

The Presence of God

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Preacher: Rev Irene Munro

[0 : 0 0] Let's pray. Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden, gather our thoughts and give us open hearts to focus on your word to us today. Amen.

Well, that prayer was spoken at one of the English services I was listening to recently. And I think they're wonderful words because they remind us that nothing is hidden from God because his presence is everywhere, as we know.

Maybe we have a first slide up as well. So this is a quote from one of my favorite authors, A.W. Tosa. And he said, nothing in this world measures up to the simple pleasures of experiencing the presence of God.

Nothing in this world measures up to the simple pleasures of experiencing the presence of God. And I wonder if we really read that, if we really think that. Well, regarding the presence of God, Solomon asked, but will God really dwell on earth with humans? The fact that God's presence is there with us is both wonderful, but almost unbelievable, and too much for our tiny minds, too much for mine anyway.

And sometimes because it's too much. And sometimes because it's too much, we just sort of part that thought. It's too much, and I'm not really going to take it to heart. But I think the question which Solomon spoke and answered is one word looking at.

[1 : 3 6] Solomon, after asking if God will really dwell on earth with humans, he almost answers his own question from his own knowledge of God and says, The heavens, even the highest heavens cannot contain you.

As we prayed in our prayer of approaching confession this morning, God has not suddenly come into the church as we have here. He is everywhere. And he is especially among his people.

Indeed, God is not contained in earth. We will have our second slide. And the verse that Charlie read, John 1, 14, the word became flesh and dwelt among us, shows us the three versions there that just put it slightly down, but make it maybe more real for us.

So the NIV, the word became flesh and made its dwelling among us. The message version says the word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.

And the English translation, the word became flesh and tabernacled among us. Literally, as we know, pitched his tent among us. And you know, you can take a tent anywhere, so tents are not fixed.

[2 : 4 6] Well, Solomon acknowledges God's presence, asking God, hear the cry and prayer that your servant is praying in your presence. Verse 2, he says, I have surely built you an exalted house and a place to dwell in forever.

So Solomon knew that God had a special presence in the temple, but was not exclusively there. Verse 21, may you hear the supplications of your servant and of your people Israel when they prayed towards this place.

So he was, by saying that, he was admitting that God wasn't just in the temple, that people would be able to pray. But you know, some who came afterwards, after Solomon, they did think it was not possible to worship God away from the physical temple.

If we can have our third slide, we see people in the rivers of Babylon, by the rivers of Babylon, you know, that psalm that was made into a psalm in the church about 1978, some years ago.

And by the rivers of Babylon, how can we worship God in a strange land, they asked. Well, the problem with the children of Israel in captivity, they're thinking only God could be worshipped in one place.

[4 : 0 0] When they went into exile, they couldn't see how God could be worshipped so far from the temple, in their homeland. And yet, in Psalm 90, the prayer of Moses shows the omnipresent God.

Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. So not just in one place, but being our dwelling place. So before we criticise the excerpt, we should be thankful to Jesus and the new covenant, because we have the knowledge that they didn't have.

And John chapter 14 is well known that when Jesus was talking about leaving the disciples physically, when he was going to leave them, he told them that the Holy Spirit would be with them and for us forever.

And I will ask the Father and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever. The Spirit of Truth. Well, the psalmist in writing, I think, what first praise he stands today, how lovely it is, the dwelling place, he couldn't envisage that the Holy Spirit would be dwelling internally with every believer all the time.

Again, we have the new covenant. And Paul says in Romans 8, the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you. And that's really awesome to use a word that's popular in overviews.

[5 : 1 8] But it is. When we think back, the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in each of us. And the Spirit of God that raised Jesus from the dead was so powerful to move and store it in you.

But that same Spirit is within us. And I think we need to think about that more. Not an external thing that was a bit in the Old Testament, the Old Testament people who have the influence of the Holy Spirit working on them powerfully.

So while it's important to recognize a special place to come and meet with God, God is everywhere because he is, by his Spirit, with us all. So the new covenant, the Old, falls on and is superior to the Old.

So just a little bit verse 11. There I put the ark in which is the covenant of the Lord. The ark was a representation of God's covenantal presence with his people. The one word I liked at college, and I learned more than one word, but one really quick and wise spirit that I heard was the word *chesed*.

And it's spelled H-E-E-P-H-E-S-E-E. Sorry. For Polish people to get around. But it's one of those words that's difficult to give a direct translation. It means loving kindness in the covenantal sense, which means always the stronger looking after the weaker.

[6 : 3 6] And I think that's lovely to think about that, because in our final hymn we're going to sing, are the words, Thou my soul's shelter. And I think how wonderful to know that God, by his covenantal love, is a shelter and a protection for the soul.

