



WEEK 2

SIGNS OF HIS PRESENCE

Pastor Harry Kuehl

Dec 30 & 31, 2017

LEADER'S GUIDE

1. Of all the Christmas gifts that you received this year, which one is your favorite? Why? How do you think you will feel about it a month from now? Six months? A year?

This easy opener will give people a chance to talk about how the typical Christmas gifts we receive delight and satisfy us for a limited time. Having God with us is an amazing, permanent gift that simply never loses its luster.

2. What were some distinct signs of the presence of God in your life or someone else's in 2017?

Sometimes it's hard to adequately recall the moments when we sensed God's presence in a highly distinct way unless we took the time to write them down in a journal or inside a Bible—always a good idea. If you can't recall a moment in your own life from this year, perhaps you can remember a time in a family member or friend's life when it was clear God was actively present. Talk about how you knew it was God at work.

How hard (or easy) is it to pick up on God's active presence? Why do you think that is the case?

Discuss what desensitizes us to perceiving God's presence (busy-ness, spiritual apathy, doubt, discontent, bitterness, fear...)

3. Read Matthew 1:18-23.

Matthew 1:18-23 (NIV)

18 This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the

Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet 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 conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

What kind of person do you imagine Joseph was? Was he also chosen by God? What do you think God was looking for in the human father Jesus would have?

The fact that Joseph didn't wish to disgrace Mary with a public divorce shows he was surely a kind and gracious man. He could have brought her before the chief priests and rulers. In all likelihood she could have been stoned, or the very least, driven from the village. We also know he was faithful to the Law, and that he got up the next morning and did what the angel told him. Joseph was extremely dependable, devoted to God and remarkably kind.

Mary was betrothed to Joseph before she was visited by the angel, so Joseph was a chosen part of God's plan.

4. Pastor Harry described that the time between Joseph finding out Mary was pregnant and the moment the angel visited him as a time of chaos. What were the ramifications of their situation, culturally?

The angel visited Mary and Joseph, but not her parents, not his, not the religious leaders of their city. They were the only ones who'd been visited by God's messengers. Discuss who Mary and Joseph might have told and who believed them and who might not have. What did most of the town think, all likelihood, was the reason Mary, an unmarried woman betrothed to someone, was pregnant?

What did Joseph fear in taking Mary as his wife?

A big part of the chaos was that if Joseph didn't divorce Mary, then it would surely appear that he was the father and that they had slept together before marriage, highly scandalous. Talk about the fact that the angel tells Joseph not to be afraid; he doesn't tell Joseph not to be angry or hurt. Fear is what Joseph was feeling. Talk about why it was fear and not some other emotion.

Why do you think God waited to send the angel to Joseph?

Discuss some probable reasons why Mary and Joseph didn't get the angelic visits the same night. Why might God have waited? Why does God make us wait? What happens when we are in a place of chaos and God makes us wait?

5. Can you relate? Has there been a time in your life when it seemed like your entire world was upside down and God was nowhere inside that chaos? Or maybe He showed up days or weeks or months later than you thought He would? What did you do?

Allow time for everyone to share.

Where was God during the time? What have you learned about God during times of waiting?

God is always present, all the time, even when it seems like He's not. We know this is true even if we don't always feel like this is true. We have to learn how to trust in what we know. That kind of learning happens best when we are forced to exercise our faith muscle in a time of chaos. It's when we are tempted to trust in what we feel rather than what we know -- and we resist -- that our faith muscle is strengthened.

6. What is the opposite of chaos, in your opinion?

Some may say the opposite of chaos is order, but consider for your discussion that the opposite of chaos is peace. Discuss how we define the word "peace."

Here are two of Merriam-Webster's definitions: 1. a state of tranquility or quiet: freedom from civil disturbance, a state of security or order within a community provided for by law or custom 2. freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts or emotions.

The Hebrew word for "peace" is shalom. Its primary definition in Strong's Concordance is "completeness." Just like a puzzle that is missing a piece, it can be very frustrating to our peace of mind when something is unfinished or left undone. Many people talk about needing closure when something terrible or maddening has happened. We don't like the feeling of incompleteness. It goes against our sense of calm. Discuss.

7. Brother Lawrence in his timeless classic, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, wrote: "We ought not to be weary of doing little things for the love of God, who regards not the greatness of the work, but the love with which it is performed." How does our love for God enable us to keep moving, keep trusting, keep joyful in times of uncertainty? What does love for God enable us to do? Make a list.

Start with love for God enables us to trust Him when we we're in the moments of chaos. Love for God enables us to see beyond our selves to the bigger picture God is painting. Keep going...

8. Pastor Harry shared that the signs that God is with us are the same signs that assured Joseph that God was with him. What did Pastor Harry mean?

Discuss the takeaway from the sermon this weekend. How does God show us Himself in the chaos, in the wonder, and in the presence?

MEMORIZE Psalm 23:4 – “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

MEDITATE: Where are you spiritually today compared with January 2017? The same place? Stronger in your faith? Weaker? Where would you like to be in terms of your relationship with God this time next year? How will you better practice the presence of God in 2018? Think about it, and then create an action step to get you moving toward your goal. Consider starting with your prayer life. How will you engage in prayer at a deeper level in this new year?

One way to simplify and re-energize your prayer life is to remember the three basic manners we teach our kids. *Thank you, I'm sorry* and *Please*. Try making your everyday prayers threefold: Praise and adore God first (before you say anything else – that's thanking Him for who He is and what He's done), then confess your faults to Him (that's saying you're sorry for the things you've done or not done that you know were wrong), then ask Him for blessings, favor, healing, etc. (that's saying please.)

Praying this way is simple to remember and really helps to center your prayers on God first, and then yourself. Have a blessed year in the Lord!