

Sensing God in our Worship

Four Worship Experiences prepared for MCSK Pastor/Spouse Retreat

June 5-7, 2005

By Arlyn Friesen Epp

In my introduction below, I say: *We want to worship and attend to the presence of God who is as near to us as the breath we breathe. We want to encounter God through our various senses, knowing that sight, touch, hearing, smell and taste all contribute to our awareness of the vast wonder of the divine. We want to spend time together in reflection, meditation, discussion, song, prayer, ritual, giving thanks to God who comes and dwells with us.*

These worship experiences are meant to engage all of our God-given senses as we bring our full selves before God in praise and thanksgiving.

Permission is granted for the use of these materials. When doing so, please give appropriate credit to the various authors and sources.

I would like to extend my thanks to the 31 pastors and spouses who participated in these services and welcomed the opportunity for the creative expression of worship.

I am indebted to the following authors for their inspiration and writings. Each of these books are available for loan at the Mennonite Church Canada Resource Centre:

Coles, Robert. "Touching and Being Touched." Quoted in *Healing the Eight Stages of Life* by Matthew Linn, Paulist Press, 1998.

Hymnal: A Worship Book. Brethren Press, Faith and Life Press, Mennonite Publishing House, 1992.

Iona Community. *Present on Earth: Worship Resources on the Life of Jesus*. GIA Publications, 2002.

Krahn Fehr, Karmen. "A service for anointing with mud" in *Hymnal Subscription Service 2001:2*, Faith and Life Resources, 2001.

Price, Ian. *A Sensual Faith: Experiencing God Through Our Senses*. Wood Lake Books, 2000.

Richardson, Jan. *In Wisdom's Path: Discovering the Sacred in Every Season*. Pilgrim Press, 2000.

Wehlander, Keri. *Circles of Grace: Worship and Prayer in the Everyday*. United Church Publishing House, 1998.

Wehlander, Keri. *Joy is Our Banquet: Resources for Everyday Worship*. United Church Publishing House, 1996.

Wilson, Lois Miriam. "Restored to Community" in *Stories Seldom Told*. Northstone, 1997.

Worship One

SIGHT

Algonquin Story, by Arlyn Friesen Epp

[Sight as interpretation. A story of a canoe adventure. Would we “see” the rain and other misfortunes as the predominant theme of the trip, or would we “see” the remarkable beauty and unexpected blessings instead?]

How different one’s perspective can be at any given moment!
Riddled with anxiety.

Or, intrigued by wonder?

Paralysed by fear.

Or, overwhelmed by joy?

Trapped in the ordinary?

Or, suddenly aware of the extraordinary?

Is our world view and faith shaped by curse or by blessing?

How well do we see? Do our eyes sense the mystery and presence of God?

Do we have the ears to hear the divine?

Have we been touched by the Spirit? And do we dare reach out and touch back?

Can we taste that the Lord is good?

And what smell lingers from our encounter with God?

Have we trained all our senses to see, feel, hear, taste and smell Christ among us?

I am delighted to be on retreat with you these next days in such a beautiful setting, a time set apart, where our senses can be keenly re-tuned to God. During these times together, we want to worship and attend to the presence of God who is as near to us as the breath we breathe. We want to encounter God through our various senses, knowing that sight, touch, hearing, smell and taste all contribute to our awareness of the vast wonder of the divine. We want to spend time together in reflection, meditation, discussion, song, prayer, ritual, giving thanks to God who comes and dwells with us.

And so I welcome you: “Come. Come and See.”

Hymn #20 “Come and See”

Poem, “Sensing God” by Judith Kirk in *A Sensual Faith* by Ian Price. Stanzas 1 and 2.

Prayer, by Ian Price in *A Sensual Faith*.

