

Word for the Year 2023

God with Us: Becoming a People Aware of His Presence

Thesis: Group identity: We are a people who are becoming aware of his presence, God with us.

Text: Matthew 1:22-23; Genesis 28:16-17

Today, we come to the first day of a new year. I am glad you are here to journey with us in this adventure of life.

I am captured by the vision the Lord has given us at Calvary:

1. **Establishing people in intimacy with God.**
 - a. Outcome: awareness of God.
2. **Expressing true Christian community.**
 - a. Outcome: authenticity; open and honest with others.
3. **Extending the kingdom of God in the earth.**
 - a. Outcome: alignment and action with the ways of Jesus.

As you look back over your life, I hope that you are making progress in your **awareness** of God with you, in your ability to be **authentic**—being open and honest with others, and in your capacity to **align** with and get in **action** around the ways of Jesus.

As we approached this new year, I sought the Lord for his word for us. I got input from Pastor Steve and from our team. I prayed and listened for the Lord's direction.

Here is what I believe to be the word of the Lord for us in 2023.

God with us: becoming a people aware of his presence.

Here is our group identity.

We are a people who are becoming aware of his presence, God with us.

Today, I want to **cast vision** and **tell stories** about becoming aware of the Lord's presence individually and corporately.

Presence-based living is about **connecting afresh with God**.

1. We want to become aware of the God who is here with us **individually**.
2. We want to become aware of the God who is here with us **corporately**.

3. Becoming a people who are aware of God's presence with us is especially critical in our **prophetic context**.
 - a. According to God's word, things are going to get worse and worse, better and better, faster and faster (Isaiah 60:1-3).
 - i. So, things are going to get darker and darker.
 - ii. And, because of God's presence with us, we can arise and shine even in the darkness.
 - b. As darkness increases, we must increase in our capacity to connect with our Living God, who is the light of the world (John 8:12). Jesus wants us to be agents of light (Matthew 5:13-16).
4. **Think about it:**
 - a. Do we have lives that thrive in the midst of all that is happening and shaking out in this world?
 - b. Do we live in such a way that our lives shine with the light of Jesus for others to experience?
 - c. Do we experience the presence of God in our own lives individually and corporately in such a way that we are contagious?

God with us (Immanuel, Matthew 1:22-23).

The story of Christmas is God with us. *This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. 20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him **Immanuel**"—which means, "God with us" (Matthew 1:18-23).*

1. One the central themes of the Biblical Story, from Genesis to Revelation, is **God with us**-- **God abiding and dwelling with his people** (Leviticus 26:12; Jeremiah 24:7, 32:38; Ezekiel 37:23, 27; Matthew 1:22-23; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Hebrews 8:10; Revelation 21:3).
 - a. *I will put my dwelling place among you, and I will not abhor you. 12 I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people (Leviticus 26:11-12).*
 - b. *And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (Revelation 21:3).*
2. **In the Garden**, God walked with man and woman (Genesis 3:8).

- a. *...the Lord God was walking in the Garden in the cool of the day... (Genesis 3:8).*
3. In the wilderness, **the Tabernacle** was a place of encounter with the Living God as God dwelt with his people who left Egypt for the promised land (Exodus 25:8-9).
 - a. *Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. 9 Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you (Exodus 25:8-9).*
4. **Jesus came and tabernacled** (dwelt) with us (John 1:14 MSG).
 - a. *The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood (John 1:14 MSG).*
 - b. *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14 NIV).*
 - c. In the incarnation of Jesus, God took on flesh; Spirit and matter come together in Jesus.
5. **Now, God abides in** every follower of Jesus **as our individual bodies become the temple of the Holy Spirit** (1 Corinthians 6:19).
 - a. *Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; 20 you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).*
 - b. Now, God takes up residence in each of us. We do not become God; rather, we become individuals who are meant to *be filled up to the full measure of all the fullness of God* (Ephesians 3:19; 4:13).
6. **Now, God is building us together corporately to become his dwelling in the earth** (Ephesians 2:19-22).
 - a. *Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22).*
 - b. *... you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house... (1 Peter 2:5).*
 - i. God comes to make his home in us corporately.

God has revealed himself to us and made known to us his desire to live with us, to walk with us, and abide in us.

However, there is a problem. We leak of this revelation. We often live unaware of God's presence with us. We can grow complacent or take for granted this reality that God is with us, that he wants us to live out of the revelation and experience of his nearness and presence with us, in us, and through us.

Sometimes we live unaware in our individual lives (Genesis 28:16).

1. *Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. 11 When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. 12 He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. 13 There above it stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. 14 Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. 15 I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (Genesis 28:10–15).*
2. *When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." 17 He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven (Genesis 28:16-17).*
3. We are not different from Jacob.
 - a. The story of Jacob was this: "The Lord was in this place, and I didn't know it."
 - b. God is active and his glory is all around us and with us (Isaiah 6:3).
 - c. And, there are special places of encounter, or portals, like in Genesis 28 at Bethel.
 - d. Yet, we are unaware.
4. The good news is that we as individuals can **cultivate spiritual practices** that help us to become aware of the God who is with us.

Sometimes we become complacent, dulled, or inattentive to the presence of the Lord as a congregation.

