

It's not very often that my job requires significant travel and when it comes to family vacations, most days are spent within our own fair Province. But one of the interruptions brought on by Covid has been the inability to travel; my son and I had planned to be in England at Spring Break. I know that a number of you had planned to go somewhere, to do something, but the grounding of flights has left you stranded where you are.

*Do you every wish you could be somewhere else?* Many of us hadn't planned to travel anywhere during the past few months, but the travel restrictions have a strange effect. The fact that we haven't been able to go anywhere makes us daydream about going; we just want to get out of here, to go anywhere. If you could safely get on a flight, and travel somewhere right now, where would you go?

It's not just about international travel though, is it? During the past few months, many of us have simply wanted to go over to a friend's house. We've wanted to visit parents, or, loved ones in a Care Home; we've wanted to attend a wedding, or a memorial service—restrictions have kept us where we are.

Until there is a vaccine our ability to travel freely will remain restricted, and until someone invents a teleportation device, we'll have to be content to remain where we are, most of the time.

Over the past two months, we've been preaching through a series entitled *Describing God*; its purpose has been to look at the Bible's description of God's being, character, and activity. Last week Pastor Paul tackled the first of a trio of subjects that are affectionately

known as the omni's: God is omnipotent (all-powerful), God is omniscient (all-knowing), and God is omnipresent. Next week, we'll take a look at God's omniscience, this week I want to talk about God's omnipresence.

I want to begin this morning by offering a definition, then a brief theological explanation, followed by a number of implications. Knowing who God is can profoundly effect the way we experience the world. So first...

**1. A Definition:** When we speak of God's *omnipresence*, what we are saying is that *God is simultaneously present everywhere*. Now for the explanation...

**2. An Explanation:** How is it that God can be simultaneously present everywhere, and we cannot? Theologians agree that God's omnipresence is a function of His immateriality. God is spirit, He is not composed of matter, and consequently He does not have the physical limitation we do.<sup>1</sup>

Let's think for a moment about God in terms of our own limitations. When we have too much to do, when there are multiple events happening at the same time, we might say, "*I wish I could be in two places at once.*" All material creatures are bound by space, and so, I cannot be here on this stage right now, and in your living room eating waffles and watching this service on your tv. As an aside, when I imagine those of you at home, worshipping with us online, you're all eating delicious Belgian waffles—it makes me wish I wish I could be in two places at once!

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<sup>1</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 268.

Millard Erickson writes, "God is not subject to limitations of space... [and] it is improper to think of God as present in space at all. All finite objects have a location. They are somewhere. This necessarily prevents their being somewhere else. The greatness of finite objects is measured by how much space they occupy. With God, however, the question of whereness or location is not applicable. God is the one who brought space [and time] into being. He was before there was space. He cannot be localized at a particular point. There can be no plotting of his location on a set of coordinates."<sup>2</sup>

There is no place where God cannot be found. In Jeremiah 23:23-24 we read, "'Am I only a God nearby,' declares the Lord, 'and not a God far away? ... 'Do not I fill heaven and earth?' declares the Lord.'" In Isaiah 66:1-2, God describes heaven as His throne and the earth as His footstool. This figure of speech communicates the length and breadth of God's presence. Even when God the Son became human and took up residence in 1st century Palestine, the Father, Son, and Spirit did not cease to be present everywhere, filling the entire universe.

To avoid confusion, allow me a brief moment to clarify the difference between a biblical understanding of omnipresence and popular notions of pantheism. Dawn Wilson writes, "Pantheism is sometimes described this way: "God is everything and everyone; and everyone and everything is God."<sup>3</sup> Pantheists describe God as not

only being everywhere but also *in* everything—in this tree, or river, in this rock, etc.

The Bible describes God as being everywhere but not as being in everything, and, that which God *does* indwell does not thereby become divine. There is a boundary between God's being and our own.

In just a moment, I'm going to focus on the implications of God's omnipresence, but before I do, I want to champion the importance of faith. If God is simultaneously present everywhere—present, not absent—it stands to reason that we should be able to see Him. Not surprisingly, those who hold that God does not exist, see no evidence for God; in fact, there is no evidence they would accept. But those who allow for the possibility of God, with eyes of faith, see God in every situation. In speaking of the omnipresent God, A.W. Tozer writes, "You can see God from anywhere if your mind is set to love and obey Him."<sup>4</sup>

**3. Implications:** In order to get at the implications, we're going to look at two different texts, both of which are found in the Psalms. If you've got a Bible with you, I'd like to invite you to turn to Psalm 139:7-16.