And so the stronger looking after the weaker is a paradigm for our Christian living. That's why churches are so much deemed a shelter for others, and caring for others in that way.

It's such a good influence in the world, as we've seen the Afghan Christians being helped in Brazil. The Church of Scotland Crossreach does amazing work, looking after the weaker in so many ways, so many vulnerable people, in ways that aren't amplified enough.

The people on the street really knew what Crossreach does all around Scotland. They would hold the church in greater esteem, I think. And so we're thankful even thinking about how the civilians have been saved from the NHS because of the work that the Church does quietly throughout the land.

So we have our next slide four. And I think this is a very quick quote from Finney. Charles Finney says, If the presence of God is in the Church, the Church will draw the world in.

[7 : 57] If the presence of God is not in the Church, the world will draw the Church out. It's quite a deep saying, really, or one that deserves pondering, because we know that if the Church is not influencing, and not strong, then the society overtakes the Church with its cultural values that we don't really want to have.

So God's covenant, then, for his people, was not just one place and one town, but for our time as well. God is not bound in time and space. And so we want to think about God's omnipresence in these days, in these weak days, really, in our world, in our nation, and often in personal ways, in our churches.

So the temple, then, was to reflect God's glory and majesty. And I'm not convinced that worshipping God in a brief, undecorated building or a gym hall or a community hall where Mystic Meg might have been meeting the night before, is giving up the same encouragement to worship as a place dedicated and decorated to glorify Almighty God.

And people say, well, as God is everywhere, it doesn't really matter what the place looks like. But I think, given all the way that the temple was made and how God is wanting something really beautiful that we should try and unify our places.

And I think of a story that was a missionary went to Africa and he worked with some native people, local people there.

[9 : 34] And they came to faith and so he taught them and he moved on to another part. And he came back two years later and he found that they had built a special place to worship him.

And he said, oh, you've made a special place to worship God. And they said, yes, because we felt God was special. We didn't just want to worship God in our community hut that was used for all sorts of other things.

And so, I thought that was quite a good story. But nobody told them to build the hut. They came to that themselves, the whole conclusion. They wanted God to be in a special place, a sanctified place, a place set aside.

So there's time for that as well. Now, there's another quote. Sorry to have so many quotes, but I think it's helpful to see people that have read, learned, as I would say, who have knowledge and they have also challenges.

So, Tim Keller says in our next slide, to stand in the presence of God, that is what the gospel is. The gospel is not primarily about forgiveness, not primarily about good feelings.

[10 : 40] It's not primarily about power. All these things are byproducts. They are sparse. It's primarily about the presence of God. And I know that might seem on first looking that he's saying forgiveness and all that isn't important, but he's not.

But people come to church when they sense that people in church know the reality and the presence of God. And I think that's totally what he's getting at. He's certainly not saying that we don't need forgiveness.

So then, what difference does it make to us when we know that God is a believer? What are these byproducts, these sparks, that Tim Keller talked about? Well, I think knowing God is not in any one place helps us to worship him wholeheartedly.

And we're going to sing the words in our last hymn, I ever would be, and thou with me, Lord. We've been in the Catholic Church very clear about the awesomeness, the nearness, and the permanence of God.

And we know we cannot shut him out of anything in our lives. Maybe the introductory story that God is watching the apples and not the cookies is sometimes a wee bit of our idea of drifting away from the idea that God actually is seeing what we're like.

[11 : 58] And you know there's a saying that character is what you are on your own, which is a bit of a thought too. So we know that he's not too busy to deal with us even though we think that he's maybe focused on the Middle East or Ukraine or Sudan or these other troubled spots.

But for us, right here in Invergordon at this moment, and when we leave, we can't be back to our houses, God is with us. And so I think that's a comfort that should make us want to worship God and praise and thank him.

So knowing God is not only in one place I think it makes us ready to engage with people who don't know him because God is already there and doing our work.

Sometimes we think mission means going out and making people aware of God and bringing them in. And there is that as well. But often we find when we speak to people, when we start to chat about something and often they'll say something about, oh, I've been looking into things or the meaning of life, what's life about these days, we find that God is already prompting them to question their lives.

And I just want to give you a little illustration of that. Recently, and I was in a church hall a few months ago and we went to this mother-daughter type, parent-toddler thing, and my daughter was with us and the amount of things that had happened for me to be there to meet this man who was an atheist.

[13 : 32] So my daughter was going to go back to her island for the boat and surprisingly it was cancelled. That's happened these days. And then this man, he was the grandfather of this child who came and his daughter that we walk along the street and see the lady putting a sign up about this horrible event.

