

TUNE IN TO GOD'S PRESENCE

1 KINGS 19; LUKE 1:26–38

Imagine the fear that comes with something new: a new job, a new school, a new place to live, a new friend. Even when something new has the potential to be good, there's plenty to be nervous about. Am I really qualified for this? Where will I eat lunch? Was this the right decision? What if they don't like me? Or imagine the fear that settles in after a bad diagnosis: What if I don't get better? What will happen to my family? Or the underlying dread that resurfaces with every new climate report, every new round of weather-related disasters. What will happen to us?

Imagine Mary, standing in front of the angel Gabriel, knees knocking, voice shaking a bit. "How can this be?" she asks.

Fear can send us spiraling. Physically, a rush of adrenaline puts our bodies on high alert. Mentally and emotionally, fear sends our minds spinning as we chase down the what-ifs and the what-nows. We respond to all those fear-based questions in myriad ways: we might get paralyzed with fear and not know what to do. We might act without thinking, doing something we'll regret later. We might think we're handling it all just fine, but the stress manifests in our bodies in ways we don't quite notice.

The first aspect of this practice gives us something to do: tune in to God's presence. Being attentive is a spiritual practice that has less to do with seeing or listening than with paying attention with the heart. We search for God's guidance, or perhaps simply God's presence, so we know we're not alone in our fear. We read messengers of God in Scripture:



prophets who instruct and angels who herald good tidings and grand instructions in equal measure. And we listen to Jesus, God’s beloved one. His life, ministry, teaching, death, and resurrection offer us both a pattern for living and the strength to carry out the work of discipleship. If “fear not” is a refrain that’s threaded throughout Scripture, the invitation to discern is at least as prominent, and they often go hand in hand.

When we’re afraid, it can be hard to discern; the still small voice is drowned out by the objections and anxieties thundering in our heads. Prayer can help. When the words don’t come easily, we can fall back on the words of others, through prayer books, devotionals, and the Psalms. Or perhaps our fears grip us so tightly that words aren’t possible. Tending to our breathing or focusing on our physical senses can help.

Building practices of prayer and spending time with the divine can lay the groundwork for having a response mechanism in place when we do feel that rush of fear.


Getting quiet helps. We can often tune in to God’s presence better when we’ve set aside a particular time to do so, away from the noise of the television screen or the demands of our inbox or the chatter of social media. But God’s presence doesn’t require quiet. Sometimes, we can tune in to the presence of God just as easily in a crowded place when we’re surrounded by the humanity God loves. The truth is, God’s presence is always there, all around us; nurturing a practice of paying attention will help us discern it when we need it most.

- When is a time you were afraid?
- What happened in your body? Your mind?
- How did you know you were afraid?
- What helped you move through the fear?

Take some time to consider how you best tune in to God’s presence. Check ones that work for you.

- When I am alone and quiet
- When I walk in nature
- When I journal
- When I worship and gather with my community or friends
- When I listen to music

In the coming week, think about how you pay attention to God.



Dear God,
I want to tune in to your presence. Help me perceive your voice in quiet moments and crowded rooms. Be with me always. Calm my fears with your loving presence.
Amen.

FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE



The Bible contains many stories of people who tuned in to God's presence, as well as stories of those who listened well when messengers of God came along with astonishing news. The Psalms are a great place to find words for our prayers, or for a reminder that God's presence has been with us throughout all of human history.

We might not find ourselves escaping to the wilderness like Elijah, or facing as startling an announcement as Mary does, but see if there are tools offered to help you face your own fears in their stories.

A SNACK AND A NAP

Elijah was one of the great prophets in the Old Testament. His stories are told in 1 Kings 17–19 and 2 Kings 1–2. He had the unpleasant task of confronting unjust rulers and fighting for God's just cause. When he kills a bunch of Queen Jezebel's prophets, he flees to the wilderness to escape her wrath. He finally sinks to the ground beneath a tree and wishes he were dead. It's hard to imagine anyone more alone and afraid.

He sinks into sleep, but then something remarkable happens: an angel—a messenger from God—appears and gives him a snack. “Get up and eat something!” the angel said. *There's work to do.*

Isn't that so often the case when we are scared and overwhelmed? Sometimes what we need most is a good night's sleep and a hearty meal. Our bodies carry our stress for us, and when we are fearful, we would do well to check in with our bodies. What are our bodies telling us that could help us face the fearful task at hand? Would we be more equipped to take the next step if we were rested and well fed?

