

## JEHOVAH SHAMMAH

God says to us in Heb 13:5, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." That is good English, but it is not what it says in the Greek. In the original language, the word *never* is a triple negative. That means it should really read "I will never, never, never leave you or forsake you."

J. B. Phillips once wrote, "The presence of God is a fact of life. Paul rightly said of God, "In him we live, and move, and have our being." Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is within you." We may, by defying the purpose of God, insulate ourselves from that presence. We may, by unrepented sin, cut off the sense of God because we are clouded by a sense of guilt. We may, through no fault of our own, be unable to sense the God who is all about us. But the fact remains that he is with us all the time."

Today we are continuing in our series Revealed looking at the names of God. Today we want to look at the name Jehovah Shammah. We can find this in the book of Ezekiel;

Eze 48:35 The distance all around will be 18,000 cubits. And the name of the city from that time on will be: THE LORD IS THERE.

Why is this city that Ezekiel talks about going to be WONDERFUL? Not just because it will be an amazing place, but because God will be there. God will be with us. Jehovah Shammah reminds us that God is always with us. God's presence gives us hope. He is our source of hope. What is our hope as believers in Jesus Christ based on? Let me give you 3 things:

### 1. His Presence is Watching Over Me

In a few weeks we will be starting our Christmas series. This year it is entitled God with Us, reminding us of the fact that Jesus came and entered into our world. God has promised that He is with us and that He will never leave us or forsake us.

### 2. His Purpose is Working In Me

Because God is with us, His power flows through us. God has given us His Spirit, His comforter who is always helping us and equipping us for service.

### 3. His Place is Waiting For Me

Ultimately we know that we have a home waiting for us in heaven. On that day we will see God face to face. This assurance gives us hope no matter what we are going through here and now.

That is my message for today. When I was writing this outline a few weeks ago I thought to myself, 'this is good. I have 3 points and they all have a P and a W in them to make them memorable. I just need to fill in the points and add some funny illustrations and I am done.' And then God spoke to me;

Psa 52:9 I will praise you forever for what you have done; in your name I will hope, for your name is good. I will praise you in the presence of your saints.

I will praise you in the presence of your saints. As I was writing a message on the fact that God is with us, I felt like God was saying to me, "Yes, I am there with you. So why are you not there with one other?" What does Jehovah Shammah 'The Lord is there' mean for us during this COVID age?

Last week Dr. Lawrence Loh, the Medical Officer of Health for the Region of Peel posted recommendations on the Region of Peel website that churches be limited to a maximum of 50 people. I wrote to Dr. Loh for clarification, explaining that this was unfair. Why should a church that has 160 seats be allowed to have the same number of people in attendance as a church 10 times that size. That is like treating Walmart the same as you would a local convenience store. Several other pastors also contacted him, and he said that these were only his recommendations, not requirements. The Province of Ontario has said that churches are allowed up to 30% capacity, and those directives still hold. But the question is, why not just close down again? Why are in person services important? The Lord is here with us in this auditorium right now, but He is also there with you in your living room right now. So why is coming together so important?

In 600 BC the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and took most of the Israelites into captivity.

Psa 137:1-6 By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. 2 There on the poplars we hung our harps, 3 for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" 4 How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land? 5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. 6 May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.

The children of Israel had been taken into captivity because of their sin. God revealed through Jeremiah that the captivity was going to last for 70 years.

Jer 29:4-6 This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease.

You see that as the people were taken into captivity that their thoughts and prayers were on Jerusalem. The problem was that the longer the exile went on, the more the people forgot about their old home and customs. God told them that the captivity would be a long time, but His intention was never that they would forget who they were and where they had come from. We see that people like Daniel kept Jerusalem on his mind and the hope of returning alive even into old age.

Dan 6:10 Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.

By the time that the Persian King Cyrus allowed all the Israelites to return home, only a few were willing to go. During their time away, their lives had changed. Only a small handful returned. And who could blame them. The temple and the walls to the city had been destroyed. It was a dangerous trip and there were enemies all around. Add to this the fact that the people had established a new life rhythm, and Jerusalem and their old homeland was not part of that rhythm.

When Cyrus issued the decree to return, there were basically three ways the Israelites responded. Those who returned, those who would later return and those who would never return. Most of the Israelites (including the Levites) chose to remain in Babylon in what they considered to be safety. They had established homes and businesses. Returning to Jerusalem would mean they would lose that security. They just remained and were eventually absorbed into the Babylonian culture.

