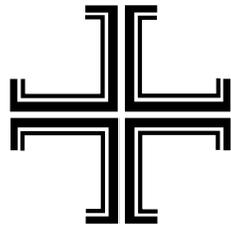




Connecting in Grace™

Radical Gifts, Radical Grace



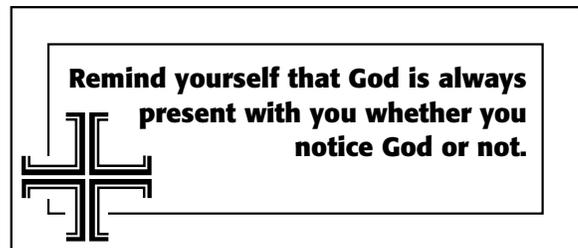
Ordinary Days



Theme

Remember when you were a child and it seemed like forever until Christmas or your birthday would come? Many of us act in much the same way as adults. We look forward to the big life events, such as graduations, weddings, vacations, and the birth of a child or grandchild. It's easy to see God's love and creative power as we watch a sunset, or sing "Happy Birthday" to a beloved child, or watch dear friends unite their lives in marriage. But sometimes it's easy to forget that our lives are really lived in the days between those special days. However, God is present with us each and every day of our lives. I remember driving to work one day. I was not in a particularly good mood when, all of a sudden I noticed some flowers growing by the side of the highway. For a few moments, I was inexplicably filled with joy! As I drove down the road, I was aware of that gift of a moment of grace in an otherwise ordinary day. I wondered, "How many of those moments have I missed throughout my life?"

The purpose of this opening session is to help us recognize that God is present each day of our lives. How can we be more aware of God's presence and rest in the knowledge that, even when we don't think anything remarkable is happening, God is actively at work? How do we teach ourselves to notice the rhythm of our days and to look for ways that God may surprise us with God's presence?



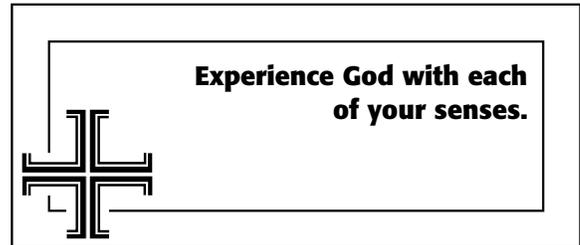
Opening Prayer

Gracious God, thank you for being present with us not just for the joyous events, but throughout the confusion, doubt, and even anger of our ordinary days. Forgive us for not noticing you. Open our eyes so that we don't miss the moments of grace in the ordinary days of our lives. Help us to patiently watch for signs of your love in our lives. Help us to love you with our whole beings and to love each other as you have loved us. Be present in our conversation today. Amen.

What does the Bible say?

Genesis 28:10-17

¹⁰Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹²And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³And the LORD stood beside him and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; ¹⁴and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." ¹⁶Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!" ¹⁷And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."



Exodus 3:1-6

¹Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." ⁴When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Think About...

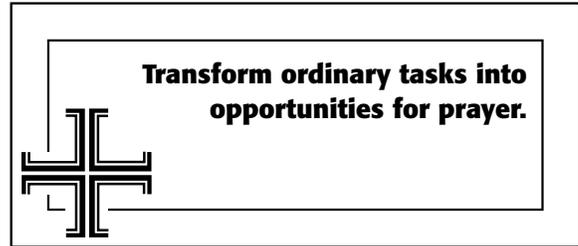
- What promise did God make to Jacob? How is that same promise relevant for us today? What are some of the things that God promises to each of us? (Genesis 28)
- When have you had the sense that you were standing on holy ground? How or why did you recognize that situation as holy? (Exodus 3)
- Can you recall a time when you were surprised by God's presence in your ordinary activities? How did you sense God's presence? (Genesis 28, Exodus 3)
- What response did Moses and Jacob have to God? What does that tell us about them? What do you imagine your response would be if you suddenly found yourself in God's presence or heard God's voice? (Genesis 28, Exodus 3)

What do others say?

I have a friend in Iringa, Tanzania, whose name is Pastor Koko. He is the pastor of Incarnation’s partner congregation, Mkwawa Lutheran Church. He says that one night he heard the voice of God—out loud, not just in his head. He says he actually heard it twice that night. The second time his brother also heard it. I have no reason to doubt my friend. That night, God’s voice called Pastor Koko in an extraordinary way to become a pastor.

I have never heard the voice of God speak to me out loud. That’s not to say that God hasn’t spoken to me. I believe God speaks to us a lot. Unfortunately, I also believe that we often miss God speaking to us because we’re too busy or too distracted to pay attention. We keep expecting God to speak to us in extraordinary ways, like from a burning bush, or a vision in our dreams, or even out loud. When, in fact, God speaks to us more often in seemingly ordinary ways on what we believe are just ordinary days.

