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## Study guide

### "God is present every day"

*Readers share insights of where they see God*

By Robert C. Blezard

Mystics, saints and other holy people throughout the ages have told us the plain truth: God is everywhere all the time. As we grow in faith and deeper relationship with God, we become increasingly aware and open to seeing more and more glimpses of the divine all around us—in nature, in worship, in prayer, and in the eyes of our brothers and sisters.

#### Exercise 1: What is God?

- Here's a big question: What—or who—is God, anyway? After all, our understanding of God will shape how and where and when we experience God.
- Give participants paper and pen and invite them to write an answer to the question "Who is God?" Here are the rules: They have to write for three minutes and keep the pen moving all the time. (In other words, no overthinking the issue and no "filtering.")
- When done, invite participants to share all or part of their response. Discuss the responses as a group.

#### Exercise 2: Where is God?

Children may think of God as "up in heaven," sitting on a throne that is floating on clouds. A lot of us grow up without developing a more mature understanding of where God can be found. Bette Midler's Grammy-winning hit "From a Distance" reflects this childish view with its repeated refrain: "God is watching us from a distance."

- For each of the following statements, discuss 1) what is true, 2) what is not true, 3) what have you been taught, and 4) what has been your experience.
  - God is up there.
  - God is down here.
  - God is in church.
  - God is in nature.
  - God is in my heart.
  - God is in everybody's heart.
  - God is in our community.
  - God is everywhere.



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## Study guide: **God is present** *continued*

- God is present in decaying city neighborhoods and impoverished rural areas.
- God is present in wealthy suburbs.
- Where else is God?
- Finally, end with a discussion of these questions:
  - Is there any place on heaven or earth where God is not?
  - What does the answer to the previous question mean for you, your worldview and your spiritual life?

### Exercise 3: When is God?

- Does God have a timetable for when God shows up, like Punxsutawney Phil, the Pennsylvania groundhog who comes out every Feb. 2 to determine how long winter will last? Or are there circumstances that have to be just right for God to appear?
- Is God present in church on Sunday morning? How about Wednesday services? Easter and Christmas? Why?
- Is God present when a church is dying? When a church is thriving?
- Does God show up when you're praying on your knees? When you're praying while driving?
- Is God present when you're feeling spiritually filled?
- Is God present when you're feeling spiritually dry and empty?
- Is God present when you're thinking bad thoughts?
- Is God present when you're angry, grumpy or sad?
- Is God present when you're happy and joyful?

Finally, end with a discussion of these questions:

- Is there any time, circumstance or situation where God cannot be found?
- What does the answer to the previous question mean to you and your spiritual life?

### Exercise 4: Drawing near

Mystics tell us that God is present everywhere all the time, as close as breathing in is from breathing out. Yet many of us have never encountered the divine in a real, life-giving way. What's up with that?

- Does an experience of God happen randomly in the world, with God simply blessing a few lucky people and leaving the rest of us out in the cold? Explain.



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## Study guide: **God is present** *continued*

- To what degree do mystics and holy people have more experiences of God because they engage more regularly in actions, practices and disciplines that deepen faith and open them to God's presence?
- What actions, practices or disciplines (or nonactions, non-practices or non-disciplines) can inhibit the growth of faith? (List them.) For each, discuss how and why faith growth is inhibited. What would happen to someone who falls into the habit of these things?
- By contrast, what actions or practices will grow and deepen faith? (List them.) For each, discuss how and why the action or practice promotes and deepens faith. What would happen to someone who habitually exercises these actions or practices?
- What does this mean for your faith life? Develop an "action plan" for your spiritual life.

### Exercise 5: Take the "Real Faith" challenge

In his book *Real Faith for Real Life* (Augsburg Fortress, 2004), Lutheran pastor and author Michael Foss describes six spiritual practices that will help Christians know and love God more fully.

- Pray daily.
- Read Scripture daily.
- Attend church weekly.
- Serve church and community.
- Cultivate spiritual relationships.
- Give a tithe and beyond.

As a study group, covenant to explore the book and engage in these faith disciplines for a good length of time (40 days is a good biblical number).

Assign group members "accountability partners" to pray for one another and check in with one another regularly outside of church to keep one another on track.

Meet regularly as a group to share experiences of joy and concern.

Invite people to keep a prayer journal to record their observations and growth along the way.

At the end of the period, hold a celebration and invite the group to covenant to keep the practice going.



### About the study guide author:

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## Study guide: **God is present** *continued*

### Exercise 6: Your experiences

Discuss a time when you saw or experienced God in the following times, places or situations:

- In church.
- With family.
- With friends.
- In a hospital.
- Meditating.
- Reading Scripture.
- In nature.
- While praying.
- During worship.
- In time of crisis.
- When you least expected.
- In the last place you expected.

### Discussion questions:

- Is an experience of God for any of God's people or just for "special" people, like mystics and saints? Explain.
- Share a time when you experienced God's presence in your life. How did you know it was God? What was it like? What impact did it have on you? Your faith?
- Does God shut out anybody from God's holy, divine presence? Explain.
- What situations and experiences bring you close to God? Can you share a memory of such a moment?
- Why do some people have dreamy, lively experiences of God while others do not?

# “God is present every day”

Readers share insights of where they see God

By Robert C. Blezard



Walking and greeting everyone she passes with a heartfelt “Good morning,” Jennifer Ginn regularly exercises not only her body but also her soul.

