

Showing up for church when I don't want to

When I show up, God shows up—although not always in the sermon.

by [Yolanda Pierce](#) in the [March 2024](#) issue

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(Illustration by Xia Gordon)

I often attend church when I would rather be somewhere else. There are Sundays when the weather seems too perfect to be inside, when I'd rather sit outdoors at my local pancake house and read the paper. There are Sundays when my mind is racing or there are too many things on my to-do list. And there are Sundays when I'm just tired of church, of the hypocrisy of religion. I confess that there are plenty of Sundays when my doubts outweigh my beliefs. But I show up.

Sometimes I attend church out of duty and obligation. As a minister and a dean of a theological institution, I'm expected to go to church. Church is an extension of my workplace. As a Christian parent, I felt obligated to raise a child "in the way she should go." There are plenty of Sundays when the service is boring, the minister preaches for way too long, and the ushers act confused. There are Sundays when the announcements, which are broadcast on a screen, are repeated ten more times anyway simply because people like to hear themselves talk on the mic. But I show up.

I show up because God always meets me when I am faithful. God always shows up. Sometimes God shows up in the parking lot, in the person who greets me with a firm handshake or a hug. Sometimes God shows up in laughter over bagels during coffee hour. Sometimes God shows up in the face of the impossibly cute toddler who wants to play peekaboo with me all service long. I show up and God shows up, and not necessarily in the sermon. I often encounter the holy presence of God before the pastor has spoken a single word.

Our churches are far too pastor-centric. We are so busy expecting the word of God to come from the pastor that we miss how God's presence arrives in other forms. Sometimes the word shows up in the person sitting next to you who hands you a peppermint. Sometimes the word comes from seeing the person who was in the hospital last month, now sitting in the pew in front of you. Sometimes the word comes from the audacious hat that one of the church mothers is wearing. God's powerful presence is all around us, not just streaming from the words spoken in the pulpit. Before the creation of an ecclesial organizational structure that includes pastor and laity, or pulpit and pew, God regularly showed up during a simple meal being shared in someone's home, where believers gathered in expectation of God's holy presence.

One Sunday, God showed up in the comments of a woman whose name I didn't even know. A creature of habit, I often sit in the same pew, as do many others in my church. I had seen her many times before; we had shared a hug and passed the peace on multiple occasions. As I arrived at my familiar pew after a few Sundays of being on the road for work, this woman leans over to me and says, "I missed your smile for the past few weeks. I want you to know I'm praying for you and miss you when you're gone." Tears welled in my eyes. The service hadn't started. The praise and worship team hadn't sung a single note, nor had the pastor even arrived at the pulpit. But surely God was present in that moment of deep human connection. She saw me, and she reminded me that God sees me.

In the sights and sounds and colors and textures of the church, God speaks to me. In the cacophony of crying babies and gospel music, God shows up for me. And yes, sometimes even the sermon blesses my soul, for which I am grateful. Sometimes the preacher has a word that was meant exactly for me and my current circumstances.

But not every Sunday brings some new insight or revelation. Not every Sunday brings some transformative change into my life. Not every Sunday soothes my doubts and calms my fears. Yet every single Sunday brings me joy. There is joy in the simple pleasure of being present among the people of God, showing up week after week. This is why the writer of Hebrews reminds us that we should not neglect to meet together, to assemble together and thereby encourage one another (10:24-25). And while I love that there is so much we can do as a community via all the remote tools we now have, nothing can ever replicate the beauty of being with one another in the flesh, fully present.

At the center of Christian theology is an incarnate God who shows up in an unexpected season and in the most unexpected of places. A God who shows up encased in the vulnerability of human flesh, in a community and a family, among a people with a history and a story. That same God longs to show up for us, in small and unexpected ways, so we know that we are not alone and that God is still moving among us.

We invite God's divine presence to show up where there is war, division, and despair and to bring peace. We invite God's divine presence to show up where there is pain and confusion and to bring comfort. We invite God's divine presence to show up where there is exhaustion, so we rest in the certainty that when our strength is not enough, God's grace is always sufficient. And we can try to show up for each other with the same consistency and faithfulness with which God shows up for us.