Sure enough, once Elijah has a snack and a nap, the word of God shows up, and sends Elijah out to the mountaintop with instructions to pay attention. Then there is wind, and earthquake, and fire . . . but God is not there; instead, God is in the sound of a gentle whisper. Some translations call God's voice coming in “sheer silence.” Elijah, rested and fed, finds the quiet he needs to listen to God and face the rest of his difficult journey.

Important for us as well is what God tells Elijah in the whisper. God reminds Elijah he is not the only faithful prophet out there fighting for God's cause. There are many others, and God's advice to Elijah is to return and join them.

[The LORD] said [to Elijah], “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind, and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake, and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire, and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

—1 Kings 19:11–12

How often we find ourselves in states of fear, feeling all alone. Tuning in to God's presence may help us discover others in similar situations who can provide comfort and support as we do them.

➤ Have you ever felt the effects of fear and stress in your body?

➤ In what ways can taking care of your body be a way of tuning in to God's presence?

CURIOSITY AND CALL

In Luke 1:26–38, the angel Gabriel visits Mary, a young woman engaged to Joseph. He hails her with the assurance that the Lord is with her. This perplexes her, and she ponders his greeting. “Do not be afraid, Mary,” he reassures her, “for you have found favor with God.” What follows is the astonishing news that she has been chosen to be the God-bearer, the one to birth the Messiah, the Son of the Most High.

Part of listening well is curiosity. Mary exemplifies this with her question, “How can this be?” The angel's response seems more obscuring than clarifying, but it also includes a restatement of just how significant this birth will be: “the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. . . . For nothing will be impossible with God.” It is answer enough for Mary. “How can this be” is a question for people who don't need absolute clarity to quell their fears, but instead want to enter further into God's mysterious work in the world.

➤ Have you ever wondered, like Mary, “How can this be?”

➤ How can we listen like Mary, full of curiosity and open to whatever amazing work God is inviting us into?

PAUL'S ASSURANCE OF GOD'S LOVE

When we tune in to a radio or television station, we trust that something will be there. Likewise, when we settle our minds and tune in to God's presence, we trust that God will be there. The apostle Paul often wrote assurances of God's presence when writing his many letters found in the New Testament. One favorite is found in Romans 8:35–39 where he asks, “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” (v. 35). After going through a list of all the things that might separate us from God's love, he ends with these promising words:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

—Romans 8:38–39

FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

Since the first humans lifted up prayers to God (or perhaps, since the breath of God swept over the waters of creation), humanity has been seeking the presence of God. A full survey of prayer practices would fill volumes. Here are just a few; you will no doubt know others.

THE COMMUNITY OF TAIZÉ, FRANCE

The Taizé community is an ecumenical monastic community in France, which started in 1940, in the midst of World War II, and continues to this day. The brothers who make up the Taizé community are committed to a life of prayer, service, and communal living. Taizé has become a place of pilgrimage for many who seek a place to pray and deepen their spiritual lives. The music and worship of Taizé, however, has become one of its most significant contributions. Taizé-style music is simple and contemplative, often including lines from psalms or other Scriptures, phrases that are sung repetitively and meditatively. Singing in the style of Taizé is a particular practice of tuning in to the presence of God in the context of community: each voice joins the others, and the song is repeated an undetermined number of times, until the community as a whole brings the song to a close. Such communal singing can be a powerful way of listening for the voice of God.

Watch the YouTube video “Bless the Lord My Soul Taize HD with Onscreen Lyrics” (bit.ly/FMBlessTaize, 3:51) for a taste of the music.



PRAYER OF EXAMEN

The prayer of *examen* is a practice with ancient roots that can serve as a helpful tool in tuning in to God's presence. The *examen* has long been associated with St. Ignatius of Loyola, a 16th-century Spanish priest who wrote about the practice in his famous book *Spiritual Exercises*. The *examen* is a way of praying that involves looking back on a period of time—a day, a week, a year—and noticing God's presence. Most traditions include these steps:

1. Give thanks to God;
2. Pray for grace in understanding;
3. Review the time period, noticing how you felt at key moments;
4. Reflect on those moments: where did you feel closer to or farther away from God?
5. Look ahead, and pray for wisdom and guidance.

DESERT MOTHERS AND FATHERS

The Desert Mothers and Fathers were Christians who formed monastic communities in the third and fourth centuries. Anthony the Great, the most well-known of the Desert Fathers, first moved to the desert to live a life of simplicity and silence, believing that removing the distractions of daily life would enable him to grow more deeply in his spiritual relationship with God. Today, people from many faith traditions follow the practice of temporarily stepping away from the hustle of regular life—if not as completely as Anthony did!—to spend time with God.

