

“Homeland Insecurity (An Exploration of the Omnipresence of God)”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, August 18, 2013

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16, 29 – 12: 2

Chapter 11

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ²Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ³By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

⁸ By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. ¹²Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, ‘as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.’

¹³ All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, ¹⁴for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their

God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

29 By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned.30By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. 31By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

32 And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— 33who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, 34quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. 35Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. 36Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— 38of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

39 Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect.

Chapter 12

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, 2looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Omnipresence

Around 600 years before Jesus Christ was born,

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon besieged Jerusalem
and took captive many of Israel's citizens.

Among those deported to Babylon

were four young men from the tribe of Judah:

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

Upon arrival in Babylon their names were changed

to Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Their faithfulness and wisdom helped them to grow in the king's favor.

When Daniel, also known as Belteshazzar,

correctly interpreted a dream

that had deeply troubled King Nebuchadnezzar,

the grateful king appointed the four Hebrews
to high administrative posts.

Later King Nebuchadnezzar built a golden image

and then commanded that everyone worship it

lest they be thrown into a fiery furnace.

The followers of God flat out refused.

King Nebuchadnezzar threatened them.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego responded, saying,

"Your threat means nothing to us.

If you throw us in the fire,

*the God we serve can rescue us from your roaring furnace
and anything else you might cook up, O king.*

But even if [God] doesn't,

it wouldn't make a bit of difference, O king.

We still wouldn't serve your gods

or worship the gold statue you set up.” (Daniel 3: 16-18, The Message)

King Nebuchadnezzar was so upset by their defiance

– and by their faithfulness to the God of Abraham and Sarah –

that he ordered they be thrown into a fiery furnace

seven times hotter than normal.

The furnace was so hot that the guards who tossed them in were killed outright.

Down at the coffee shop folks tell the story that

that day God was approached by a choir of angels.

The angels were terribly upset by the evil being done in Babylon that day.

They exclaimed, *“Lord, Lord, do you see what is happening*

to our friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego?”

God said, *“Yes, I do.”*

“Aren't you going to do something? Are you going to Babylon?”

“My angels,” said the Lord, “I am already there.”

The Holy Bible opens for us in the Book of Daniel

that when old King Nebuchadnezzar went down to the fiery furnace

to see for himself whether they were dead, he exclaimed,

“But look!

I see four men, walking around freely in the fire, completely unharmed!

And the fourth man looks like a son of the gods!” (Daniel 3: 25)

I'm already there.

Omnipresence

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego knew a thing or two

about the presence of God

in times of trial and tribulation, despair and distress.

In God they trust

because they had the faith that God would be there

either to save them in the heat of the moment

or to save them for eternity.

Either way they win.

Either way we win.

You and I know a thing or two, as well,

about the presence of God

in times of trials and tribulations, despair and distress.

The popular poem "Footprints in the Sand" is popular because we can relate.

Written by Mary Stevenson in 1936,

it has stood the test of time

because her words tell our story, our walk with God,

just as the Holy Bible tells the stories of a great cloud of witnesses

whom God carried when they needed God the most.

One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord.

Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky.

In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand. Sometimes there were two sets of footprints,

other times there were one set of footprints.

This bothered me because I noticed

*that during the low periods of my life,
when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat,
I could see only one set of footprints.*

*So I said to the Lord, "You promised me Lord,
that if I followed you,
you would walk with me always.*

*But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life
there have only been one set of footprints in the sand.*

Why, when I needed you most, have you not been there for me?"

*The Lord replied, "The times when you have seen
only one set of footprints in the sand is when I carried you."*

I'm Already There.

Omnipresence

Our faith walk is stretched and affirmed

in today's lessons from the Letter to the Hebrews

(which was neither a letter nor to the Hebrews!

It's a sermon to the Christian community.)

The Letter to the Hebrews speaks of faith

as *"the assurance of things hoped for,
the conviction of things not seen."*

Using Abraham and Sarah as examples, Hebrews then draws a line

from their hopeful faith in God

even and especially in times of trial and tribulation,

despair and distress,

to their practices of trust, obedience, awe, intimacy, parenting,

and playing a role in a cause greater than themselves.

Faith helps us to see what has not yet come to fruition.

Faith helps us to practice the spiritual disciplines

which guide us through life's daily routines and relationships.

Faith helps prepare us for what is yet to be.

Faith serves to connect us with the presence of God and one another.

Over the course of human history

we have sought to get a handle on the nature and nurture of God.

We have identified three core Omnis, if you will,

that serve to clarify the mystery that is God.

Omnipotence

Omniscience

Omnipresence

The Omnipotence of God – God is all-powerful, all creating, almighty.

The Omniscience of God – God is all-knowing,

aware and cognizant of all creation across the universe.

The Omnipresence of God – God is always present,

always with you and all life here, there and everywhere.

For many of us we start our faith journey by embracing the omnipotence of God.

No surprise here: the omnipotence of God

permeates our hymnbook and favorite biblical stories.

We revel in the attributes of a powerful and almighty Creator

who can do all and be all and save all.

