

# LISTENING HEARTS MINISTRIES

# EXPLORATIONS

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## “Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places”

**The Rev. Tim Grayson**  
**Baltimore, MD**

I have always liked Carl Jung’s famous affirmation of God’s presence: “Bidden or unbidden, God is present.” We do not necessarily have to cry out like the psalmist to attract God’s attention. God is hidden in places we might never deem to look, and, in any event, it is God’s prerogative to choose when and how to reveal God’s Self. Therefore, we can rest easy, even when times are hard, knowing that God is always working on our behalf underneath the surface.

However, problems can arise when God in Christ appears in a guise that we do not expect. When Christ shows up unbidden and in an unfamiliar form, we might wish we had received prior notice, so that we could prepare our response accordingly. Far from comforting us, Christ’s aim in such situations appears to be to afflict the comfortable, to correct whatever notions we hold as to how he should manifest himself and to what purpose. While we believe that we would always welcome the unbidden Christ, we realize that we still want to control what happens when he shows up.

Some years ago, I attended a large convention in San Francisco. My hotel was on Union Square in the heart of downtown and Macy’s department store was nearby. I strolled down there to buy a few things I needed, and a woman named Mary stepped out of the shadows of the store’s entrance. She grabbed my arm and asked if I would buy her a cup of coffee. “Sure,” I replied, happy that I could offer a street person some temporary relief from her hard day. There was a coffee station just inside the door. After we got our order, we walked back up the street to the hotel, making light conversation.

The next day, I again bumped into Mary outside Macy’s. “Would you like a cup of coffee?” I asked, and again we walked back up the street, parting company when we reached the upscale hotel where I was staying. I was beginning to feel quite pleased

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## “Christ...”

that I could do a good deed for a stranger two days in a row. It did not ask much of me, but I liked the feeling it gave me. I almost felt as though Mary had singled me out to help her.

The next evening, coming back from a nice dinner in the North Beach district, I encountered Mary a third time. She was standing in front of my hotel. This time when she grabbed my arm, it was not out of playfulness. “I need to get to the hospital,” she said. She was shivering, although it was not cold. My mind clicked through the options: “Should I hire a cab and go to the hospital with her? What hospital would we go to? Did she want me to go with her? More to the point, did I want to go with her?” I did not know what to do. I was paralyzed with indecision. I reached for my wallet and handed her a \$20 bill. She took the money wordlessly and turned around. Suddenly, her collar loosened and dropped, and I had a glimpse of the multiple open sores on her back as she began walking away. Within seconds she was swept up by the night.

I have reflected on that encounter many times over the past 18 years. I cannot help feeling that I met the suffering Christ on Powell Street in San Francisco and failed him miserably when it most counted. And yet, of course, so did his disciples. I know that Christ forgives me, and I have given up thinking about what I might have done differently. I think Christ wanted to teach me something about how to keep focused on him when he appears unbidden, instead of dwelling on how to respond appropriately to him in a crisis. I realize that, instead of keeping my eyes on Christ, I had become absorbed in my own luck in finding a temporary ministry that did not demand much of me and had left me feeling good. And that is not discipleship.

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*I think Christ wanted to teach me something about how to keep focused on him when he appears unbidden, instead of dwelling on how to respond appropriately to him in a crisis.*

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I know I will make many more mistakes in the future. However, I hope that my eyes are now more attuned to recognizing Christ in others, especially the suffering Christ whom we do not recognize because we need our view of the world to conform to how we wish to see it, rather than as it really is. When we are able to see without self-preoccupation, we recognize the truth of Gerard Manly Hopkins’ observation: “For Christ plays in ten thousand places / Lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his / To the father through the features of men’s faces.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gerard Manly Hopkins, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*

## Redemption

**Alice Ann Robertson  
Glyndon, MD**

After seven years of courtship and forty years of marriage, Jim and I knew what to expect from each other. We had a comfortable rhythm to our life together. Our marriage relationship lent orderliness to life. I knew he loved me. I knew he would always be there. I understood the spaces in our relationship that were mine to fill and those that were his. There was a flow and certainty to life. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they will become one flesh.” We did.

But ten years ago on the Saturday after Thanksgiving, Jim died suddenly and unexpectedly, from a massive abdominal aortic aneurysm that ruptured.

God’s presence in the midst of that chaos was all I had. Family and friends can only walk so far with you. The path through grief is a solitary journey. Learning to live with this massive amputation takes a long time.

I clung to my morning quiet time, gulping in God’s presence and peace from His Word like one adrift in a vast ocean. “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast,” I read in Psalm 139:7-10. What balm! Daily I presented myself to the Lord, seeking His plan for redeeming the chaos.

During Lent, I was drawn to listen to Suzanne Farnham give a presentation from Listening Hearts Ministries. I was touched that day as the Spirit of light called to the darkness within me. Through Suzanne, the Spirit reminded me that “even the darkness will not be dark to you [Lord]; the night will shine like day for darkness is as light to you” (Psalm 139:12).

Suzanne left us with a small wooden cross fastened on a circle of small wooden beads that was just large enough to wear on my ring finger. I wore it frequently as a tangible reminder that I was not alone; that somehow this suffering would be redeemed, slowly but surely.

Now ten years have passed and the Lord’s plan for this season of my life is unfolding. To my amazement and joy, I have a new love in my life. I also have a continued connection with Listening Hearts Ministries.

Each fall I give a dinner for the Listening Hearts Executive Board. It is with great anticipation that I prepare for that evening when my home fills with the presence of the Spirit carried in the hearts of these brothers and sisters in Christ.

How can one explain such fullness of the Spirit? How can one describe being in the presence of the Lord at work? The Listening Hearts dinner is such a heavenly peaceful space in the midst of my life.

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### MISSION STATEMENT

Listening Hearts Ministries provides a range of programs, publications, and services that teach people the practice of spiritual discernment through prayerful listening in supportive communities.

*Insight into how God can best make use of us in a particular circumstance flows from the trust we have in God and the commitment we make to listen for God's guidance...*

*—Grounded in God, p.40*

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Planning the dinner is replete with pleasurable expectation. Possibilities float in and out of my thoughts, gathering and shaping into a menu bit by bit. Shopping for the ingredients is a treasure hunt. Do you remember being on a treasure hunt as a child, searching for the next thing on the list and being so overjoyed to find it? Preparing the food is filled with a sense of joy. The textures of the various foods are pleasing to the touch. The scents released in cooking increase the anticipation of sharing the results.

The flowers are arranged, the table set, the candles lit. All is in readiness. When the members of the Executive Board arrive, they have been waiting on the Lord, praying, listening, discerning His will, seeking His direction for two days. They bring His presence, the fullness of the Spirit – and I am so honored to witness it. They bring the radiance of God with them, the way Moses did when he descended from the mountain.

I almost hesitate to speak about this because I don't want it to disappear. In serving them, I serve the King, who is present in these people whose hearts are ready to share and listen.

“To serve God, we must constantly be alert to the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Without God, we can do nothing.” This statement from *Grounded in God* embodies the call to the Executive Board, and to me, and to you.

*Alice Ann Robertson, a Spiritual Mentor, received her training with Stillpoint School for Spiritual Direction and Contemplative Prayer in Nashville, TN and also with Listening Hearts Ministries in Baltimore, MD. She serves as co-chair of the prayer team at Anglican Church of the Resurrection in Stevenson, MD.*