

The Meeting Place: Facilitating Encounters

Brad Jersak

The Meeting Place is a meditative exercise in the traditions of the Psalmist and Ignatian spirituality. I learned it through the writings of the Spanish mystics, St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. We began practicing it in the context of inner healing ministry in the 1990s with dramatic effects, especially in the case of severe trauma, such as childhood molestation and sexual assault. Later, we realized that it served just as well as a contemplative exercise for Christians interested in more Christ-centered meditation. At some point, we discovered that it worked well as a pathway to encounter for those who had not yet chosen the Jesus Way. For example, in step 11 of 12-step recovery (e.g. AA, NA, SAA), the program says, “Through prayer and meditation, we sought to improve our conscious contact with the God of our understanding, praying only for the knowledge of his will and the power to carry it out.” The Meeting Place exercise has empowered many addicts to do exactly that, prior to any Christian commitment. In Christ’s relentless pursuit of humanity, “seeking to save that which was lost,” we have seen how this simple meditation can open the door to a first meeting with God and the healing that frequently accompanies face-to-face meetings. So too, it can become an ongoing and fruitful practice of anyone’s regular prayer life.

Where would you meet God?

If you could meet God anywhere at all for a one-on-one encounter—a place where you felt completely safe—where would that be? While many find God in their place of deepest pain, we’ve learned that establishing a peaceful foundation is a healthy first step.

Would it be outside in nature, somewhere like a forest trail or mountain vista? Would it be on the shore of a lake or a seaside beach? How about a mountain top?

Or perhaps you’d chose somewhere indoors. A favorite room or chair in your own home? It could be in a cozy cabin or cafe, or some place more ornate and majestic, such as a palace, fortress or temple. It could also be a biblical venue, such as Psalm 23, the Cross or the throne of grace... or any one of Jesus’ many face-to-face meetings during his ministry. What feels perfect to you?

Is this a place from your past, present or future? How old do you seem to be? Some folks feel it is very much “now,” while others show up as their child-self, from a time when they were either completely innocent or first broken. The important thing is that this is a safe place where you feel comfortable.

Allow yourself to picture your Meeting Place vividly. Think of the colors, textures, smells and sounds. Understand that this venue, whether a material place you’ve actually visited or a scene constructed by your imagination, is also a place in your heart. Where are you at this

moment? You are in a secure place within your own heart—a place undefiled by darkness or evil. Don't just view it as you would a movie screen. Step into it with all five senses. As best you can, don't just watch yourself there—BE yourself there.

Are you sitting, standing or walking? Maybe you're lounging in a hammock or soaring through the sky. The heart is also where we dream, so don't feel restricted by the limitations of your waking life.

How would God come to you there?

Locating and entering the Meeting Place of your heart is not really the point. Anyone can construct an imaginary "happy place" and hide there in denial of their circumstances or in isolation from others. That's not authentic inner peace. The purpose of this exercise is to open ourselves to encounter the living God of Triune Love. Christ promised that his Father would make his home in us, that the Spirit would dwell in us and that he, Jesus, would "show himself" to those willing to behold him with the eyes of their heart.

Some are paranoid that this is "New Age" visualization. This is not that. Opening the eyes of our heart to gaze on the Lord Jesus Christ is what the Bible calls (and repeatedly commands) "beholding." Remember when Jesus said to John, "*Behold, I stand at the door and knock,*" what did John do? He says, "*So I looked. And there was an open door. And Someone was standing in it.*"

Yes, we may happily *imagine* aspects of our Meeting Place, as David did in Psalm 23—green pastures, quiet streams, prepared tables, etc. But then, when "we *behold* the Lord with unveiled faces," we are beholding the glory of God's immanent Reality—Christ in us.

We can know and must test whether the Lord we behold is the Real Deal. First, we can expect to behold the One True God because Christ promised: if you ask the Father for good gifts, God will hear, answer and give us the Holy Spirit—not a snake, stone or demon. "*Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and the door shall be opened.*" To what? To the One who lives in you and loves you! Second, we can know we've met the Real Deal by this simple test: does the God we meet bear the fruit of Truth and Love. It's not complex because God has chosen to be entirely accessible to those who desire to meet Triune Love in person.

