

“Where is God?”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, pastor at Church of the Covenant Lynchburg, VA 2/2/20

Micah 6:1-8

For the ancient Hebrews, God was in many ways perceived to be distant from them, communicating with them through chosen emissaries like Moses and Aaron, and later through prophets. God’s essence resided in the Ark, an ornate coffer which housed some of the holiest of Hebrew relics, like the 10 commandments. And later this symbol of God’s presence would eventually be housed in the Temple in Jerusalem, in the room as we discussed earlier called the Holy of Holies, separated from the world by a large, thick, “veil” (or curtain). However, as mentioned in three of our Gospels, it was purportedly destroyed at the point of Jesus’ death on the cross—within for decades after the temple itself would be destroyed altogether, sending the Jewish faith into a complete redefining of the question, “where is God?”

Jesus had already answered the question of “Is God only in the Temple?” When Jesus befriended the Samaritan woman at the well, a woman of a different religion who wanted answers as to whether she needed to go to Jerusalem to find God, he clarified it for her. He said simply, “no.” In fact, he told her basically that God is not confined to any one place or any one people. God is everywhere because God is Spirit. This was a revolutionary thought in the region at the time. But this truth realized itself when the Temple was destroyed when the Romans would lay siege to Jerusalem later in the first century, and the Temple was never restored. The Jewish faithful needed to come to a new realization as a people that God is not confined to the Temple itself but that God is everywhere. This concept, like even Jesus’ teachings decades earlier, was revolutionary at the time and in many ways very liberating.

However, with the institutionalization of what would later be referred to as Western Christianity towards the end of the 4th Century, i.e. the establishment of the church structure both in matter of hierarchy and physical structures, we devolved in many ways into placing God back into a box—which in hindsight seems counter to what Jesus had done in the first place and what the Jewish people now spread throughout the world had themselves experienced, which was an evolving reality of “God is everywhere,” similar to what the Israelites had experienced in previous exile experiences, even. Why would western Christianity do this? I don’t know. But I beg you to journey with me into what Jesus had set before us originally, God is not inside something; Jesus said “God is not on this mountain or that mountain.” Instead, Jesus taught us that God is everyone and with everyone, because God is spirit.

So, we do not walk inside somewhere to meet God. We do not walk up something to meet God. If anything, we walk “outside” of the structures that hinder us, the vestiges of physical control—in other words we let go of personal power in order to encounter God, no longer within the box, but now outside of it. There is a metaphorical box that seems to bind many of us into a state of stalemate, where we refuse to grow, where we resist change, and we simply stay confined, and often times comfortable. But God is drawing us out, metaphorically from our comfort zone, but I believe literally out into the expanse of creation itself—while not to a particular mountain, God is calling us out into the freshness of sunlight and fresh mystical breezes, into the beauty of this earth with which we were created. We are one, and to cut ourselves off from it puts us at odds with it. It is like one finger trying its hardest to separate itself from its hand. Instead let us embrace the hand and love it.

Do you long to encounter God? I mean have moments where you are whisked into the presence of true union with Creator and creation, comm-union of the highest order? If this is what you seek, let it all go. Let go of the restraints you have carefully placed on yourself, used as bumper guards to keep you from falling. Don't be afraid to fall anymore. Trust that within God's presence, within in all of God's presence—you are safe. There is nothing you need to fear. You do not need to worry that you're on the wrong mountain! Jesus cleared that up a long time ago. You are free. God is drawing you close to the presence you seek, or the "kingdom" as Jesus often described it—and the only thing missing is your faith to believe that God will not let go of you as you seek it. Like a child taking her first steps, letting go of the piece of furniture she has climbed up in order to stand steadily onto her little, newly formed feet, she must let go of the chair she clings to and run into her mother's arms six feet away, who is waiting patiently for her, telling her "You can do it. Come to me!" Do not be afraid. Your creator is patient, and the earth has been patiently waiting, and you have resisted because you were taught to do so. However, she is no longer your enemy and God is no longer elusive. You were conditioned to fear the unknown, the heretical, the non-human parts of Creation itself.

Do not be afraid. God has made all and is in all, and simply longs for you to understand that our spirits are connected. We need only to walk outside of our manmade structures, our self-imposed barriers, and breathe in God's essence, feel alive again, re-invigorated, aligned—Creator with Creation. We are one, and now we are at home. We are at peace. Bev Cosby, our founder, understood this simple truth. God is not in the Church structures. If you came to the church structure itself to find God, you have looked in the wrong place. Bev taught this community years ago that Jesus is hidden in those who suffer on the margins of society: The poor, the persecuted, the forgotten, the voiceless, the imprisoned, the hurting—this is where Jesus is. For Jesus said, "what you have done to the least of these, you have done unto me." Jesus is the stranger. Jesus is despised, the rejected. Jesus is the neighbor we want to run away from. To run towards God, is to run towards those hurting the most. So, once you're outside the structure, you are running to those who need healing. Be with them. Now you are present in the deepest sense, with God. As the prophet Micah was admonished, so may we find the courage to confidently step outside of our silos and "do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God."

Shalom