Intro to the Evening from *In Wisdom’s Path* by Jan Richardson

In her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard writes of reading Marius von Senden's book *Space and Sight*, in which he describes the time when surgeons discovered how to successfully remove cataracts. They fanned out across the United States and Europe performing operations, many of them on patients who had lived with blindness since birth. The surgeons' case reports described the terror that sometimes ensued. The patients blind since birth had not developed the necessary pathways between eyes and brain; their eyes could register images, but their brains couldn't make sense of them. They had never learned to see.

Annie writes of one man who "practiced his vision" by taking one of his boots, throwing it a distance, and trying to gauge how far away it was. Throw by throw, boot by boot, the man worked to gain a sense of perspective.

Author and artist, Jan Richardson (in her book, *In Wisdom's Path*), describes seeing as a process, something that is not a given even for people whose eyes have always worked. "I miss thousands of details a day," she says, "overlooking the God who dwells in the commonplace, passing by the smoldering bush that might have burst into flame had I gazed on it long enough."

She tells of her daily practice of standing at the edge of the pond. "I stayed until I saw something I might otherwise have missed. It was often just as I turned to go, thinking there was nothing new, that my unseeing would begin to erode.

(Distribute the handout "Optical Illusions" – a series of images from the websites listed below)

I viewed a fascinating interactive website recently on "optical illusions" (www.michaelbach.de/ot/index.html). How playfully one's eyes can be tricked into mis-perceiving reality! The website itself has many dynamic, revolving, colourful images that I can't reproduce on paper, but I include a few simple ones here. Are the lines parallel? M.C. Escher (www.mcescher.com) in his wood cuttings and lithographs has etched perplexing pictures that also offer our eyes an illusion of perspective. Sit with these dual-images for a bit.

(Pause.)

Perhaps most startling is the Magic Eye 3-dimensional hidden pictures (www.magiceye.com) that cry out for a sudden change in vision, a movement from "unseeing" to "really seeing."

"It was often just as I turned to go, thinking there was nothing new, that my unseeing would begin to erode."

(Pause.)

I trust we're all on a journey toward "seeing." Like a 3-D image that suddenly jumps into clarity, God may be revealed to us in surprising ways. Like Escher's perplexing staircases, God's appearance might be outside our boxes of dimension. And like the dual-images, perhaps there's often more than meets the eye?

Paul writes (1 Corinthians 13:12): “Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part. Then I will know fully.” Paul, of course, is a good example of a person who walked a road of transformation. From persecutor to apostle. From blindness to sight.

“Saul/Paul” reading by Arlyn Friesen Epp. (See Appendix)

Discussion/Reflection

Have you seen God in surprising ways?

How has God stretched your vision, made you see things outside the box?

When have we wrongly perceived reality?

What stories of transformation can we tell?

When has our blindness received sight?

(Pause.)

Hymn #517 “Open My Eyes, that I May See”

Ritual: Visual Centres

In a moment I’ll ask you to move to one of six different “visual centres:”

- a 15th century icon of Christ, entitled “The Saviour;”
- a contemporary, contemplative women at rest;
- Rembrandt’s 17th century painting, “The Return of the Prodigal Son;”
- a simple cross from the Mennonite Hermitage in Michigan;
- four entertaining musicians;
- and some articles from nature found here at Shekinah.

We’ll take 15 minutes to sit silently at one of these visual stations – time to centre yourself before God and to use the image as a visual tool to see something of the divine.

I don’t know how familiar this “sight exercise” is to you? Our western minds are often fixed solely on words. Our Mennonite history has sometimes shunned images or art as a means of approaching God. But I welcome you to try.

Henri Nouwen writes that icons are not easy to “see.” He himself spent weeks meditating in front of Rembrandt’s painting of the prodigal son at the museum in St. Petersburg. And he wrote an entire book on the subject. He is quoted by Ian Price in *A Sensual Faith*: “[Icons] do not reveal themselves to us at first sight. It is only gradually, after a patient, prayerful presence that they start to speak to us. And as they speak, they speak more to our inner than to our outer senses. They speak to the heart that searches for God.”