1. **The story of Jack Hayford and the Church on the Way.**
 - a. One day God manifested his presence at Church on the Way. Jack was alone one Saturday in the church sanctuary checking on the thermostat, and he saw the silvery mist of the Lord's presence in the sanctuary.
 - b. As a church committed to the presence of the Lord, Jack Hayford said that they as congregation at times failed to appreciate the presence of

the Lord. They faced the danger of taking the Lord's presence for granted or for not stewarding the Lord's presence.

- c. **Jack writes:** ... we learned that God's glory must be entertained—that is, honored so as not to be lost. To “entertain” God's glory is to welcome His workings in our hearts and homes, our churches and congregations, just as we would a beloved guest. My own church has learned the danger of becoming “accustomed” to His grace. Glory is the portion of those who glorify Him, and true worship springs only from hearts that are being constantly renewed in a childlike first love.
- d. Neglect, sophistication, even well-intended but dulling habit, will diminish glory to whatever degree the will of the flesh or the pride of the human heart persists in its own way. Samson is a disturbing photograph of this possibility.
- e. Following his carnal indulgence and surrender to Delilah's connivings, we find him shorn of his hair. The glory he offered God through obedience was gone, and the glory his obedience had invited upon his life, resulting in excelling strength and ability, was gone with it. It's a sad episode.
- f. And [Delilah] said, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” So he awoke from his sleep, and said, “I will go out as before, at other times, and shake myself free!” But he did not know that the Lord had departed from him. Judges 16:20 (author's emphasis)
- g. God's gift of unique blessing upon Samson was “entertained” by his continuing in his vow to walk in God's ways. The tragedy is double, not only that he lost God's presence, but worse—that he didn't even recognize it was gone until he was crippled at the hands of his enemy!
- h. Over the years the Holy Spirit has reproved me and our congregation. Any style of worship can become habitual, ritualized, and tinny instead of fresh, wholehearted and vibrant. It is an incredible fact: Our hearts can become as hardened to the presence of God as they can against it. A church can be deceived, thinking its growth verifies the congregation's righteousness. An individual, similarly, can be deluded by the notion that his or her prosperity is God's seal of approval. A magnificent home may seem to attest to glorious achievement.
- i. This is all a delusion. Well-managed churches, businesses, careers, and dwellings can be built with or without God. But without God the day inevitably comes when, like Samson, we say, “I will go out as before, at other times, and shake myself free,” and nothing happens. **And in these words we hear the echo of thousands who have “learned all the moves” to achieve apparent success, but who have discovered that glory does not reside in our systems or structures, but in our simplicity of dependence on God.** (Jack Hayford, [Glory on Your House](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 1994), 24–25.)

2. **Calvary, we face this same danger.**

- a. God is in this place. Calvary is a place of encounter with the Lord. It is a portal place, where God is active. It is a porch, a place where we step into the presence of the Lord. It is not because of who we are but because of the goodness of God and who God is.
- b. It is easy for us to take for granted what we have here and to neglect so great a salvation, becoming dull and unaware of the God who is with us corporately.
- c. We can fail to acknowledge the gift that we have, the gift of God's presence and activity among us.
- d. We can fail to appreciate that God is here.
- e. We can just show up to church and go through the motions without engaging our affections and desire.
- f. Or, we can fail to pursue God's presence intentionally, just having a "ho hum" or "take it or leave it" attitude or "been there, done that" attitude.
- g. The good news is that we corporately can cultivate spiritual practices that help us to become aware of the God who is with us.

Stories of God with us corporately.

1. **The story of the church in Acts 2:42-47.**

- a. The good news is that we as a church can learn how to steward and cultivate the presence of the Lord, like they did in Acts 2:42-47.
- b. *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:42-47).*
- c. **Intentional actions:** *they devoted themselves...*
 - i. To putting into practice the teaching and equipping of the leadership (apostles).
 - ii. To fellowship with one another; genuine community (koinonia).
 - iii. To doing life together (breaking of bread); not just as isolated individuals. In our busy culture, we have to make time intentionally to get together with others.
 - iv. To praying together.

2. **The story of Sadjah Echols.**

- a. I have asked Cheryl Moses to share Sadjah's story of encounter here at Calvary.

3. **The story of Michael Sullivant encountering the Angel of Calvary.**
 - a. During one of his visits to Calvary, Michael Sullivant entered that back door to this Prayer Room. Then, he became aware of the Angel of the Lord in this place, who had an assignment. The fear of the Lord came on Michael and he knelt. The angel told Michael that God is in this place and that his angelic assignment was to watch over what is being done here for God's purposes. Michael was aware that he was responsible to share with us what God purposed, not just what he wanted to share.
 - b. John Paul Jackson and other prophetic people have had significant encounters with God here. John Paul Jackson told us one time that he had an encounter here that he had never had in another church before.

Prayers for new year:

1. With the Lord helping us, we will live with an awareness of God's presence with us (Matthew 28:18-20).
2. With the Lord helping us, may we grow as a people who are becoming aware of his presence, of God with us, individually and corporately.
 - a. Our lives really are meant to be the dwelling place of God among people (1 Corinthians 6:19-20; Ephesians 2:21-22).
3. With the Lord helping us, we will live as agents of God's presence through us into this world by our acts of serving, volunteering, loving, giving, reaching, blessing, praying, etc. (Matthew 5:13-16; Acts 1:8; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21).