So sent the grandfather there and the grandmother of the child. And he sat down beside me and everybody else was busy as well. And he sat down beside me and he said in a drunk voice, well it's a long time since I've been in a church.

And I said, oh, how does that feel? And he said, I don't believe any of it, it's all a lot of rubbish. And so, that's not really a Monday morning conversation that I was really thinking was what I'd quite thought of.

But it turned out anyway he was kind of background of a severe cult-like Christian group. And he'd been very traumatised by that. But when we think of the things that had to happen for him and I to be sitting together if my daughter hadn't wanted to go to this group, if her vote hadn't been cancelled, if the other person hadn't seen the sign getting put up, and if he hadn't sat beside me because nobody else was free.

There was no other adult that's not the thing that I was going to be the one, but there was nobody else with him to sit beside. So, obviously, when we start a conversation, or we start a conversation really, God brought all these circumstances together and he was already there, I believe, because this man had a background on Christian faith and I believe that when he was going back to a place where he lived because he was on holiday there, that God would not be unfaithful in providing somebody to continue on the conversation I had and maybe make him rethink his position and think about his life before his creator.

[15 : 27] So, obviously, it would be nice to have you said, well, I'll let the man to the Lord there and then, and of course, it was in my heart and it would be all your hearts as well, but you know, the verses we read, it was in David's heart to build the temple and so, God knows it's in our heart and he does go ahead of them and us.

And so, knowing God everywhere and then makes us aware he wants to bless us with his protected, protected covenantal love. Well, we've sung that to him just now and he, Psalm 139 and, I'm a while ago, Russell Smith is our local in Fairmontosh where I worship if I'm not somewhere else and Russell was local and he told everybody we had to read Psalm 139 for a month and Russell wasn't going to reading that from the pulpit but anyway, some of us didn't notice us in the Bible study where we talk about this so we read Psalm 139 that we've sung just now a part of it and a friend was saying that when she first became Christian she didn't like the idea that God was everywhere because she saw him as a big brother who's watching you and I don't know she wouldn't be very comfortable with the Bible we sung but God is always near us but these are the words you know that we sung

God is always near me hearing what I say knowing all my thoughts and needs all my work and play he's always near me in the darkest night he can see me just the same as by my day light and I think we need to think about these things more because they're not a word or a look or thought or need but God knows it all and so he is coming unto love he's seeking bless all of us because he knows all around us and he's promised we are children of the promise so we know then what it makes us examine our relationship when we know God is everywhere relationship with him relationship with others and we have to examine ourselves if we've got anything in our hearts that would stop us really experiencing God's presence and because if we have something in our hearts then we shouldn't be surprised if we feel that God is really not near us and so we want other people to know God as much as he can so it makes us want to do

Christian works and to do mission because we want people to know Jesus just as well as we do and so when we start why the church does serve even though it's imperfect Psalm 2 tells us serve the Lord the reverend here and rejoice with trembling when we consider the presence of a holy God we won't be casual around how we approach him and what we do for him so then our last slide is sort of summary of these things really that we know God is everywhere we want to worship him knowing he's everywhere helps us to recognize when he's doing our work in people and it makes us aware that he wants to bless us and he is indeed our soul's shelter and so we do need to examine do we approach him casually how are our relationships with him and others and so it does really spur us on then to know that we should be doing what we carry on doing and also new ways of doing for our charitable works and our mission but how do we sense

God's presence well we remind ourselves that when he's always present we should use the means of grace to practice his presence and we know brother we all show a book about that but having a deliberate desire to seek God's presence does quicken our spirits not just at church or at prayer meeting or once a day but a continual desire to be aware of the presence and the victims and the small things throughout the day because practicing the presence of God is not just for monks or mystics 1 Kings 8 says Solomon's other prayer in 1 Kings 8 is a parallel to this one that was read today may your hearts be fully committed to the Lord your God to live by his decrees and obey his commands so as God's people we are assured of his presence with us and we will love God's ways God's word and worship him in spirit and truth so then we want to ask do the words of the first life challenge us

[20 : 25] A.W. Tozer nothing in and of this world measures up the simple pleasures of experiencing the presence of God is that really our experience our desire Solomon's prayer is a great prayer of worship and adoration and one that we can model for our new prayers when we approach God either together or in our quiet times and sometimes we don't always feel like worship but the words of Bible prayers can lift up ourselves so we can feel closer to him we come with confidence because we remember our almighty God is the one to whom all hearts are open all desires known and from who no secrets are hidden amen let's pray eternal God you have been the hope and joy of many generations and you have down the centuries given people the power to seek you and to find you as you draw them we pray we will have a clearer vision of your truth a greater faith in your power and a more comforting assurance of your God as we know the reality of your presence day by day amen amen

Thank you.