Discussion/Reflection

What are our responses?

Closing Hymn #545 “Be Thou My Vision”

Worship Two

TOUCH

(Heat rocks ahead of time, so they have cooled somewhat by mid-service.)

Welcome

Poem, “Sensing God” by Judith Kirk in *A Sensual Faith* by Ian Price. Stanzas 1 and 3.

Prayer by Keri Wehlander in *Circles of Grace*, pp.18-19.

Hymn # 511 “God who touches earth with beauty”

Have you been touched by God?

Felt God’s presence?

Have you bumped into the divine?

Have you been gently sheltered under God’s wing, like a hen gathers her chicks?

Have you known the assurance of the hymn writer: “*And I will raise you up on eagle wings, bear you on the breath of dawn, make you to shine like the sun, and hold you in the palm of my hand.*” That’s a sensually gripping text!

Ian Price writes, “Touch is one of the most important things in life. Before we are born, we are enveloped in the amniotic fluid of our mother’s womb, a place of warmth and security. At birth, touch is one of the principle means by which we are bonded to our mother and our father. As we go through life touch is one of the main means we have of exploring our world and communicating our feelings. Touch can be a beautiful thing. A warm handshake to greet another; a tender kiss between lovers; walking arm in arm together; laying one’s hand in prayer on another. These and others are ways of expressing love and joy.”

The peace of Christ

I invite you to offer a handshake to each other and exchange the sign of peace. Greet each one with the words, “The peace of Christ be with you.”

Touch can be wonderful.

Touch can also be a terrifying aspect of life. Brutality, violence, and abuse all employ touch to hurt, destroy and violate.

Touch can be tender or terrible, beautiful or brutish, engaging or exploiting.

In the spring of 1961, psychiatrist Dr. Robert Coles was studying black southern children struggling to desegregate schools against extremely discouraging odds. As Dr. Coles watched four six-year-old Louisiana black girls respond to constant harassment with quiet courage, he wondered what could give these impoverished and vulnerable children such resilience. None of his intricate social science

explanations could account for it. Then he heard this from one Louisiana black mother: “*My child comes home from school, and she’s heard those white people shouting, and she’s not going to show them she’s scared, not for a second, but she is scared. I know she is. And the first thing she does is come to me, and I hold her. Then she goes to get her snack, and she’s back, touching me. I’ll be upset myself, so thank God my mother is still with us, because I go to her, and she’ll put her hand on my arm, and I’m all settled down again, and then I can put my hand on my daughter’s arm! Like our minister says, the Lord touches us all the time, if we’ll just let Him, and He works through each of us, so when my mother puts her hands on me, and I put my hands on my child – it’s God giving us strength.*” (From “Touching and Being Touched” by Robert Coles, quoted in *Healing the Eight Stages of Life*.)

Let us look at our hands.

Look at our palms – their shape and size, calluses and familiar markings.

Look at the fingers and think about the many ways in which they are deployed, to feel, to grasp, to point.

Turn them over and look at the back of each hand.

How have they changed over the years?

What do our hands have to say about the way we live?

Think of a few things your hands have done this week.

Is there a source of pride in the things they have been doing?

Are there any things that you wish they had not done?

(Pause.)

Confessional Prayer and Hymn #152 “Kyrie”

(From “As those who have been touched” in *Present on Earth* by Iona Community.)

Three Biblical Stories of Touch

1. **Luke 8** Adapted by Arlyn Friesen Epp from “Restored to Community” in *Stories Seldom Told* by Lois Miriam Wilson, pp. 24-26.

(Hand out pieces of fabric to each person.)

What does God feel like to you?

(Pause.)

Hymn #375 “Heal us, Immanuel, here we are”

Hold fabric in your hand while singing.

(Distribute a heated rock to each person.)