Likewise, researchers are pointing out the fact that today in the church we also have 3 groups of people. Those who have returned, those who will return and those who will never return. There have been positive things that have happened because of this pandemic. As a church I believe that during the pandemic we have responded to the challenges well. Perhaps in some ways too well. I am so grateful to our tech and worship teams for the way that they have stepped up.

Public worship in Ontario was only shut down for 3 months. That shutdown was understood and accepted by everyone. Over 5 months ago that shutdown ended. People were free to return to worship provided that they follow certain guidelines. Understandably, people have been reluctant to return for a number of reasons.

Back in March, just 2 weeks into the pandemic, there was an Ontario pastor who wrote an article that said, "Pastors and elders may well find it difficult to regather their congregants on the other side of this exile. Once the church figures out how to deliver services online it will be tempting for many to remain at home and simply consume those services in peace and comfort."

Add to this the fact that, even though our doors are now open, we have a list of protocols that many people find awkward, inconvenient and even frustrating. We are limited to 30% capacity and we must wear masks. People are told to register before they come and the doors of the church are closed 15 minutes after the services begin. Child care is limited to grade school children.

The big question that people are asking is this; "If public worship is going to be different then I have known it in the past. If we must have these restrictions in place and if our online options are so good and available and convenient and our physical presence is a possible health risk, then why should I return and worship in person?"

Let me try to answer that question for you today. A little while ago I posted something on Facebook that said that church on the sofa will never be the same as church in the sanctuary. It is not something I came up with, it was an article I edited and then posted. Likewise, this message today is not original. It is one that Fellowship Baptist pastors all over Canada are preaching. Why is church on the sofa not the same as church in the sanctuary? Let me give you 5 reasons;

1. You are only there in spirit from the sofa

We are physical beings. We exist in a physical world. We were designed to move and taste and smell and feel our way through this physical world we have been placed in. Reality is more than what we simply see on a screen in front of us. We were not meant to spend all our time connecting with others only in a digital way. That is not how God created us.

For the past months we have seen the power of our online world, but we have also felt its limitations. No loving couple believes that a long distance relationship is just as good as an up close and personal physical one.

Our daughter Petra spent 2 years away from home on the ship Logos Hope. Every now and then we would have the opportunity to connect with her by voice and occasionally through video, but it was not the same as her actually being there. We would sit down and open presents at Christmas or be around the table at Thanksgiving and we would hope that maybe we could have a short video conversation with her. Was it better than nothing? Absolutely. But it was no substitute for having her home with us. It was not the same. Neither is church.

Eph 4:3-4 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit -- just as you were called to one hope when you were called

The one body that this verse speaks about is the church. We are family. Many biblical writers believe that when Paul wrote that there was one Spirit that he was not simply saying that there is only one Holy Spirit, he is saying that there is a oneness that the Holy Spirit creates. The Holy Spirit is always drawing us inward towards oneness and unity and community. God cannot be divided, so when we are divided there is uneasiness, like a giant rubber band drawing us back together. We are called to maintain that unity through community.

So how are we doing? We are allowed by the city of Brampton to have 550 people gather. Less than half of that are coming. Together with the Thursday senior's service, we have around 20% or about one fifth of the congregation back in person. Can't you feel the Spirit drawing us back?

2. You don't sing from the sofa

Being in community as we attend church together is a sacred moment. Listening to a message in person is very different than watching it online. Of course it is better than nothing. When the church was completely shut down it was good to have the ability to hear the sermons online. I know that there have been complaints about sound volume and things like that, but I believe that we as a church have shown excellence in the way that we responded to the pandemic. However, online is not the same.

Years ago when we were in Kuwait a few pastors and I went to a conference at a big church in the States. I was really looking forward to attending and hearing the pastor speak. However, we arrived too late and were told that the Main Auditorium was full so we would have to sit in the overflow room and watch the service online. "Don't worry" the man said, "It is just as good as being there!" It was not. Would you rather go to a church and sit in an overflow room where you simply saw what was happening in the Main Auditorium, or would you rather be in the Main Auditorium?

Watching a service from home online over an extended period of time is not good for the soul. It creates consumers, rather than contributors. Sitting on your couch there are all kinds of disruptions that can happen. The phone rings or the cat wants food. You can pick up your remote and mute the preacher, maybe some of you have already done that...