God speaks to us through people—ordinary people in ordinary places such as home, work, the store, the coffee shop, or the neighborhood. God speaks to us through ordinary things such as nature, a book, a movie, or a picture. God speaks to us through our thoughts, our memories, or our feelings. God certainly speaks to us through the Bible. We just need to pay attention. We need to look beyond just what we see and learn to look for God’s everyday incredible activity all around us. Life is much more than just what we see.



One of the reasons to gather together with others in a small group like this is to have the chance to discuss and pray with others and to ponder how God may be speaking to you and to others. God often speaks most clearly to us as we are in community. We need the help of others to test whether what we are hearing is God speaking, or perhaps just our imaginations or wishful thinking. We need the help of others to try and figure out those places and ways that God is speaking to us.

We are surrounded by God’s holy activity every day. God called to Moses out of a burning bush. A bush that perhaps Moses had walked by many times before as he went about his day-to-day work of watching over his father-in-law’s sheep. Notice that God doesn’t begin to speak until Moses actually stops and goes over to the bush to see what is going on. Once he stops, God speaks: “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” We are standing on holy ground all of the time. Every day is holy, all ground is holy, because God is already present at all times and in all places, making them holy. We just need to learn to stop and pay attention to those places and people from which God is calling to us.

As a follower of Jesus Christ, I don’t believe that there are such things as ordinary days. Jesus came to bring us life, abundant life each and every day. That is not ordinary. That is incredibly extraordinary. We have a relationship with the God of the Universe. We have the power of that God already at work within us. Our lives are more than only what we can see around us. As some of my favorite verses from the book of Ephesians say, God can accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine. We can’t even imagine what God is already accomplishing in us, through us, and around us. We are given the privilege and the responsibility to spread the Good News of God’s love in Jesus Christ everywhere we go in our world. We are given power by God to make a different world, to play our part in bringing about God’s kingdom in this world. How can that be ordinary?

In keeping my eyes open to God’s activity in “ordinary days,” I have found it helpful to say a simple prayer before my feet even hit the ground in the morning. “God, this is your day, this is your world. Help me to be open to see you today in everyone I meet and everywhere I go. Speak and help me to listen. Amen.”

We are standing on holy ground. Make some time to stop, take off your shoes, and listen to God speak. God is speaking. We just need to listen.

Reflections from *Alive Now*:

“A state of mind that sees God in everything is evidence of growth in grace and a thankful heart.”

Quote by Charles G. Finney, from *Alive Now*, March/April 2005
 (Nashville: The Upper Room, © 2005), page 5.

Think About...

Groups that have been together for one or more years may want to use the questions with ■◻

- Why do we so often miss the “God moments” in our lives? How can we look beyond the mundane aspects of our lives to see the moments of grace where God is active and present in our lives and in the world each day?
- Does having faith help us to be more aware of how God acts in our daily lives? What gets in the way of seeing God’s activity or God’s gifts in our lives?
- What are some of the simple blessings or gifts that God gives us that remind us of God as our creator, savior, and comforter?
- In the first reflection, the writer raises the question of how we know whether it’s God or our imaginations or wishful thoughts speaking to us. What are some ways that you distinguish whether you’re hearing from God or your own thoughts or imagination? How have others been helpful in making this distinction?
- When or where do you feel closest to God? What are some of the many ways that God comes to you so that you suddenly become aware of God’s presence?
- When is it hard to imagine that God might be present? Even in those times, how might God be working in your life or the life of someone else?
- ◻ Do you think of God’s presence as gift and grace or as something else (fear, awe, intrusion, punishment, guidance, shoulds and ought tos)?
- ◻ Where are the places in your life where you feel you are standing on holy ground? What do you feel in those places? How do you respond?
- Do you expect to see a sign of God in each day or does it come as a surprise to you? When have you been surprised?
- ◻ Some people believe that God is completely in control of each moment, others believe that God is present, but gives people much more freedom. Where are you on this continuum?
- ◻ Tell about a time when someone else has pointed out God’s presence for you when you were not able to see it.
- What does the phrase “radical gifts – radical grace” bring to mind? What most excites you about this faith study? What most concerns you as you begin this faith study? What gifts do you bring to the group as we all seek to explore God’s radical gift of grace in our lives?

Developing Your Group Covenant

Purpose of Small Group Covenants

Covenants function as a road map for the group by laying out plans and setting expectations about how group members will interact with each other. Anyone who has ever taken a trip to a new place knows that having a good map (and a person who can read it!) simplifies the trip and helps ensure that the travelers will arrive at their destination while seeing the best sights along the way. A covenant provides some road signs and mile markers that help your group stay on track. It clarifies the expectations each member has for the group's destination and for the road trip along the way.

