

“You Can’t Hide from Love”

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First United Methodist Church of Wausau

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Psalm 139:7-12

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,”
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

Where can I go to get away from God as Spirit? Where can I go to escape your presence? Are these rhetorical questions? We’ve been told again and again that God is everywhere – ever abiding.

Contemporary theologian Sallie McFague talks about God being immanent and transcendent. Immanent as in God is in everything that makes up the cosmos. Yet God is also transcendent because even though God is in everything, God is not used up, not contained. There is still more of God even after God infuses Godself into every little thing.

Today we talk about the present-ness of our God. God who is always as close as a breath or a thought. Closer actually.

Where in your life, today or this month, are you aware of God’s present-ness? Have you noticed God almost everywhere? Do you find God at home but not at the workplace?

A woman has two neighbors. One neighbor, Renie makes a point of chatting with the people next-door or across the street. She puts their bins back next to the house when they are gone for a few days. She notices things but does not share them with the whole neighborhood.

Two doors down, Joan knows what’s happening up and down the street but mostly because she sits like a spider on her front porch watching everyone. And she is willing to share the details with whoever comes near. If you go to visit her, Joan spends the whole time talking about her own story or telling you what you do wrong.

In which neighbor can one find God? You can find God in both of them. True, it’s easier to notice in Reanie. She’s caring. She listens. Finding God in Renie is like finding God on the lake; of course God is here! Yet God is also present in Joan. God leaves a piece of Godself, if you will, in Joan, just as in everything beautiful or peaceful or kind. We may have to dig to notice but God is here just as God is in Reanie.

This leads us to our next question. Where in your life do you feel like God is absent? Or maybe, accepting that God is never absent, where do you feel like God is not finding you? Since that frightening diagnosis, has it seemed like God has misplaced you? Or since the most recent downsizing at work?

Feeling like God doesn’t know where you are may seem especially hard when you’ve had a close relationship with God before, when you know what it’s like to experience God up-close-and-personal.

When we admit to friends that don’t feel God’s presence, they will sometimes tell us that, it’s not that God moved, we have. This idea is prevalent enough that you can probably find it on a bumper sticker, rather like “If God is your copilot, change seats.”

Through the ages, some very faithful people have gone through long, dark valleys of years or even decades, feeling totally alone. Georgia Harkness, who became an elder in the Methodist Episcopal Church once they finally started ordaining women, and who wrote a verse in one of my favorite hymns, wrote about her long dark night of the soul.

As a young woman, Mother Theresa had an up-close experience with the holy. This vision led her eventually to Calcutta India to work, for the rest of her life, among the poorest of the poor. Yet in all the ensuing years, she never again experienced God's presence as she did that one time. Indeed, for her last years fifteen years or so, she felt totally bereft of God's presence.

I think we can trust that neither of these women walked away from God. Both devoted themselves to following God's way. And part of the reality for each was that there were times when they had to accept God's present-ness in their lives on faith, for they could find no sign of it otherwise.

Saying that if you can't find God in your life, you're the one who moved may help the speaker to feel comfortable but it is seldom – if ever – a comfort to the one who feels God's absence. It's more akin to saying "God needed them in heaven" to the bereaved person after a death.

If you are feeling like God isn't finding you, if you are questioning God's present-ness in your life, don't assume you're doing something wrong. Instead I encourage you to hold on to the faith God felt close, and you felt secure in God's love and acceptance. Work at trusting in what you could easily trust then.

Another thing that can help you to get through one of these shadow times is to talk with other people who have gone through similar things. There are a lot of us out there. Surround yourself with people who accept the reality of God – whether God feels near or far away. A good place to find such people is right here at church. Some of the people in the pews around you feel secure about God's present-ness in their lives. But others show up Sunday after Sunday hoping that maybe this will be the week when they finally feel that God near again.

Other places where a person can find people who rest in God's abiding presence might be Al-Anon meetings or support groups for cancer or eating disorders.

Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night"

This sounds so comforting, especially when it's followed by the "darkness is as light to you." Even in our darkest, most gloom, shadowy seasons, God can locate us. We can trust that God is with us.

But what about if we read that verse like this:

Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night"

What about those times and situations when we sincerely hope God is not watching? Are there areas in your life, in your mind or your heart like that? Circumstances where you hope God won't find you? Are you fine with God finding you in the woods but not on the golf course? Fine in the kitchen but not in the bathroom? Fine at work but not the lunchroom?

Do you value God's presence in the doctor's office but wish God would be absent while you're shopping? Being as honest as you can in this moment, what came to mind for you? Where do you wish God *was* absent?

These are the places in your life where you need to examine your motives, the times when you need to ask yourself, "For what reason do I prefer that God be absent?" And, this is where you need to be more intentional about inviting God to join you.

God is with us in every moment and in every situation. With the 21st century theologian or which the ages-ago psalm writer, we can affirm that there is no place we can go, no situation too wonderful or terrible that God is not right with us, right where we are, right in that moment.

When we're feeling like we've messed up our lives beyond mending, trusting in this truth, clinging to this truth is part of what gets us through. And when we feel like the world is open before us and there is nothing we cannot accomplish, reminding ourselves of this truth keeps us grounded and living in God's way.

In all things, we can bear all things for we trust that living or dying (and everything in between) God is with us.

We are not alone.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.