SERVICE

Not all spiritual practice requires silence. In fact, sometimes we are most aware of God's presence when we are surrounded by people. Certainly, Christians have found themselves in tune with God when feeding hungry neighbors, visiting the sick and grieving, advocating for justice, or welcoming strangers. The key is not always the silence; it's tuning in to the presence of God.

➤ Have you experienced any of the practices discussed? What was your experience?

➤ What amount of simplicity and solitude would help you tune in to God's presence?

Want to learn more?

- *Soul Feast*, by Marjorie Thompson, is a spiritual classic that continues to be a bestseller, as thousands each year accept Thompson's invitation to the Christian spiritual life. The book offers a framework for understanding the spiritual disciplines and instruction for developing and nurturing those practices.
- *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Anything*, by James Martin, examines everyday spirituality by encouraging readers to be tuned in to the presence of God throughout their lives, not just when they are doing something particularly religious.
- The book *Protestant Spiritual Exercises: Theology, History, and Practice*, by Joseph D. Driskill, is a good place to start. Driskill explores the history of spiritual practice and then provides accessible, practical tips for trying out a variety of practices.



By the way, it's called *practice* for a reason. You don't have to know how to do it perfectly the first time—or ever!

PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

Tuning in to God's presence isn't something we can just do at the flip of a switch, like queuing up our latest favorite streaming show. Listening for the still small voice of God takes a lifetime of practice. Here are some practices that we can incorporate into our daily lives.

GET QUIET

Life is noisy, and sometimes we need to intentionally create times for quiet so we can listen to what God is saying to us. Set aside time for journaling or prayer, go for a walk without your headphones, or just sit quietly and listen to the sounds of your neighborhood.

LISTEN IN THE BUSTLE

Quiet is not the only way God speaks. Find a place filled with lots of people—a grocery store, an airport, a school—and notice the presence of God in each person.

PRACTICE THE EXAMEN

The *examen* is an ancient practice that invites us to look back on a period of time—the past 24 hours, the past month, the past season—and reflect on where we saw God at work. This is a good practice to do at dinner each night, right before bed, or at the end of a particular season.

PAY ATTENTION

Nurture a practice of noticing. Notice beauty. Notice something that delights you. Notice something that makes you feel sad. Try to notice something each day. A photo-a-day challenge or a simple journal can help with this practice.

READ THE PSALMS

The Psalms have been called the prayer book of the Bible, and they can be an excellent resource for tuning in to the divine. These ancient words contain the full range of human emotions, and they serve as a reminder of God's presence in times of joy and in times of fear and struggle.





CHECK IN WITH YOUR BODY

Sometimes, our bodies carry stress and fear in ways we don't notice. Check in with your body: do you, like Elijah, need a snack or a nap? Talk to your health care provider if you are feeling particularly overwhelmed by fear or anxiety.

GROUND YOURSELF IN THE PHYSICAL WORLD

Try this practice: pay attention to five things you can see, four things you can hear, three things you can touch, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste. (If one of these senses is unavailable to you, omit it and/or double up on one of the others.) This practice helps us tune in to what's around us, which is a form of spiritual listening.



● Ways I can commit to tuning in to God's presence:

FOLLOWING JESUS

When we're afraid, it's easy to let our minds spin out of control. Sometimes our bodies react too, with flare-ups or breakdowns we didn't see coming. If we shape our lives with practices that help us stay in tune with the presence of God, we'll be better equipped to respond when fearfulness shows up.

We can take intentional time for prayer and spiritual practice. We can approach our call and our fear with curiosity and openness. We can tend to our physical bodies. We can learn from centuries of Christians who have drawn closer to God through their faith practices. Tuning in to God's presence won't keep us from being afraid. But as we'll see in the next aspect of this practice, it can help us from feeling alone.

Each session's closing reflection will offer a psalm you can read aloud or silently. Also, a verse or two is offered as a closing prayer. Perhaps reading the psalms regularly is a devotional practice you will wish to carry from this study.

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.
The nations are in an uproar; the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice; the earth melts.
The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Come, behold the works of the LORD;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.
"Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations;
I am exalted in the earth."
The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Be still and know that I am God.
Be still and know that I am.
Be still and know.
Be still.
Be.
Amen.

PSALMS
PSALM 46