But it is not just the preaching but also the worship. Let me ask those of you watching from home today, did you sing the songs out loud that we sang today? Did you stand up and sing, maybe lift your arms in worship? There are some things that simply are not translated through the screen. Imagine you are having Thanksgiving together as a family, but you have one child that could not be there. They decide to join you via facetime. You set up the computer at the end of the table. You talk with them as you eat. You pick up some turkey and gravy with some stuffing and you wipe it on the computer screen so that they can have a taste ... sorry but it is not the same as being there.

Psa 95:1-2 Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. 2 Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.

There is no experience on earth like public worship. There is something in singing together that unites and us empowers us. The bible tells us to sing and praise God *together*.

Heb 10:24-25 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. 25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another -- and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Let me say that we are a whole lot closer to the Day of the Lord now than when these words were written. Singing together is powerful. It encourages us. The Psalmist in Psalm 137 asked "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" You can sing anywhere. You can sing in the car, you can sing in the bathtub. The earth is the Lord's and everything in it. You can sing in Toronto or Tokyo, Hamilton or Haiti, Brampton or Bangladesh. The issue was not that the Israelites had forgotten how to sing, it was just that it was not the same now. It was not the same as worshipping at the temple in Jerusalem.

Likewise, singing on your couch is not the same as singing in church when we assemble together. Worship is not only powerful because it is God directed but because it touches the people around us as we do it. Paul tells the church in Ephesus;

Eph 5:19 Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord

Sing to the Lord, but as you are doing that you are also communicating with one another. When Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown in jail in Philippi, they spent the time praying and singing together. God showed up and the foundations of the prison were shaken. There is power in public worship.

3. You don't celebrate the sacraments from the sofa

It is hard to truly celebrate the sacraments from the sofa. We have had a number of people who have been baptized since this pandemic started. Most of you saw them, maybe you were even cheering from your living room. They did not see you. There was only a handful of people here to stand with them and celebrate their decision.

I have also had many people say to me that celebrating communion from home is just not the same. Yes, you have a cracker and some juice, but there is something special when we celebrate the Lord's Supper together. It is a sacred moment. Jesus could have just told us to do it when we were at home doing our devotions, but it was something the early church did when it came together. Taking it at home is better than nothing, but again there is something lost when God's people are not together.

Both baptism and communion are physical reminders of spiritual realities. There is a physical nature to them, something that transcends only the spiritual realm. We taste and touch and feel the gospel.

4. You don't serve from the sofa

I do not want to suggest that just because a person is not attending in person worship services that they are not serving. We have people that are delivering groceries in Knightsbridge and doing other things. However, they are not doing it from their sofa. We have a mission as a church, and it is a mission that cannot be completed from the couch. It requires us gathering together. Exalting, embracing, equipping and extending – they all require community. Again, Heb 10:24 reminds us that the way we encourage one another, the way we spur one another on toward love and good deeds is by meeting together.

Yes, you can have online services, online small groups and online classes. We have even talked about the idea of online missions trips. The reality is that none of them are a substitute for meeting together. They just aren't.

All of us are called to serve. We all have a spiritual gift and hopefully an area to use that gift. Can you really use your gift effectively in isolation? Ministry is not something that just the pastors do. We need everyone to be using what you have for the church to function properly.

One of the things that this pandemic has done is that it has shaken up our routines. It has made us reevaluate our priorities. A lot of people are not as busy now as they were before the virus. I have heard from many who have said that the lock down has caused them to refocus on what was important, so that they plan to do less after this is over than before. That is a good thing. I think it is always good when we take the time to reexamine our priorities. We do not like the Covid world as it exists now, but we also do not want to return to the business we had before the virus hit.

We need to establish new rhythms, so will Jesus and His church be one of those priorities?

5. You don't see others from the sofa

If you are watching from home right now, all that you are seeing is me. The whole service for you is just the people on the stage. Church is about so much more than that. One of the things that I look forward to each week is greeting people. Seeing them, and saying God bless you. Looking people in the eye. So many have said to me their first Sunday back, "Pastor it has been so good to see you on the computer and be encouraged by you each week." You have seen me, but I have not seen you. You may have been encouraged by me, but that encouragement has not been returned.

When you read the letters on Paul you see that he always took the time to greet people when he wrote. I used to think that this was just politeness, but the older I get the more I understand that it is so much more. Greeting people and saying goodbye to people is so important. It is part of what it means to be a family. When I started at this church I had so many people say that they were glad to finally have a pastor again that greeted them. I find it inconceivable that any pastor would not do this. It is part of what it means to be a pastor.

