical problem solving mode.

Moses said in the central command of the Law that God's people are to love him "with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. Deuteronomy 6:5 When Jesus cited the command, he followed the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, by adding one phrase "with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength and **with all your mind.**" If you resonate with the Intellectual pathway, I bet you just said to yourself, "Yes Jesus!" If it's your dominant pathway you get a little thrill just hearing the word Septuagint!

Many of the most significant times of worship, devotion, experiencing God come when Intellectuals are in deep learning mode. The danger of this pathway lies in becoming all head and no heart. No one likes sitting next to the kid in class who's right all the time and knows it. "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up," wrote the apostle Paul. If that hits home for you, stretch yourself and make sure your growth in knowledge leads also to a growth in worship.

Activist - People who relate to the activist pathway have a high level of energy. They resonate with statements in scripture such as the words written about Jesus: "Zeal for your house will consume me." John 2:17. They are zeal junkies, with lots of passion to take action. When hearing about injustice, others may shake their heads in sadness. Activists are ready for action: "Somebody's got to DO something! I'm in – who's with me?"

Challenges don't discourage you; they energize you. You feel closest to God when you're passionately pursuing a cause for Him. Prayer and action go naturally together – when God puts something on your heart, you pursue it with relentless zeal, depending on God's presence and guidance as you charge ahead.

Be careful not to get so excited about the cause that you run over others in your zeal for what you want to accomplish. You may need to slow down and spend time in reflection and solitude to ensure you're discerning God's true call from your own strong impulse to act.

Contemplative - People with a contemplative pathway love large blocks of uninterrupted time alone. Reflection comes easily; journaling is their jam! If this sounds like you, you may sometimes feel like an observer in life and that's ok. There's a lot to observe! God is most present to you when distractions and noises are removed.

You love to bask in silent adoration of God, his mercy and love flowing through your mind. People often seek you out for your calmness and quiet strength.

To keep that calm, you need to make sure you have time to listen to God in silence. Solitude is vital to your soul and necessary for you to experience a deepening sense of God's presence.

When friends or the world disappoints, your first response may be to retreat into your inner world. Investing in key relationships and regular acts of serving will help keep you connected to God's most precious creation – his people.

Serving - For people on the serving pathway, Jesus's statement that "whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me," Matthew 25:40 is a truth they take to heart.

Serving people find God's presence most tangibly when they are involved in helping others. You can enrich your sense of God's presence by constantly looking for him in people you serve. My friend Sue and I call this "Jesus in disguise."

If this sounds like you, you may feel uncomfortable in a setting where you don't have a defined way to serve. But if you can do something – stack the chairs after Worship, make coffee, serve food – you feel a sense of God's delight in you. You often find yourself making observations that help you grow or speaking with God as you are engaged in serving.

A danger here is thinking God is present ONLY when you are serving. Don't get so caught up in serving that you forget you are his child first of all. Sometimes God will ask you to just sit at his feet and be with him.

Nature - **"The heavens declare the Glory of God; the skies proclaim his handiwork. Psalms 19:1**

It's hard not to experience God when you are out in his magnificent beauty – like the top of the ski mountain or the splendor of a sunrise. If the nature pathway is one of your main pathways, you find that you connect best with God when you are experiencing the world he made.

Being outside refreshes and replenishes you; if you are cooped up inside too long, your soul starts to feel stale! People on this pathway not only see God in the spectacular – those magnificent mountains or sunrises but also feel his presence in the presence of a leaf dropping, a butterfly taking flight. One of my favorite hymns is "The is My Father's World" – and the line "in the rustling grass I hear him pass, he speaks to me everywhere."

Like the Contemplatives, nature pathway people need to guard against using their pathway as an escape. You may think "I don't need church; I can worship God on my own in nature." Again, we must remember to see beauty where God does and people are truly the most valued part of all he created.

So now what? We've looked at some pretty amazing ways to connect with God. In your bulletin today there's a handout highlighting key attributes of each pathway. This week take a few moments and see which ones resonate with you.

Appreciate all the pathways. Resist the temptation to envy, judge, or copy someone else's pathways. No one pathway is above the others. Comparison leaves you feeling less than – when you honor your unique pathways you feel joyful and fulfilled.