*"Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? 8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed*

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<sup>2</sup> Erickson, 273.

<sup>3</sup> Dawn Wilson, *What Does "Omnipresent" Mean?*, <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/bible-study/what-does-omnipresent-mean.html>

<sup>4</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*.

*in the depths, you are there. 9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, 10 even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. 11 If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,” 12 even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. 13 For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb...15 My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. 16 Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”*

One thing that is immediately noticeable is the poetic use of merism (opposites). The height of Heaven is paired with the depth of Sheol (the grave). David talks about travelling from where he is to the far side of the sea; he also speaks about light and dark. He employs these extremes to make a singular point: we cannot run from a God who is everywhere.

David didn’t live a time of air travel and so he had to use his imagination—if I were to fly up to the heavens, *You are there*. Even if, we were to enter the grave—hoping to escape—God’s reach extends even there. The Scriptures tell numerous stories of God raising people from the dead.

Likewise, geographical distance cannot separate us from God. Vs. 9, if we were to hitch our wagon to the dawn—which moves from East to West at the speed of about 1600 km per hour—and settle on the far side of the world, even there we would find God.<sup>5</sup>

Vs. 11, we tend to think about God (or holiness) in terms of light and darkness, in terms of what remains hidden (or secret), but darkness is not “dark” to God. John 1:5 describes Jesus as “*the light [who] shines in the darkness*”.

**illus:** I used to be afraid of the dark, or more specifically, of what might be hiding in the dark. Sounds in the middle of the night, monsters in the closet or under my bed. As I got older and began to understand that there is an unseen spiritual realm around us, it gave me more reasons for fear. I can distinctly remember waking up one night when I was young and hearing the voice of someone laughing...a mocking, malevolent laughter that communicated ill intent—I was terrified.

When I told my mom about my fear, what I had heard, she gave me a piece of advice that I clung to then, and now. Speak the name of Jesus out loud. Calling out His name does not make Him appear, as though He was somewhere else, but at the mention of His name, He shows up. No, He is always present, but calling out His name does have a particular effect on us and around us. Jesus brings light to dark places. Jesus brings fear to demonic spirits...when we call out to the God who *is* present, they tremble.

Vs. 13-16 make God’s omnipresence personal: “*You knit me together in my mother’s womb...Your eyes saw my unformed body.*” One author translates it in the following way, “Your eyes saw me as an

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<sup>5</sup> Goldingay. 632.

embryo”.<sup>6</sup> If God sees us, and is present to us in the womb, it stands to reason that He remains present throughout the entirety of our lives. He is present whether we are aware of it or not.

**illus:** In recent months, I’ve spoken with a few congregants whose spouses are experiencing the devastating effects of Dementia or Alzheimer’s. These diseases ravage the mind, and in particular the memory; loved ones who were once vibrant are now but a shadow. They are still here, but they are lost to us; we can no longer reach them, and they cannot reach us.

The truth of Psalm 139 has implications for these loved ones; they are not alone. I believe that God can, and does, pierce the fog of dementia; He is present everywhere, and fully able to access their minds. They may be lost to us, temporarily, but they are not lost to God. Even in the darkest shadow, Jesus is with them, His right hand holds them firm. Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

But it’s not just the unborn foetus, or the person with dementia, who is within God’s grasp; no one is beyond God’s reach. Not your estranged son or daughter. Not your parent, not your spouse, not your friend. You may be longing for reconciliation with these loved ones; God is present everywhere and they are within His reach. It may be that you long for a loved one to know Christ; God is present everywhere, they are within His reach.

No doubt you have heard people speak about “*walking away from God*,” the language is clearly metaphorical. We may choose to ignore

God, to forget God, to reject God, but we do not leave Him behind—every place, every moment, is alive with His presence.

God can reach those you love most in this world and He can also reach those who have done harm to you, to your loved ones, or to this world. The crooked employer, or landlord, is not beyond God’s reach; neither is the unjust ruler.

God can be what He is, God can be what we need, exactly where we are. He can be strong and wise for you here—on the North Shore—and be equally strong and wise for those who call to Him from Bangladesh, Syria, and Iceland.

At this time I want to invite you to turn with me to Psalm 23. “*1 The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, 3 he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake. 4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 6 Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*”

This Psalm, from beginning to end, expresses confidence in God; as every season unfolds in our lives, God is always present, and He never changes in His goodness towards us.

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<sup>6</sup> Goldingay, 635.

