

“Where Can We Go?”

Sermon Based on Psalm 139:1-12

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for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

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God, you've searched me, and you know me. You know if I am standing or sitting; you read my thoughts from far away. Whether I walk or lie down you are watching; you are intimate with all of my ways. A word is not even on my tongue, God, before you know what it is: you hem me in, before and behind; you shield me with your hand. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me - a height my mind cannot reach!

Where could I run from your spirit? Where could I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you're there; if I make my bed in death, you're already there. I could fly away with wings made of dawn, or make my home on the far side of the sea, but even there your hand will guide me, your mighty hand holding me fast. If I say, "The darkness will hide me, and night will be my only light," even darkness won't be dark to you; the night will shine like the day - darkness and light are the same to you.

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Where can we go?

We're all asking some version of that question these days, aren't we?

Where can we go? And some of the answers are clear. We can go to the grocery store, and to the pharmacy. We can go for a walk around the neighborhood. We cannot go to a concert. Or to the coast. Or to the mall. We cannot go to most parks, unless, as announced by the Yamhill County Parks department recently, we're willing to sign up for

volunteer shifts to sanitize restrooms. We cannot go – at least in the ways we used to – to school, to work, on vacation, on dates, to a friend’s house.

We are at home almost all the time. We are at home with ourselves. Some of us are at home with our families. Plenty of us are much less distracted from ourselves than we were just months ago, and it’s been a difficult adjustment – so much time in our own space, with our own bodies and thoughts.

And this Psalm tells us, in all of that, God is nearer than the breath we no longer take for granted.

There are lots of coronavirus rewrites these days, of songs and essays and more. I’ve enjoyed the parodies of children’s book covers – maybe you’ve seen “Goodnight Zoom” or “The Berenstain Bears and Too Much Home Time” or “Oh The Places You Won’t Go.” I started thinking about what a rewrite of this Psalm would sound like for these days:

Where could I run from your spirit? Where could I flee from your presence? If I go to the kitchen, you’re there; if I make my bed on the couch, you’re already there. I could fly up the stairs to the bedroom, or

make my home in a tent in the backyard, but even there your hand will guide me, your mighty hand holding me fast.

I don't only say that in jest. I say that because I think the Psalmist was on to something with his acknowledgement that God is in the extremes – the heights of heaven, the depths of despair.

Remember the places you did go, not really so long ago? Remember standing at the edge of the Pacific Ocean, looking out over it until you saw whales spouting, realizing again that there's a whole world, a whole world teeming with life under that mostly smooth, glassy surface? Remember climbing to the magnificent overlook at God's Thumb, or pausing beneath roaring waters at Silver Creek Falls, or sitting in the concert hall at the Schnitzer for the Oregon Symphony, letting the sounds, the sights, the beauty of it all overtake you?

Of course God is there. Those experiences take us outside of ourselves. They remind us how big the world is, how much we do not know, how much is not our doing, how wondrous it all can be.

But these days, there's something else we're being invited to understand. Martin Buber, an early 20th-century Jewish philosopher, gets at it, I think, in his rewrite of this Psalm. His version goes like this:

Where I wander - You! Where I ponder - You!
Only You, You again, always You! You! You! You!
When I am gladdened - You! When I am saddened - You!
Only You, You again, always You! You! You! You!
Sky is You, Earth is You! You above! You below!
In every trend, at every end,
Only You, You again, always You! You! You! You!

Do you hear it in that? This is a complicated Psalm. It's a complicated expression, of a complicated relationship. God's presence, everywhere and always, is reason for comfort and celebration. "It's too wonderful for me," says the Psalmist.

One woman from Bible Study this past Friday said she hears this Psalm like a security blanket, like God's love wrapped around her, pulled tight. I thought of the Prayer Shawls that our Knit Wits make for friends who are going through difficult times – that's exactly what they're meant to do, bring the comfort, the warmth, of God's presence, wrapped around us.

And do you also hear the annoyance? Do you hear both the gladness and the irritation? You! You! You! The Psalmist also wrote, "where can

I flee?” Commentator Shauna Hannan suggests, “Being so close to God is as burdensome as it is beautiful.”

And Jeremy Troxler tells us a bit more about the original language, “you hem me in, before and behind,” saying the Hebrew word for “hem in” used here doesn’t mean cuddle. It doesn’t refer to a protective embrace, like a bear hug, or like being rolled up in Bubble Wrap. The word for “hem in” is the word used when a city is laid under siege. “You besiege me, O God.” “You hem me in. You besiege me. You entrap me. You encircle me. You will not leave me alone.”

This presence is “as burdensome as it is beautiful.” What is that burden? Why do we experience it as such?

Wherever we are, God is. In our tradition, we believe this is true because we believe the world is God’s. Because all the world lives and moves and has its being in God – not just the depths and the heights and the dramatic landscapes of earth, but the depths and heights of our own emotional lives, the drama, or lack of it, in our everyday reality. It’s also true because God lives through each one of us; each of our hearts, each of our lives, is another way God comes to be in the world.

But if we leave all of the theological formulating aside for a moment, and just say what feels true: being known is beautiful and it is burdensome. We long for it and we dread it. Even those of us who don't harbor a lot of secrets – or, if we do, they're pretty ordinary ones – we fear that if we are found out, we will be rejected. How plain we are, or how outrageous. How outlandish our hopes are, or how common. How selfish we are. How lazy. How insecure. How angry. How riddled with doubt.

How we wish we could go somewhere, anywhere, to escape ourselves.

And it's not just being known, but knowing, entering into relationship, saying this friend, this family, this faith community, this is who I will do life with – all of that is beautiful and it is burdensome. Because here's a confession, from me – I don't know if it's true for you, too: I am hardest on, and worst to, the people I love the most. It's around them that I get defensive and sulky. It's to them that I am demanding and critical. It's out of them that I expect more than is probably reasonable. It's not who I want to be, especially to and for the people that I love. But knowing, and being known, means I give all of that. And the people closest to me take it.

Where can I go from that? Somewhere I am not known? Somewhere I have to sacrifice intimacy, friendship, my place as a beloved among other beloveds.

And even there – God is already there before I get there. Knowing it all, holding it all.

And the Psalmist tells us this – God has seen it all. Already. And hasn't left. Hasn't abandoned us. Hasn't said, "I really need a break from you people." God has always done with us what so many of us rarely took the time to do before this season: grabbed a cup of tea, sunk into a chair, pulled a blanket up close, and hunkered down. Said, "I'm here. I know who you are. And I'm not going anywhere." One commentator on this Psalm said its promise is that "we will be searched, and nothing will be found in us that is not already known and embraced."

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What does it mean that the one who made the world, the one whose heart holds the whole world, all that ever has been and all that ever will be – what does it mean that that one dwells within each of us? What does it mean that the one who knows all, and embraces all, makes a home inside each of us? What does it mean for us, for what we

try to hide and for who we hope to be? What does it mean for the world?

I don't know. I could say with the Psalmist, "such thoughts are too wonderful for me." I could say it makes this extended, intensive alone time rife with possibility. I could say it's just one more invitation into God's abundance and mystery – and what a gift, not just to be invited in but to recognize ourselves as part of it, each of us as places where God's love takes root, and God's mystery unfolds. We could give thanks for our being known, and we could say it is the experience of the beauty and the burden of that together that lets us know we are alive.