It is also part of what it means to be a believer in Jesus Christ. It is not just my job to greet everyone, it is the job of everyone. As we gather together we say hi to one another, share words of affirmation and interest. We share our burdens with one another and often take the time right there and then to pray for one another.

When Paul wrote to say that we should greet one another with a holy kiss, what was he saying? This certainly seems unthinkable in this Covid age with masks and social distancing.

Part of the culture at that time was to kiss one another when you met. It was like a handshake, only more intimate. More like a hug today. Many of you grew up in cultures where a kiss on the cheek was the common greeting. When we lived in Kuwait this was the case. Hugging and kissing on the cheek was the norm. There was nothing inappropriate or sexual about it. It was just what you did. E.g. Naomi greeting Tracey when we first came back to Canada.

Greeting one another with a kiss is simply a physical way to show your love and appreciation for another person. We all need that. We need physical touch because we are physical beings. The happiest moments for me over the past few months has been seeing people again after many months and being able to greet them. Look them in the eye and say “God bless you, I am glad that you are here.” Then receiving their greeting in reply.

These are some of the reason I believe that people need to return. I would not be doing my job as a pastor if I did not remind you of these things. However, I would also not be doing my job as a pastor if I were not doing everything I could to protect you. One of the reasons we started the senior’s service was that recognized that there were people in the church that required extra protection.

From the beginning we have said that it is not our job to either force you or forbid you to return. This is not a rebuke, it is a challenge. So what am I saying? I am not saying that everyone needs to come back to church next week, but there are certainly some of you that should. But isn’t that risky?

I want to end today by talking about risk. A lot of people today are talking about risk assessment. When you hear what people are talking about today, so much of it is centered around fear. If there is an incident of infection it is far too often exaggerated. Words like outbreak, second wave and surge are thrown around. Words like that keep us on the edge of our seat, they only add to the culture of fear that we are living in.

The media keeps telling us that going to church is dangerous and reckless. I have seen many Facebook posts where they give the most dangerous places to go during a pandemic and church is almost always right at the top. So where is the proof of that? The media portrays going to church as people crowding together and all coughing and sharing germs with one another. We as a church have been open for 5 months now. Every Sunday we do contact tracing of everyone who comes. There are many people in Brampton that are coming down with COVID. I can tell you that they are not getting it from here. We have had zero incidents so far. Zero.

That does not mean that it might not still happen. We need to be cautious, but we cannot allow fear to control us and our decisions. There is healthy fear, and there is unhealthy fear. As believers in Jesus Christ we are called to live a life of faith, not fear. There is ungodly risk and godly risk. When a kid in shorts and a t-shirt races their motorcycle down the 410 at 160 km/h, that is an ungodly risk. However, when a fireman enters a building equipped with everything they need to combat the flames, it is a godly risk. It is a calculated and purposeful risk. Do you understand the difference?

An ungodly risk is when people get together in large numbers at a party without any distancing, eat out of the same pizza box and drink out of the same cups. A godly risk is when you come together for church taking all necessary precautions. Using the hand sanitizer, wearing a mask and practicing social distancing. It is a calculated and purposeful risk.

The protestant reformation would never have happened without Godly risk. The modern missionary movement would never have existed without Godly risk. Pioneer missionaries sailed for Africa with their belongings packed in coffins, because they knew that the odds were that they would be returning home in that coffin. When Naomi and I took 3 month old Petra to Kuwait for the first time there were people that told us that what we were doing was reckless. It was not reckless, it was godly risk. We calculated the cost and we were willing to pay the price and step out in faith.

During the Babylonian exile, there were those that returned right away, there were those who returned later, and there were those who never returned. Likewise today, there are those who have returned, there are those who will return and there are those who will never return. The longer this exile continues, the more people will move from the will return column to the will not return column.

Let me call you to respond today. If you are praying about when to come back, I just want to say to you today that the water is fine, jump on in. If you are staying home simply because it is convenient or if you see online worship as an equal option to worshipping in person, church on the sofa is not the same as church in the sanctuary. It never has been and never will be. It is time for you to return home from exile.

To those of you who have good reasons not to return yet, I pray that you will do everything you can to stay connected. Meet with your small group online. Take a class online. At the very least, can I just encourage you today to remember Zion. Maybe like Daniel you could open a window in the direction of Jerusalem and say a little prayer for us now and then?