2. **Isaiah 6:6-8**

Then one of the seraphs flew from the Lord's throne and approached me. In its grasp was a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said, "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is gone. Then I heard the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

God's healing touch might burn.

What does the hot rock represent for you?

Have you been freed to respond to God's call?

Hymn #26 "Holy Spirit come with power" verses 2-3

Hold the stone in your hand while singing.

3. John 9 Adapted by Arlyn Friesen Epp from "A service for anointing with mud" by Karmen Krahn Fehr in *Hymnal Subscription Service 2001:2*

This is the story of a man born blind who encounters Jesus, the light of the world. It's a story of a man's simple faith and a community's complex response: the neighbours were in disbelief; the Pharisees felt threatened; the parents were fearful. The man's faith is straight-forward and honest: "Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' I went and washed and received my sight." We, too, are invited by Jesus to receive the mud of cleansing and the water of healing.

I invite you to participate in a symbolic ritual, an anointing of your hands with mud. As Jesus physically touched a blind man with dirt and water, the raw ingredients of our world, so Jesus continues to work within the nitty grittiness of our lives. This is a constant blessing, and our hope.

And as Jesus told the blind man to wash in the pool of Siloam, so Jesus extends his healing to us as well: "Be awakened to the real possibilities and power of God, not only here on retreat, but also in the days ahead."

You are welcome to participate, but if you have reservations you are also free to remain seated, and participate by singing together. After a prayer, please come forward and receive the mud. Then proceed to the basin to receive the water. It's a two-part symbol of anointing: The soil of the earth is rich and life-giving and represents God's interaction with us in the real world. Water cleanses and brings new life and represents God's healing presence in our lives. Together, the anointing is a blessing, not only for ourselves, but extended to our work and to our world.

Prayer

God of healing, we acknowledge that you are the source of whole and healthy living. Anoint us with your healing touch. Anoint the people and the ministries with whom we work, our families, congregations, our world – anoint us with your healing touch. Amen.

Words of Assurance

May Jesus' words offer assurance to us: "These miracles happen so that the work of God might be displayed." May our lives proclaim that we are the women and the men whom Jesus has anointed and healed.

Anointing and Washing

Words of Anointing with Mud: “May you know the closeness of God.”

Words of Anointing with Water: “May God’s touch heal and transform you.”

Hymns (during Anointing and Washing)

#584 “They that wait upon the Lord”

#299 “New Earth, Heavens New”

Prayer:

May we live in the grace of Christ,

May we dwell in the love of God,

May we rest in the peace of the Spirit. Amen.

Worship Three

HEARING

(Before the service begins, have the group participate in a “listening exercise” by dividing their voices into four parts: light, medium light, medium dark, dark – in preparation for the choral reading.)

(Have Taize music – “Veni Sancte Spiritus” - playing on CD player as participants gather, sit and reflect.)

Poem, “Sensing God” by Judith Kirk in *A Sensual Faith* by Ian Price. Stanzas 1 and 4.

Prayer by Ian Price in *A Sensual Faith*.

Psalm 150: Choral Reading by Arlyn Friesen Epp (See Appendix.)

Hymn #44 “When in our music God is glorified”

Deuteronomy 6:4-5

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

This is known as the Shema, from the Hebrew “Hear.”

Ian Price reminds us that the Shema was recited twice daily by the Israelites, affirming the unity of God, and the demand that God alone be worshiped. “Hear, O Israel ...” God is a God who calls, speaks, cries out, whispers, shouts. The cry that echoes down through centuries of faithful worship is that God is knowable. God can be heard. A profound expectation. “Hear, O Israel ...”

When have you heard God?

How was God heard?

When do you expect to hear God?

(Pause.)

Hearing is complex. It is not always easy to be sure that what we hear is accurate. There is more to listening than just hearing. It is difficult enough to know what another person is saying to us, let alone what God might be saying. Discernment is tricky. And our language is often inadequate to properly express what we have heard.