“I meet God on the track at my local YMCA,” wrote Ginn in an email to *Living Lutheran*. “Circling the track over and over creates a pattern for my body and mind in which God takes shape every time.”

Most days as she walks, Ginn, a pastor of Cross & Crown Lutheran Church, Matthews, N.C., meditates on the Scriptures she’s preaching about on Sunday. She envisions walkers and runners—fellow pilgrims on our common journey of faith—as characters from the Bible.

“Rehearsing the story of Mary and Martha, I wonder about the two ladies always walking



together. Which one prefers sitting and listening over tending to dinner?” Ginn wrote. “Whatever the Scripture, it issues the same invitation to watch the very real people around me walking in and out of God’s story.”

Ginn is among those who responded to *Living Lutheran*’s call inviting readers to share where they see God. Like Ginn, several see God in other people.

“I see God in the poor moms that need clothes for their children at Harvest House Baby and Children’s Ministry in Buffalo,” wrote Melissa Peters, an avid volunteer and member of Lord of Life Lutheran Church, Depew, N.Y. “When I wake and put my feet on the floor, I thank God that he has given me another day to serve.”

Russell Makant, pastor of St. Luke Lutheran Church, Conover, N.C., saw God in a fortuitous rescue.

Makant was walking with his wife in their neighborhood following a winter storm that dropped



*Living Lutheran* readers encounter God in the hospital and the great outdoors, in the eyes of a neighbor or a stranger, in classic hymns and well-loved Bible verses.

a foot of snow. By divine coincidence they saw their neighbor fall as he was heading to his car.

“I have most often thought of holy-ground moments as fire-laden, burning bushes—clear indicators that God was up to something,” he wrote. “But this ‘holy ground’ had 12 inches of snow covering it and an elderly man, Eddie, had fallen to his knees, post hip surgery. We helped him up.”

Another reader sees God in the faces of kind strangers who assist her as she moves around in her wheelchair. Judy Schlegel, a member of St. Paul Lutheran Church, Durham, N.C., said fellow shoppers at the grocery store are happy to reach an item high on a shelf or pick up a dropped item for her.

“From those who open or hold doors, volunteer to drive, carry my drink at church dinners, run errands, take my trash down to the curb on collection day, and on and on, I experience God’s love many times each day,” Schlegel wrote.

Throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus revealed his divine nature to the sick and suffering. Similarly, some readers saw God as they experienced illness or ministered to the sick.

“The doctor-patient relationship is a holy one in which God is the ever-present intermediary,”

wrote Ronald Burmeister, a retired obstetrician-gynecologist who belongs to Our Savior Lutheran Church, Rockford, Ill. Countless times he has witnessed God in the miracle of pregnancy and childbirth. In retirement he remains a healer, anointing the sick with holy oil.

“With faces uplifted, some with tears, others with eyes closed, recipients manifest trust through faith as they sense the warmth of the oil-traced cross on their foreheads and hear, ‘Child of God, receive this oil in the name of Jesus Christ; be filled with God’s Grace and love; and know the healing power of the Holy Spirit,’” he wrote.

Throughout the joys and challenges of her life, Jane McKinley has prayed to God as a friend—in a chatty, conversational tone. “It was so comforting to know that the Spirit was always there,” wrote the member of Immanuel Lutheran Church, Lakewood, N.J. And over the years, that friendship has deepened.



“Now I’m old, so tired from my 13 years of battling cancer, but ... my best friend [stays] with me,” she wrote. “When I have a crisis, all I have to do is call on God and I calm right down.”

Jesus promises to be present whenever two or more are gathered in his name. Not surprisingly, many readers saw God in worship and church traditions.


“For me, it is the great classic hymns of the church [that] were sung into my heart in childhood and [that] I still sing from memory even when I can’t remember what I had for lunch,” wrote Rodney Juell, a retired pastor in Joliet, Ill.

Norwegian Christmas traditions and rituals revealed God to Art Dale when he was a boy. On Christmas Eve 1938, following a family celebration at which his father read the Nativity story, Dale had a profound experience of the divine.

“Pure wonder stopped everything,” wrote Dale, a retired pastor in Soudan, Minn. “Standing in the darkness something beautiful, ancient and very real held me in the mystery of God being born in

Jesus, zapping the world. Every Christmas Eve, [I encounter] that same wonder. The love of Jesus, bound together with our human love, mysteriously fills the universe. The communion of saints is real. God loves everyone.”

But most of the responders—as with most Christians—see God in a plethora of places and faces throughout their days. That was the case for Julie Roy, a member of Shepherd of the Sea Lutheran Church, Garden City, S.C. Whether it’s staring up at the night sky, noticing guests at a food pantry or observing the kindness of members who help others, she’s aware God is all around us.

“God is present every day,” Roy wrote. “And you don’t have to look hard to see him.” 

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### Reader call: Friendship

From Ruth and Naomi to Moses and Aaron, the Bible is rich with tales of friendship. How do friendships enrich your faith?

By Oct. 30, send your 300-word story, subject line “Friendship,” to [livinglutheran@elca.org](mailto:livinglutheran@elca.org) for an opportunity to be published in *Living Lutheran*.



**Robert C. Blezard** is an assistant to the bishop of the Lower Susquehanna Synod and editor of *Living Lutheran’s* study guides.