

***Never Far Away***  
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**Ancient Witness:** Acts 17:25b-28a (Inclusive Translation)

*God is the One who gives everyone life, breath—everything. From one person God created all of humankind to inhabit the entire earth, and set the time for each nation to exist and the exact place where each nation shall dwell. God did this so that human beings would seek, reach out for and perhaps find the One who is not really far from any of us—the One in whom we live and move and have our being.*

I want to start out by reading a prayer written by a 12 year-old boy:

*Dear God, I read that home is where God (that's you) is. What does that mean, I wonder? Does it mean if I am at religious school I am not away from home? Do I have to be in our living room to be with you? Are you everywhere? I am not sure. I just know that you are in my heart. From home, David*

This morning I want to talk about this question, “Where is God?”

One of my favorite spokespersons for progressive Christianity was New Testament scholar, Marcus Borg, who passed away a few years ago. In his book, *The God We Never Knew*, he talked about how there are two root concepts in the Bible and the Christian tradition. One of these concepts is of a God who is “a supernatural being ‘out there,’ separate from the world, who created the world a long time ago and who may from time to time intervene within it.” Borg called this way of thinking about God “supernatural theism,” and this is probably what the majority of people think of when they think of God. This concept of God has come to totally dominate the religious landscape.

The second concept thinks of God as a Holy Mystery within us. This idea of God is not a supernatural being that is separate from the universe. Rather, God is a layer or dimension of reality and is all around us. So God is not “somewhere else” but always “right here.” God is a Sacred Presence that is within all things. As Augustine said, “God is closer to me than I am to myself.” Now, even though this alternative way of imagining God has been part of the Christian tradition throughout the generations, most people, including Borg, himself, have been unaware of it as an option. And “becoming aware of [it],” wrote Borg, “made it possible for me to be a Christian again.” He wrote,

*If “God” means a person-like being “out there,” completely separate from the universe, then I am an atheist. I do not believe there is such a being. But if the word “God” points to a radiance that pervades “what is,” as I now think—then of course, God is real. Not just the God of Christianity but the God of all the enduring religions.*

This is why it is so important to have progressive congregations like this one to hold up this mystical alternative way of encountering God, this neglected and marginalized aspect of God, that *makes it possible* for many thinking people *to be Christian again*.

This is a perspective that is reflected in Thich Nhat Hanh's words when he said, "The miracle is not to walk on water. The miracle is to walk on the earth." Or as Einstein, who said, "There are two ways of seeing world. First, that nothing is a miracle. Second, that everything is."

Finding and experiencing God is not a matter of God behaving differently, jumping out from behind the sofa, or getting closer to us. No, seeing and feeling the Presence has to do with the intensity of our searching, the quality of our openness, and the extent to which our defenses are stripped away. And so, as Thich Nhat Hanh rightly says, looking deeply together and touching deeply the present moment is the main task of a spiritual community or a church.

We can know this Presence in our heart of hearts even if we aren't always experiencing it, even if our awareness often eludes us. There's a famous quote that is said to have been written in a cellar wall during the holocaust:

*I believe in the sun  
even when it isn't shining.  
I believe in love  
even when I am alone.  
I believe in God  
even when he is silent.*

We find this sentiment in parts of the biblical tradition, as well.

*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. (Psalm 139:7-10)*

This is the reason that I don't like the term, "invocation," that is sometimes used in worship. Invocation refers to the act of summoning or calling forth. But who could we be calling forth? Certainly not God. God cannot be conjured up with any combination of incantations. God is already and always present and is never far away, even when we are alone in the darkest of depths. As the mystic, Meister Eckhart famously said, "God is at home, it is *we* who have gone out for a walk."

This is why when I start worship, I don't use the traditional, "The Lord be with you," as if God may or may not be with anybody. Rather, I prefer to start with the affirmation, "God *is* with you." The Sacred Reality is present to all people and to all things, eternally. I like what the medieval theologians did when they described God as a circle whose circumference is nowhere and whose center is everywhere. To experience God, we don't have to be anywhere, we only need to look deeply wherever we are. The center of a vast, limitless circle is within each of us.