Therefore the Bible often illustrates God’s speech and action in metaphors and symbols. The biblical metaphor of “running water” is perhaps best understood as sound, a metaphor to be heard.

I invite you to relax, sit comfortably, centre yourself in prayer before God, and let the metaphor of water splash you, refresh you and welcome you. I will lead a guided listening exercise from scripture.

(Turn on water fountain.)

“Guided Meditation” compiled by Arlyn Friesen Epp

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

(Silence.)

The Lord is my Shepherd. I have everything I need. He lets me rest in the field of green grass and leads me to quiet pools of fresh water.

(Silence.)

Happy are those who delight in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They are like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green. In the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.

(Silence.)

Be strong, do not fear. God is here. Waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.

(Silence.)

Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

(Silence.)

Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.

(Silence.)

The Spirit says “Come.” And let everyone who hears say, “Come.” And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

(Silence.)

I will pour my spirit upon you and my blessing on your descendents.

Reflections/Discussion

How is God’s Spirit being poured out on you?

(Pause.)

Hymn #372 “O Healing River”

The word “listen” is made up of the same letters as the word “silent.” Isn’t it ironic that sometimes you need silence, the absence of sound, to hear God?

(Turn off water fountain.)

1 Kings 19: “Hearing God: Elijah’s Story” by Arlyn Friesen Epp

It must have been 150 km/hr, maybe more. The likes of such wind I’ve never seen. At first it only whisked the ground, lifting dust, swirling debris at the foot of the mountain. But then the storm. Suddenly dark heavy clouds in the valley. And the increasing gales. Like I said: 150 km/hr. Exposed on Mount Horeb, I lay on the ground prostrate clinging for a foothold. The wind nearly swept me over. I crouched low. An avalanche of rock passed by. I was alone.

It could have past as a small tremor – at first. I felt the earth twitch. But the rumbling became more intense. Like the mountain was experiencing a seizure – its steady anchor suddenly pulled; a cork bobbing in a large sea. I felt adrift. There was nothing to hold on to. Nothing solid. The earth quaked. I was alone.

Fire? Had I not seen enough? I ran for safety. But the brush, at my heels, kept burning. And the trees above me – the flames danced from one treetop to the next in a satanic pattern. I could barely escape the falling ashes, the billowing smoke, the intense heat. I was alone.

It was like the wind, the quake, the fire had one target – me.

Then, as suddenly as the natural disasters appeared, the earth became calm. Silent. Like the morning after a night’s rainfall. And the droplets have rested on the spider’s webbing – still, each droplet clinging. Quiet. Like the prairie grass reaching toward the large curvature of sky. Silent, quiet, pause. Like the seventh day of creation. I stood amazed. No longer in fear, but in awe. No longer at risk, but at rest. No longer alone, but with God.

Have you, like Elijah, heard God in the silence, the whispers, the quiet voice?

(Pause.)

Hymn #140 “Open Lord, my inward ear”

Silent Reflection

Close your eyes. Relax again. And for the next 5 minutes, listen to the sound of your breathing. Get in touch with its rhythm. Become increasingly still. Bask in the silent presence of God.

Hymn #347 “Through Our Fragmentary Prayers”

Closing Prayer from “God’s Song” in *Circles of Grace*, by Keri Wehlander, p. 20.

Worship Four

SMELL and TASTE

(Distribute the reading “Bread of Blessing” ahead of time.)

(Bread is baking in a bread machine in the centre of the circle.)

Poem, “Sensing God” by Judith Kirk in *A Sensual Faith* by Ian Price. Stanzas 1 and 5.

Prayer by Ian Price in *A Sensual Faith*

Hymn #2 “In thy holy place we bow”

Ian Price tells us that the sense of smell is believed to be the fastest of the senses, in that it stimulates the cortex of the brain. The sense of smell is often associated with particular times and places. Often, years later, we will enter a place and remember its smell, or be somewhere entirely different and smell an aroma that takes us back to our childhood – to a seldom-remembered place or person.

