

## Experiential Environments

**We are transformed through encounters with Jesus that mark us forever. (Col. 1:27)**



While the process of spiritual formation is life long, there are moments and places of encounter with Jesus that transform us and we are never the same.

Have you ever been in a cathedral of high ceiling and ornate stained glass windows and the massive sculptures and intricately detailed paintings? Although it may have felt “over the top,” there was a sense that of the majesty of God.

Somehow you understood, even experienced, that the architecture, the symbols and every single image meant something...that it all pointed you to the beauty and transcendence nature of God.

Have you ever stood on the precipice of a mountain, gazed over the vastness below and been moved to worship the transcendent Creator?

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After this transformation God is not “out there” anymore. You look out *from* God who lives in you and through you and with you.

Have you ever leisurely gazed at sunset or allowed music to penetrate your heart in such a way that it “took hold” of your soul? (You could not find any other way to describe it.)

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Have you ever through a tragedy, an accident, an illness, or desperate situation encountered God in such a way that lifted you above your pain and loss? And although you would never want to go through it again, you would never trade the “mark” it made in your heart.

We encounter God, often in ways that cannot be explained. We just “know” we’ve encountered the living God.

One of the most obvious example of this kind of experiential discipleship is our own conversion “experience.” Salvation is more than a head-decision, or a legal transaction which forgives our sins...it’s a conversion experience of giving us a new heart. Every person has to come to God experience on their own. After this transformation God is not “out there” anymore. You look out *from* God who lives in you and through you and with you.

Paul’s conversion was a classic and authentic religious conversion. It was an inner and authoritative experience, not just an idea, not hearsay, not textbook knowledge nor some secondhand information given to him. Afterwards, he *knew* God.

Too often our Christian experience has been reduced to talking about Jesus and never connecting with him in a real, meaningful way. We have settled for thinking about God instead of encountering God.

We have been satisfied with knowing facts about God instead of experiencing God himself.

...or studying about prayer without ever praying...when we do pray it comes off like a sanctified shopping list and becomes more about how to twist God's arm than to enjoy his presence

...or in our tenacity to tear apart Scripture in order to master a text... we fail to hear what God wants to say to us through the text and don't experience it in the life-giving way it was meant to be read.

We have theologically declared that God is love and yet most of us have rarely felt the love of God in a real way on a consistent basis.

The Christian life is not meant to be an objective pursuit of orthodox doctrine but is embodied in those who follow a Person rather than a dogma.

Erwin McManus offers this lament of the church's non-experiential bias:

"As currently practiced, Christianity is about a reasonable faith not an experienced faith. If we believe the right things, then we are orthodox. Frankly whether we ever actually connect to God or experience His undeniable presence has become incidental, if not irrelevant. We have become believers rather than experiencers."

Granted experience alone is not a reliable guide, and should not be divorced from either the revelation of scripture or reason. However, a Christianity that is only cerebral is also misguided. True Christianity stems from knowing God personally. Many people, however, are like Job in that they have heard about God but have not come face to face with Him (Job 42:5). God exists and has a very real presence about Him that cannot be contained on paper. He is meant to be understood experientially. "I am not talking about a theological union only," Tozer writes, "I am speaking also of a conscious union, a union that is felt and experienced."

Knowing God in an experiential way, are what people are looking for. Our culture is not so much interested in what you believe; they want to see how you live. They want to know that God is real; he is transcendent... and they can encounter him in a real way. Rather than rely on our logical arguments for the faith, they are looking to see if it is embodied in you. Rather than believe it when you say, "God is love" they want to see how well you love.

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They are hungry for meaning and purpose. They have a deep longing to experience authentic community. They desire to experience the real and genuine transcendent God. I suspect you do too; because our hearts were created to worship God himself.

As we seek to live out our faith our lives must correspond with these hungers....as well as the ministries of our church.

What do we have as a church of offer such people? When people do turn their hearts to Christ I don't think it will be our persuasive arguments. I think it will be the undeniable sense that God was actually present with us as we worshipped.

In this environment we call corporate worship, we each have opportunity to encounter in a real way...God himself. This is one of the ways we respond to Jesus' invitation to walk with him and be with him.

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Be reminded: When talk about "knowing God" – it's not just facts about God; it's a personal, first-hand interaction with him. It's not just learning facts ABOUT him; but what you continue to learn FROM him.

The key, however, to responding Jesus' invitation to know him is that you have to "be all there."

Do you enter a worship experience with a ho-hum attitude? Do you show up late and spend the first 25 minutes "settling in"? Are you distracted by the people in the choir, or the worship leader's new haircut? How often have we plowed right through a worship service distracted with the cares we brought with us or by the crying baby behind us? On the other hand, how often has God used a song to bring strength and challenge to your soul? Worship challenges us to take an honest look inside, reminds of truths we've forgotten, convicts of sin and more...if we allow it to.

How often have we come to worship but our hearts are not connected with our lips?

When the people of Israel fell into a totally external life of ritual and observance, God lamented, "These people . . . honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Isa. 29:13).

John 4:24 says – "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth." True worship comes from the heart not outward performance; although raising our hands might be an authentic expression of what is going on in our hearts.

Richard Foster wrote, "To stand before the Holy One of eternity is to change." But if we don't focus or show up "all the way" in worship we will miss those divine encounters of grace. More than a feel-good experience, worship becomes an opportunity for a life-changing encounter with Christ.

Know this...the transformational encounter we talk often about does not typically happen in the spectacular, hyper-sensational ways. You don't have to act weird to encounter God.

It usually happens in slow, incremental, virtually immeasurable ways. Standing in an environment of worship with hearts that are alive and attentive to the presence of God in us changes us.

I think that just our showing up brings him pleasure.

*And...It's finding one day you've become more like him simply by being with him.*

As we place ourselves in the environment of worship...if we engage our hearts and "show up all the way," as we do so, believers are shaped into the image of Christ and inquirers experience the present reality of God in a unique, meaningful way.

Besides the **corporate worship settings on Sunday mornings**, other opportunities at Faith for this kind of experiential discipleship today is in the **retreats** (women, men, youth, kids) we offer. Often these places become opportunities for experiencing God in a fresh way because these settings offer a change of pace (a "slowing" from the dizzying haste of our days) and a change of place (taking us out of the routine and familiar) which often results in seeing ourselves and God with new eyes and we encounter him in a new way.

It's not that God is more "active" in these kinds of places...it's that we are more focused...more engaged...more intentional in our being there.

One thing for sure, whatever place we find ourselves, whether in worship with a community of believers, a mountain "cathedral," a journey into illness, a retreat setting, or an evening of "awakening," if we engage our hearts and "show up" all the way, we will never be the same.