God is no more present in the church or in "the holy land" than anywhere else. There are no privileged locations. That is not the reason to go to church; that would be superstition. We don't

come here because God is closer to us here. Rather, this community is here to help us look deeper wherever we are. All land is holy land. God is present everywhere.

As Paul wrote from the depths of a prison cell:

*For I'm certain that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, neither heights nor depths—nor anything else in all creation—will be able to separate us from the love of God... (Romans 8:38)*

The loving reality of God is inseparable from us; it is inseparable from the world.

I'll never forget what I heard Andrew Greeley say once in a lecture. He said, our job during worship is not to impart an experience of God to others, because you see, everyone already has countless experiences of God. Rather, he said, our job is to bring those experiences to the surface of conscious awareness. When we preach, we don't bring God to people. We help people to see God who is already and always there.

This is what Jesus was about. He helped people see God who is already there. And in Jesus' life we see what it is like to be at one with the presence.

For Jesus, faith is not something that can be externally forced on someone; it cannot be extracted by threats of punishment or fear of damnation. Faith is about seeing for oneself.

In Paul's great speech to the Athenians, he speaks out of his own awareness of the divine in the world. He shares his own realization of "the One who is *not far from each one of us*, the One in whom we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17:27-28)

It's important to remember that when it comes to faith and the subject of God, teaching and learning is not about facts, but it is about an *experience* and an awareness of a presence. The knowledge of God is not objective; it is subjective; it is relational. It's possible to know all kind of stories and information and yet have no knowledge of God whatsoever. Forcing profession of certain doctrines turns faith into something we possess instead of something that possesses us. It turns faith into an object instead of an experience and awareness that it truly is.

There's a story of a boy who was in the first grade of school, and his teacher asked the class, "What is the color of apples?" Most of the children answered, "red." A few said, "green." Kevin raised his hand and said, "white." The teacher tried to explain that apples could be red, green, or sometimes golden, but never white. Kevin was quite insistent and finally said, "Look inside." Perception without mindfulness keeps us on the surface of things, and we often miss other levels of reality. We might know all the sacred texts and religious history in the world, but have no interior awareness of the presence of God. As learners and as teachers, what we are after is a mindfulness which takes us beneath the outer skin and surface of things to be in touch with other levels of reality and the hidden reality of God.

Dr. Les Fairfield, who was a dean at an Episcopal seminary, relates a story told to him by his friend named John.

*John was a fellow undergraduate at the University of Colorado back in the early '50's, and he was blind. For a semester or so, I spent an afternoon a week reading to him. One day I asked him how he had lost his sight. He told me about an accident when he was a teenager. Afterwards he had simply given up on life. The man I knew was an eager learner, so I asked what changed his attitude. He told me this story.*

*When the accident happened, and I knew that I would never see again, I felt that my life had ended. I was bitter, and angry at God for letting it happen, and I took my anger out on everyone around me. I felt that since I had no future, I wouldn't lift a finger on my own behalf. Let others wait on me. I shut my bedroom door and refused to come out except for meals.*

*One day, in exasperation, my father came into my room and started giving me a lecture. He said he was weary of my feeling sorry for myself. He said that winter was coming, and that it was my job to put up the storm windows. "You get those window up by supper time tonight, or else!" he shouted, and slammed the door on his way out.*

*This made me so angry that I resolved to do it. Muttering and cursing to myself, I groped my way out to the garage, found the windows, a stepladder, all the necessary tools and went to work. "They'll be sorry when I fall off the ladder and break my neck," I thought. "But little by little, feeling my way around the house, I got the job done." Then John stopped, and his sightless eyes misted up as he told me, "I later discovered that at no time during the day had my father even been more than five feet by my side."*

You know, this really is a story about all of us. Most of the time, we figure that we're all on our own. "I've always been right by your side," the Spirit would answer.

And it is this great Truth to which we are awakened. And it is the goal of all our learning and teaching—to discover the presence of the Holy One, who is never, never far away.

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*