We find comfort and a sense of security

in trusting the One who conquers death and overcomes hate with love.

Now we draw near to the point in the sermon when toes may get stepped on.

Now we give ourselves permission to dig deep and decide to trust

that we are open to hearing the Word afresh.

For many of us building a faith system on the omnipotence of God

becomes problematic when evil raises its ugly head;

when the gift of free will is abused

and leads some to fly airplanes into tall towers

or shoot innocent protestors in the streets and temples of Cairo;

when our beloved are harmed due to the laws of gravity and physics,

both of which appear on the surface

to stymie the power of the Holy Spirit.

So we lift our heads in anguish and ask,

“If God is all powerful,

why did God allow this harm come to my beloved?”

Martha asked the approaching Jesus, *“Where were you when my brother died?*

If you had been here, he would still be alive.”

We know how Martha felt.

We’ve projected our disappointments onto the omnipotence of God.

And so have many of our neighbors and relatives felt let down by the divine,

as distress becomes despair which leads to disappointment

which results in departure from the faith and from the Church.

I’m already there.

Omnipresence

Until the premature death of his son from progeria (rapid aging),

Rabbi Harold Kushner believed, as many do,

that God was all-good and all powerful.^[1]

His son's tragic death caused a reexamination of these traditional beliefs

and resulted in a best selling book

“When Bad Things Happen to Good People”

Using the Book of Job as a background,

Rabbi Kushner suggests there are three things

all of us would like to believe:

1. God is all-powerful and causes everything that happens.
2. God is just and fair, giving everyone what they deserve.
3. Job is a good person.

As long as Job is healthy and happy

one can believe in all three of these.

No good person should be subjected to such terrible misfortunes as was Job.

Therefore, in view of Job's righteous suffering,

Rabbi Kushner concludes we cannot hold both to 1 and 2,

that God is (1) all-powerful and (2) just and fair

if Job's suffering is undeserved.

What then is the solution to Job's tragedy?

Why do good people suffer such bad things?

The Rabbi's answer is that

“God wants the righteous to live peaceful, happy lives,

but sometimes even [the Lord] can't bring that about” (p. 43).

As a matter of fact, says Kushner,

“There are some things God does not control...” (p. 45).

For Kushner this news is not necessarily all bad.

For there “is a sense of relief” in coming to the conclusion
that God is not all-powerful or all-perfect.

For if this is so, then “our misfortunes are none of God’s doing” (p. 44).

Harold Kushner said:

*“I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it,
more easily than I can worship a God
who chooses to make children suffer and die,
for whatever exalted reason”* (p. 134).

I’m Already There.

Omnipresence

Rather than starting your faith with the omnipotence of God,
consider grounding your faith walk in the omnipresence of God.

Marjorie Suchoki observes that Jesus used water as a metaphor
for the presence of God in our lives.

Imagine the presence of God like the water that rises up to fill a well,
a refreshing and sustaining water of life
that overflows and blesses all it touches.

She said:

*“Water rushes to fill all the nooks and crannies available to it.
Water swirls around every stone,
sweeps into every crevice,
touches all things in its path
-- and changes all things in its path.*

And as water moves it changes what it touches.

The changes are often subtle -- often slow,

*and happen through a continuous interaction with the water
that affects both the water
and that which the water touches.*

The water is changed by what it touches too.

*Particles of sand and sediment change the color of the water,
and the water's action changes the stone, and the land,
and the life that can be supported.*

The water doesn't exert its power

*by being "single-minded" over and above these things,
but by simply being pervasively present to and with all things.*

God works this way,

*not as a power over an inert matter,
whether that be a person or an earth.*

*God does not have a single purpose... rather, God is a power WITH all matter,
present to it, pervading it with presence, with multiple purposes."*

"What if God is like that?

Can we imagine a God pervasively present

*throughout all the universe,
filling all its vast and small spaces,
its greatest galaxies*

and its tiniest motes of stardust?"[2]

I'm Already There.

Omnipresence

The omnipresence of God -- Emmanuel – God with us.

Jesus Christ is the manifestation of Emmanuel, God with us, always and forever.

This presence is what we encounter in our prayer life

– the mercy of the grace of God.

This presence is what we experience at the Lord's Table

– the hospitality of a God who welcomes us into God's presence.

This presence is what we engage in the city

– meeting and greeting the presence of God in the souls of our neighbors.

This is where a true sense of security and faith reside,

not in that which perishes or dominates or destroys,

not in our wallets or walls or weapons,

but rather in that which sustains, engages, and connects us

with the Living Water of the presence of God.

Consider building your foundation of faith

on the omnipresence of God,

which in time may lead you to grow in appreciation

of the omniscience of God,

the all knowing grace of God,

as well as to foster a sense of awe at the creative, almighty power

of an omnipotent God who loves you.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

[1] Notes adapted from a critique by Dr. Norman Geisler and my own reading of "When Bad Things Happen to Good People" by Rabbi Harold Kushner, 1981.

[2] Marjorie Suchocki, "In God's Presence," Chalice Press, 1996, pp 4-5.