In vs. 1-3, David describes God in terms of a Shepherd. The fact that He is always present is the foundation for His provision. He is the Shepherd who is present when we need sustenance, rest, and restoration. He is the Shepherd who is present in times of decision, when we need guidance.

Vs. 4: God is equally present in the place of abundance as He is in the place of trouble; none of us have to contend with darkness or death alone. *Even though I walk through the darkest valley... You are with me.* He is the Shepherd who is present when we find ourselves in a dark, difficult, valley, when we are dying, or when it feels like we're dying.

Vs. 5: God is the Host who is present when we are surrounded by enemies. When no one will stand with us, He is beside us, speaking a word of affirmation and blessing, throwing a banquet in our honour.

Vs. 6: The final verse strikes a chord of future hope. The one who has known God in abundant pasture, in the darkest valley, and in the presence of enemies, can look forward to dwelling in God's house forever. He is the Host who is present, with goodness and love, through every day of our life on earth, and, beyond, welcoming us into His eternal home.

Psalm 23 teaches us to look at our lives in terms of "pilgrimage".<sup>7</sup> In every place, in every season of our lives, God is present.

**illus:** Now that we find ourselves in Phase 3 of B.C.'s Restart Plan, non-essential travel has been opened up within our Province. As

result, this Summer, many people will be taking road trips. As one makes their way through small towns, or even particular regions, road signs can be found that read: "*Welcome to Castlegar,*" or "*Now entering \_\_\_\_\_*" or "*Now leaving \_\_\_\_\_*". These signs represent reality as we know it. We leave one location for another, and when it comes to time, the moment that passes by is replaced by another. We cannot simultaneously occupy two different locations or moments.

High School graduates leave High School behind. Children grow into adults and they tend to leave the family home, parents, and siblings behind. Eventually, parents leave children and grandchildren through death; this the way of things. In each of these cases, and many more, presence—togetherness—is interrupted by distance and time; we've all felt the pain of separation. And because this is our experience of nearly everything, we tend to lump God into the same category, but, life with God is entirely different.

For example, for many of us, certain places seem "sacred." When we encounter God in a particular place, perhaps a church sanctuary, we begin associate the place with God's presence; this is further reinforced if we experience God, multiple times, in the same place. If we have a special place that we go to pray—a quiet room, on a mountain top, or on the lakeshore—a place where God spoke to us, or answered our prayer, we begin to associate the place with God's presence. It might seem as though God is "more present" here than in other places, and so, when we need help, we might feel the need to return to the place to access God.

Similarly, you might have experienced God working—in power—in

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<sup>7</sup> Gerald H Wilson, *The NIV Application Commentary: Psalms Volume 1*, 441.

a particular season of your life. Perhaps when you were a young child, or as a young adult, or when a loved one got sick, God seemed especially close, loving, or strong. But now that the season has passed, it may seem like God is not as present as He once was.

Dawn Wilson writes, “God is present continuously, but He doesn’t always choose to reveal Himself. And sometimes He doesn’t reveal Himself to every person in the same way or at the same time. [Psalm 46:1] says that God is our ‘*very present help*’ in troublesome times.”<sup>8</sup>

God is simultaneously present everywhere. By implication, we don’t leave God behind when we move from one location to another, or, from one season of life to another. When you move cities, change schools, or start at a new company, God is always present.

We don’t “bring God with us,” from place to place, or from moment to moment, like a favourite sweater packed in a suitcase. It’s not even correct to say that God precedes us wherever we go, as though God gets to where we’re going more quickly than we do. No, God is everywhere; He has access to every place—and to every person—in every moment, for all time.

He is present where we are, He is present where we are going, and present where we will one be. He *is* present when we are children, He *is* present when we are young adults, and His presence continues throughout the flowering of decades. God saw us as an embryo, He will be with us at our final breath, and in every moment in between.

I want to conclude with a quote attributed to Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

“Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God,  
But only [the one] who sees takes off [their] shoes;  
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.”

God *is* present whether we are aware or not, and more often than not, our awareness of His presence is directly proportional to our faith. No matter where you find yourself today, in terms of location or season of life, God is with you—as Creator, Shepherd, and Host.

I pray that you will seek Him, and find Him as He is—kind, strong, faithful, loving, and wise.

### **Prayer**

### **Worship**

### **Benediction**

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<sup>8</sup> Dawn Wilson, *What Does “Omnipresent” Mean?*, <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/bible-study/what-does-omnipresent-mean.html>