

2 Corinthians 13:11-13 The Presence of God
Matthew 28:16-20
May 31, 2026

The Bible is full of goodbyes; the time when Jesus left earthly life is one of the prominent farewells. The goodbyes between Paul and those in the churches he left behind also come to mind. Both are reflected in the texts for the day.

More often than not, they are unintentional. The, “last,” time we see most acquaintances is rarely known to be so when it happens. Even when the writing is on the wall, we sometimes willfully fail to see it because final farewells are difficult and uncomfortable, and we avoid them if we can.

We live in the time after the farewell of Jesus to this earthly life, and the time after the Apostolic leadership of the church. These occurrences meet us at the level of mortality because we are unable to overcome the breach between time and eternity. Only God can do that. The Holy Spirit is the guarantor.

According to the Pentecost tradition, the last time his followers saw Jesus, they were left staring at the sky, just standing there, probably not realizing what was happening. Not every gospel reports it this way.

We have read the Matthew text of the Great Commission, which does not claim to be associated with the Ascension, or the arrival of the Spirit, but sounds pretty much like a, “fare thee well.”

We read that Jesus told them about the authority given to him. He commanded them to make disciples, baptizing them and teaching. He finished with these words, which very much sound like a final goodbye, he said, “And surely *I will be with you always*, to the very end of the age.”

And surely God *is* with us, for we are not to the end of the age, which may yet be a long time coming.

Also interesting are the goodbyes of Paul, who always seemed to keep open the possibility of another visit, even in situations in which *the writing was on the wall*. There is a scene in the twentieth chapter in Acts when he makes his way towards his fateful trip to Jerusalem, and sails past Ephesus, refusing to leave the ship so that they wouldn’t be able to talk him into staying on an extra week or so. He did not want to miss the festival and was concerned something might go wrong. He told them they would never see him again.

Neither he nor the people he left behind wanted it to be a, “never again in this life shall we meet,” kind of moment. There are strong traditions that after Paul’s trial before the emperor in Rome he found time to return to some the churches near the Aegean Sea. Nonetheless, they had to tear themselves away from them.

Nor did the people in Corinth *desire* a letter that would be a final correspondence. There is a benediction in 2

Corinthians, the concluding lines of the letter that marked it as perhaps at least a final letter. He told them to aim for perfection, be of one mind, live in peace. He told them that the God of love and peace would be with them, to greet one another with a holy kiss, that all the saints send their greetings. Then he finished with this benediction,

“May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

So here we are. Today is the first day, in the part of annual journey around the gospel story, called ordinary time. All of the foundational events from the lead-up to the holy birth we call Advent, through the Resurrection and Ascension into heaven of the Lord and the arrival of the Holy Spirit, which are everyday realities to us, but are emphasized in their turn, have been observed and are behind us for a time.

From now until Advent the focus of our attention is the nature of faithful living in this time between the times; the time after Pentecost and before the Lord's Return. What does Spirit-filled living look like in this so-called modern or post-modern industrialized technological extravaganza; the information age, the age of the machine?

It is clear and evident in scripture that among the various possibilities in answer to this question is the strong confidence in God's presence in every situation. It is the first answer.

One of the most well-known biblical texts comes from the fourth chapter of Paul's Letter to the Philippians. I am sure that you know the one to which I refer. It begins, “Rejoice!” Then it goes on famously to instruct believers not to worry about anything, but to pray with gratitude, and then it promises the protection of a divine peace that defies understanding.

There is a line in that text that rarely receives attention in sermons but is nonetheless very telling. Very simply, “The Lord is near.” *The Lord is present in space and time, has overcome the breach.*

One of the outcomes of any useful spiritual discipline is the nurture and growth of that very confidence in God's presence. One thinks of Brother Lawrence, that medieval monastic cook, whose little book, “The Practice of the Presence of God,” is a devotional classic. He was not a mover and shaker of grand events. He lived his life in humble circumstances, a kitchen, and found God's presence and insisted in the sacredness of little things, because God was in them.

At the very end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus promises the same presence as Paul does in Corinthians and Philippians. Let us remember that it was in uncertain and turbulent and chaotic times that these exhortations about God's nearness were made, and the faithful have testified through the ages of its veracity in both good times and bad. Nonetheless, there is the nonetheless, we live in the time after Pentecost.

Much can be said about the tasks of devotion to which believers are to be committed; tasks associated with the development of high character; integrity and honor, faith and empathy, of mercy and love; of making disciples and teaching fidelity to God's commands.

Much of the unrest in the Christian family derives from a misunderstanding of these divinely given tasks. For frustration grows when in our awareness there is not clear evidence of success, nor clear evidence of God's presence.

Frederick Buechner addressed this experience by speaking of the visible absence of God as well as the invisible presence of God. He spoke of absence as being sacramental, which may be a little strong, but nevertheless he refers to, "a door left open, a chamber of the heart kept ready and waiting."

One thinks also of the Cry of Dereliction from the cross, "My God, why have you forsaken me?"

One's personal circumstance is not relevant, nor is it relevant if one perceives themselves called to evangelize, to help the poor, to work for justice and peace, or to nurture the faithful, or any other task one may experience as a calling, the perception of failure is discouraging, and can be suffocating.

The orientation of the spirit leads to a confidence in God's abiding presence, we are called to accept it by faith and trust the Lord.

It is beneath this confidence of God's spiritual presence that the conviction that the Church's mission stands. It is the umbrella that covers all we do. The Great Commission refers to the outreach ministries of the church which affects everything from the missionary enterprise (I think of Ann and Bill Clemmer in Goma, with the outbreak of the Ebola virus), and reaches into the relationships with those we meet in daily life and in friendship both within and outside of the family of faith, and all the way into the depth of our inner selves.

The Presence of God, is the first answer to the question about the faithful life, all the year round, throughout the remainder of our lives.

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