What smells are distinct and memorable to you?
How is smell linked to the presence of God?

(Pause.)

2 Corinthians 2:14-17

Thanks be to God who in Christ leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance that comes from knowing him. We are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing ...Who is sufficient for these things? ...In Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence.

(Pause.)

Reading – “Bread of Blessing” by Keri Wehlander in *Joy is Our Banquet*, pp. 100-102.

(Pause. Allow for discussion/reflections.)

Hymn #226 “You are the salt of the earth”

Taste and see that the Lord is good! (Psalm 34:8)

Eat your bread with enjoyment and share your cup with delight, for you have God’s favour (Ecclesiastes 9:7)

Jesus said, “I am the bread of life” and “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.”

What feeds you?
For what do you hunger?

(Pause.)

Poem, “Sensing God” by Judith Kirk in *A Sensual Faith* by Ian Price. Stanzas 1 and 6

Invitation to Communion

We come to the table of communion with joy to meet our Lord!

Hymn #459 “I come with joy to meet my Lord”

Communion Prayer by Keri Wehlander in *Circles of Grace*, pp. 83-84.

(Distribute the communion elements while singing the hymn.)

Hymn #471 “Eat this bread”

Communion

(Holding up bread)

This is the bread of joy.

This is the bread of wisdom.

This is the bread of hope.

Gifts offered by God, through Christ, in love and tenderness.

(Holding up cup)

This is the cup of grace.

This is the cup of compassion.

This is the cup of strength.

Gifts offered by God, through Christ, in love and tenderness.

Let us share and delight in these gifts to us.

Blessing

God of love, with open hands, we have received. With open hearts, may we now share. And may your peace accompany us and fill our communities and world. Amen.

Closing Hymn #478 “Sent forth by God’s blessing”

Amen!

Saul/Paul

Acts 9: 1-19

By Arlyn Friesen Epp

1 I am Saul
2 I am no longer Saul
3 I have been named Paul

1 I am a man of steel, stone
2 I am chipped granite: jagged, split, crumbling
3 I am a pillar of faith

1 I am invincible, convinced, sure
2 I am afraid, hungry, blind
3 I am humbled, forgiven, blessed

1 I stand for God. I can not fall
2 I kneel before God. I have fallen
3 I know God. To fall is to rise

1 I fight for God. I am strong
2 I fight to see God. I am weak
3 I need not fight. God is my strength

1 I kill for God
2 God, I wish I'd never killed
3 I live for God. I will not kill

1 I see God clearly
2 I am blind
3 I once was blind, but now I dimly see

1 I am right
2 I am wrong
3 I am true

1 I am Saul
2 I am no longer Saul
3 I have been named Paul

Psalm 150

A Choral Reading

By Arlyn Friesen Epp

- 1 Light voices
- 2 Medium Light voices
- 3 Medium Dark voices
- 4 Dark voices

(A slight crescendo during each grouping.)

- 1 *Praise the Lord!*
- 2 *Praise God in the sanctuary!*
- 3 *Praise God in the mighty firmament!*
- 4 *Praise God for God's mighty deeds!*

- 1 *Praise God*
- 2 *Praise God*
- 3 *Praise God*
- 4 *With trumpet sound!*

- 2 *Praise God*
- 3 *Praise God*
- 4 *Praise God*
- 1 *With lute and harp!*

- 3 *Praise God*
- 4 *Praise God*
- 1 *Praise God*
- 2 *With tambourine and dance!*

- 4 *Praise God*
- 1 *Praise God*
- 2 *Praise God*
- 3 *With strings and pipe!*

- 1 *Let everything*
- 2 *All things*
- 3 *Everyone*
- 4 *Everywhere*

- 1,4 *Praise the Lord!*
- 2,3 *Praise the Lord!*
- All *Praise God!*