The Image of the Invisible God

I believe that Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God. So, that's who I look for in my Meeting Place. But for those not prepared or able to meet God in the vision of a Jewish male, remember that has also come as Abba, Son and Spirit. God may come as shepherd, king, friend or sibling. He has shown up as light, fire, wind and water. God may arrive symbolically as a lion, lamb, eagle or dove. And that is just a narrow sampling of the biblical images. Trinity appears in our hearts in whatever form we need.

It may be impossible for those whose dads or husbands were abusive to view God as Father or Bridegroom. The Trinity is Love by nature, not merely male. She may need to arrive as a black Momma, as in *The Shack*. Is your God big enough for that? After 25 years of visiting the most broken people, I can confidently testify, divine Love will not be confined to any of our tiny boxes.

So, let me ask: as you survey the Meeting Place of your heart, how does Trinity come to you? Where is Abba, Christ or Holy Spirit? What are he/she/they doing? Draw as near as you are able and welcome perfect Love to draw near to you.

The Touch of God

From both the Bible and from experience, we know Christ's loving touch can heal and transform our hearts and lives. Many times, Jesus would place a hand of blessing or of healing on those whom he met. Many women in the Gospels—one with a hunched back and another with an issue of blood—found that Jesus' touch was not only safe; it conveyed healing power.

In your Meeting Place, what would the touch of Abba, Christ or Spirit be like? Would they lay a hand of blessing on your head or heart? Would they lay healing hands on your infirmities? How about an affectionate arm around your shoulder? Perhaps you'd find yourself melting into a generous hug. Or would you initiate the touch? Would you take Abba's hand or arm and go for a stroll? Or throw your arms around Jesus' neck and squeeze? When I am weary, I usually need to lay my head on his lap.

Through touch, somehow we begin to feel the resources of Christ's heart. I ask, "In that touch, what do you feel?" Invariably, we will begin to feel peace flowing from God into us—possibly for the first time. There will be an emotional connection that opens a channel for us to release our life-draining burdens in exchange for God's wellspring of life and strength. When God touches you, what do you feel? Comfort? Solace? Belonging? Drink it up!

The Face of God

If you could gaze upon Jesus' face, what expression would you see? You don't need a literal picture to experience this, although I find it helps if you can picture the face of Christ. But even hypothetically, you can just know that face intuitively. Abba's primary orientation toward you is love and affection. Is that what you see? Is Christ radiant with delight at meeting with you? Do you see concern and care because they know your life is hard? Do you see Jesus' confidence and assurance that your life is in Abba's competent hands? Remember, we test the authenticity of the One we behold according to Jesus' promise to come as Truth and Love. You will know the mind of Christ by the expression on his face. It will always be within the range of the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy or peace, great-heartedness, kindness,

generosity and gentleness. That's how the Christlike God approaches us in the safe place of our hearts.

In addition to a general expression, I find it beneficial to ask, "What are God's eyes saying to you?" You know that eyes can communicate. If you could put the look in those eyes into words, what's message do you see? It will normally be the gospel tailor-made to your deepest needs.

The Voice of God

When we speak of "the voice of God," you needn't expect an audible voice amplified with reverb echoing from the sky or bouncing around your skull. Think in terms of those thoughts of truth and love that come to you when you pay attention to God's indwelling Spirit. Is that God? Is it you? Or might it be Christ-in-you, the wonderful Counselor and good Shepherd? The voice of God might feel like an aha! moment of clarity or a still, small voice of insight. Surely, in a first encounter, it ought to be Good News.

I find that I hear better someone who is in the room with me, when I can look them in the face, see the light of their eyes and follow their lips as they speak. This exercise is meant to help us hear better. It is meant to remind us that Christ is alive and lives within the temple of our hearts, longing to pour his love to our hungry souls.

Do you think that gift is reserved for the super-spiritual? No way! For 25 years, as of the publication of this article, Eden and I have witnessed countless encounters between Christ and the most broken and messy people you can imagine! Those who need him most seem to experience Christ most profoundly.

But we also know that this same Trinity lives in you now and is happy to meet over coffee under normal circumstances on a daily basis. Consider this exercise as one such approach. Imagine: prayer as a real conversation with a living friend! Why not?

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