What's a covenant?

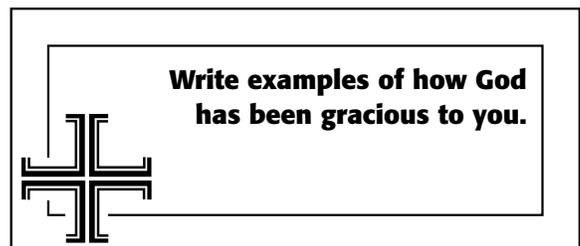
A covenant is a promise that people in a group make to each other. In the Bible, God made covenants with Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and many others, including us. Small group covenants typically include the following:

- The **group purpose** or **mission statement** explains **the destination** of the gathering. Some examples are, "To get to know one another and experience a sense of community" or "To learn about God's grace." There are typically three to five statements of purpose.
- The **group values** outline **the route the group will take** in terms of expected behaviors. Some examples of things that other groups have included in their values are, "We will hold things said in this group in confidence." "We'll make attending the meetings a priority in our lives." "We will value the contributions of each person by listening and not interrupting when another person is talking." There can be as many values as you want; however, if you have 20 statements, you may have trouble remembering them!
- **Group arrangements (our itinerary)** simply state when, where, how often, and for how long the small group will meet. "We will meet every third Thursday from 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. in Adult Room A at Incarnation."
- A list of **group members**, including phone number and e-mail, if appropriate, helps us keep track of **who is on the trip!**

What's my response?

Many of us speed through our daily lives oblivious of the ways that God is present to us in grace and love. This month, pick one or two of the following activities to remind yourself that God is always present with us whether we notice God or not.

- Make a list of some of the tasks that you perform on a daily basis, such as taking a shower, brushing your teeth, turning on a light, stopping at a stop light, drinking a glass of water, etc. Think about ways that you can transform these tasks into opportunities for prayer. For example, you can express your thanks to God for your baptism as you shower. In the quiet times of the day, ask for wisdom to slow your life to provide more opportunity for prayer and meditation. Use these daily tasks as reminders to pray or be present to God. At the end of the month, reflect on how this prayer time has changed the way you perceive these activities.





- Experience God with each of your senses. During one day, resolve to savor every bite of what you eat and, as you eat, thank God for the gift of nourishment. On one day, find something in nature that you love to look at. It could be a shell, a leaf, flower, rock, tree, frog, or your dog! Take time to really look at it in detail and marvel at how God has put the world together! Pick a quiet time and listen to all the sounds around you, then make a list of what you have heard. As you listen to your breathing, thank God for your life. Look at your hands, noticing all of their unique features, such as bumps, lines, calluses, the shape of your fingernails. Thank God for the ability to serve as God's hands in the world.
- Spend an evening doing something that you have wanted to do for a long time. The next day, or shortly thereafter, review the activity. How did engaging in that activity make an ordinary day special?
- Spend time each morning in prayer or reading a devotion. Start your day with the ritual of asking God to show you gifts and grace and God's presence. Starting your day with this attitude of openness will make you more aware of how to look for God's activity in your life throughout each day.
- Rent the movie *A River Runs Through It*. As you watch the movie, think about how the author portrays the ordinary pastime of fly-fishing as a means of grace. Think about the means of grace that are present in your life as a result of your gifts and talents or as a result of your relationships with friends and family.
- Visit someone in a nursing home or a memory care center. Take time to have a good conversation with this person. You may be the moment of grace in someone's very ordinary day.
- Write examples of how God has been gracious to you and to your family. Include how God has shown God's grace through others.
- Practice random acts of kindness to help spread God's grace throughout our community.
- Go on a walk. Move at a leisurely pace and notice all the signs of God's creative activity. Take time to look carefully at several flowers, trees, insects, etc., and notice the magnificent intricacy of color, shape, smell, etc.
- Each day for a week, take time at the end of the day to write or think about "God moments." How was God present in this day in ways, that you may or may not have noticed at the time? Say a prayer of thanks for God's presence in the world and in your life
- Begin a practice of asking close friends, "How has God recently been present in your life?" You might be surprised at their responses.
- Is there an ordinary symbol that reminds you of your faith? Select something ordinary and use it as a reminder of God's gift of grace.
- Make a list of the things that get in the way of sensing God's presence. Select one to remove, and then make a list of the things that open you to God's presence, and select one to incorporate into your life.



Closing

Closing Prayer:

Gracious God, we thank you that you are never far from us. Surprise us with your grace, Lord. Come to us when we are so caught up in our lives that we're not paying attention to your Spirit that is always loose in the world. Lord we thank you for holy friends that show us glimpses of your grace. We thank you for the members of this group (read the names). Help us to support each other in seeking and finding you in moments of grace in the midst of our ordinary days. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

If you'd like to read more...

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