Stretch yourself by paying attention to those pathways that may not come naturally to you. God gives us many beautiful pathways – we need to have appreciation for all of them. Learning to appreciate all the pathways helps us to value the contributions of our sisters and brothers in the church community and helps us maintain some balance in our own spiritual lives.

We can't just ignore learning nor can we opt out of Worship just because it doesn't come as naturally to us. We get to experience God in so many ways – stretch yourself!

And then as the Activists would say “Do Something!” Practice them! Start with the pathway that feels most natural and invest time in exploring practices that fit in that pathway. Here are a few suggestions to get you started.

- Relational – join a growth group!
- Worship – Get those tunes going!
- Intellectual – read a great study bible.
- Activist – Join a mission team; start one for a cause you are passionate about.
- Contemplative – set aside time in the morning or evening to reflect on God's goodness in your life that day.
- Serving – jump into one of the many ways of serving we have right here or in the community
- Nature – Take a walk with God!

Did you ever say to yourself – I know God speaks to some people, I sure wish he would speak to me. I often say, “Louder God, louder. Maybe try a bullhorn!” Hearing from God comes from spending time with him. Maybe the reason so many of us have difficulty hearing God's voice is because we are barking up the wrong tree – we haven't taken the time to discover our unique ways of connecting with God.

In Revelation John writes that one day we will receive from God a name that remains secret between him and us throughout eternity. How cool is that? C.S. Lewis writes, “What shall we take this secrecy to mean? Surely that each of the redeemed shall forever know and praise some one aspect of the Divine better than any other creature can. If all experienced God in the same way and returned Him an identical worship, the song of the church triumphant would have no symphony, it would be like an orchestra in which all the instruments played the same note.”

Or if all the football players played the same position. You knew I'd bring it back here somehow right? When asked what was key to the Eagles winning the Superbowl, quarterback Jalen Hurts immediately said “It was the Defense.” Offense wins games. Defense wins Championships.” It takes all the players using their gifts and experience to bring home a Championship, to make Jalen an MVP.

Later when asked what he/the Eagles had changed to help them reach the Super Bowl, Jalen replied, “I had a purpose before anybody had an opinion. You know that thing is still true and my purpose is being who God called me to be and like I said, it's never been about anyone else.”

Find your purpose by spending time with your heavenly father. He already thinks you're an MVP.

Spiritual Pathways
1 Kings 19:11-13
How do you experience God?

The RELATIONAL pathway

- I feel God's presence best when I pray, study, worship, and serve with others.
- As I look back, God has often spoken to me through others: a parent, pastor, friend, mentor, etc.
- It's hard for me to have solitary devotional times; I'd much rather be seeking God by discussing with others.

The INTELLECTUAL pathway

- I feel closest to God when my mind is fully engaged; give me an intellectually stimulating book any time!
- My best devotional times with God have me pouring over commentaries and studying the Bible.
- Emotional approaches to faith can feel uncomfortable.

The WORSHIP pathway

- I feel most alive when I can let go and experience God in joyful celebration and worship.
- I love to add music, worship playlists to my devotional times with God. God speaks to me through music.
- If I lack opportunities to spend time in Worship, I start to feel dry.

The ACTIVIST pathway

- I feel closest to God when I'm laser focused on a single cause for God's kingdom.

The ACTIVIST Pathway, continued

- I thrive spiritually in highly challenging, fast paced environments.
- I am a person of action; I don't always have patience for those slow to join me!

The CONTEMPLATIVE pathway

- I love to spend time in solitude. I'm a deep thinker; there's usually a lot going on inside me!
- I have a large capacity for prayer and private worship.
- I need to spend time alone; busyness drains me and can make me feel like I'm living life superficially.

The SERVING pathway

- I tend to feel God's presence most when I'm serving others – teaching, visiting, physical labor.
- I am happiest and fulfilled when worshipping God by serving others.
- I can feel out of place in public settings when I don't have something to do/a way to serve.

The NATURE pathway

- I feel closest to God when I'm surrounded by the beauty of his nature – I like to worship in the "Cathedral of Creation!"
- My best devotion times are when I'm on a walk, looking at a gorgeous view, staring out to sea. The wonders of creation leave me in awe of God!
- I crave being outdoors. It can be hard for me to sit inside in a worship service.