



GSR in the Classroom: ADVENT

LESSON – REFLECTING ON GOD’S PRESENCE

SUMMARY: A sister invites us to seek God’s presence in many of today’s challenging situations.

BEFORE YOU READ:

“Presents” and “presence” are sound-alike words that have very different meanings. On Christmas day, for example, we can’t wait to open our *presents* but we’re not so excited about the *presence* of an annoying sibling for a long car ride to visit relatives. It’s also pretty difficult to consider daily news reports as any sort of a gift. If anything, the news can seem like a pile of stress, leaving us wondering whether God has any control over the world.

Keep in mind while you read:

This article lists a number of difficult situations and asks simple questions about whether God is present. These can be answered “yes” or “no,” but also take time to consider “how” God might be present, or “why” God might be present.



ADVENT: WHERE IS GOD PRESENT?

BY NANCY SYLVESTER

Nov 27, 2017

Advent is a time of waiting. It is a time when Christians throughout the world remember that the hope Jesus brought us for a world marked by love, forgiveness, unity and equality is being fulfilled but is not yet.

Advent is a time to create the space to enter more deeply our heart and our soul space, to attune ourselves to the **manifestations** of God throughout the universe and in our everyday lives. It is an openness to wonder how God is revealing God’s self to us today.

It may be helpful to remember that we don't always know where to look for God. A good lesson related to this is found in 1 Kings 19:11-13. It is the account of Elijah going out on the mountainside to await Yahweh.

"Then the Lord said: Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord; the Lord will pass by. There was a strong and violent wind rending the mountains and crushing rocks before the Lord—but the Lord was not in the wind; after the wind, an earthquake—but the Lord was not in the earthquake; after the earthquake, fire—but the Lord was not in the fire; after the fire, a light silent sound. When he heard this, Elijah hid his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave."

Mighty, powerful, loud and dramatic were not the manifestations of God. No - it was a light silent sound, like a gentle breeze.

I found myself drawn to this as I allowed myself to sink into the empty space of waiting. For the world doesn't look unified, loving, forgiving or embracing of equality to me.

I began to ponder: Where do I see the hope that is Jesus' message? Where do I find God manifesting God's self in the world today? I invite you to join me in this **contemplative** reflection as I ponder: Is that God's presence?

Over 800,000 Dreamers — a name commonly given to recipients of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, program — share their stories of working two or three jobs while they go to school in hopes of getting jobs and contributing to our country. Yet their dreams are in jeopardy.

Is God present in their dreams and their hopes?

After Hurricane Maria, many in Puerto Rico continue to be without power, but in some areas, those who have generators offer to share access with their neighbors.

Is God present in that shared energy?

Whenever I drive by a certain corner in Detroit, I see the same man sitting or standing at the corner with his sign, which says he is unemployed, in need of money and willing to work.

Is God present in the desperation that moves people to beg?

VOCABULARY

manifestations: an object, action or event that clearly expresses a more abstract reality, such as the presence of God.

contemplative: focusing on spiritual things, especially an awareness of God's being.

Football players have been protesting police brutality and racial inequality by taking a knee during the national anthem in hopes of bringing attention to the racism in our country.

Is God present in the desire of these men to raise the consciousness of us all?

Earth is growing warmer. Species are going extinct. Natural resources are being polluted.

Is God present in the cries of our Earth home?

Our country's political divisions continue to pull us apart.

Is God present in that opened-up chasm beneath us, revealing our shadow so it can be addressed and healed?

The Hebrew people awaited a king, a savior, and they found a mother and father with a newborn infant.

Were they able to see God present in that birth?

As Elijah experienced, God is not always where God is expected. We need to take a long, loving look to see what is beyond our usual sight. May this season of Advent provide the time and the wide-open eyes to be attentive to God's presence in spaces and places and people we may have never thought possible.

Nancy Sylvester founded the Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue and has served as its director since 2002. She served in leadership of her own religious community, the Sister Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe, Michigan, as well as in the presidency of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Prior to that, she was national coordinator of Network, the national Catholic social justice lobby.

AFTER YOU READ:

The story you just read is from 2017. A lot has changed in the world since then.

- Which situations mentioned have changed for the better?
- Which are worse?
- Consider a difficult situation currently in the news. How can you see God's presence in it?

SCRIPTURE SPOTLIGHT:

At times in the Old Testament, God offered support and hope to people, like the prophet Elijah, who were afflicted with depression or anxiety. An evil king and queen were out to kill Elijah. He helped obliterate the reputation, as well as hundreds of followers, of a false god they worshipped. Now he feared for his life and prayed for death. An angel gave him strength and encouragement. Elijah walked long and far to God's mountain, where he took shelter in a cave.

"Then the Lord said: Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord; the Lord will pass by. There was a strong and violent wind rending the mountains and crushing rocks before the Lord—but the Lord was not in the wind; after the wind, an earthquake—but the Lord was not in the earthquake; after the earthquake, fire—but the Lord was not in the fire; after the fire, a light silent sound. When he heard this, Elijah hid his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave."

1 Kings 19:11-13

Alone or with a partner, consider:

- What led to Elijah's emotional and spiritual drought? Have you experienced such a drought in your life? What was it like?
- God speaks to Elijah in a gentle whisper. Do you feel like God has ever spoken to you? If so, describe that experience.
- Who do you look to in order to stay awake in your faith?

THE CHURCH'S CALL

"The People of God believes that it is led by the Spirit of the Lord who fills the whole world. Impelled by that faith, they try to discern the true signs of God's presence and purpose in the events, the needs and the desires which it shares with the rest of humanity today. For faith casts

a new light on everything and makes known the full ideal which God has set for humanity, thus guiding the mind towards solutions that are fully human."

Gaudium et Spes

Alone or with a partner, consider:

- How might your faith help you to recognize signs of God's presence and purpose among what's happening in today's world?
- We live in a world of tragedy and pain. It is also a world of joy and fulfillment. God is present to us in both realities. How can these exist at the same time?
- Sr. Nancy Sylvester invites us to ponder where we look for God. Where do you look for God when you are experiencing hard times?

SYNERGY WITH SISTERS

Sr. Nancy Sylvester, who wrote the piece you just read, founded the Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue. Read this reflection on contemplative prayer at <https://iccdinstitute.org/alert-to-the-stirring-of-god/> and consider how it might help you be present to the stirrings of God despite the distraction and pain we experience in life.

ACT

1. God's presence can be packaged in surprising ways. During Advent, listen for God's voice in ordinary, everyday moments. Set a timer for three minutes. During this time, jot down where you see or sense God's presence. Should you ever question God's presence in your life and in the world, look at that list. Keep adding to your list examples of how God is made known to you. Get in the habit of recognizing God's presence all day long!
2. Objects can be tangible reminders of God's presence. Find a small object that's a symbol of God's presence. It could be a cross, a rock, a photo or another item that reminds you to pray for someone. Take your object with you wherever you go or place it in a sacred space in your room, your desk or a primary workstation.

PRAY

Ever-present, God.

Be present to those who have lost their homes in hurricanes, fires and tornados.

Be present to those living on the street—the homeless, the refugees and the migrants.

Be present to survivors of political violence—those in search of justice and peace of mind.

Be present to those suffering domestic abuse, gender-based violence and modern-day slavery.

Be present to people experiencing emotional and spiritual droughts.

Be present to people who protect our common home and call us to love creation through our choices.

Be present to all who stand in harm's way in senseless wars.

Be present with us - this Advent and always - as we advocate with and for the oppressed, the forgotten and the lonely.

Amen.

