

“Resting in the Deep Peace of God”
July 11, 2021

Jeremiah 23:23-29
Matthew 10:29-31

One quiet Sunday afternoon almost 100 years ago, the Presbyterian minister Henry McFadyen sat down and wrote: “The lone wild bird in lofty flight, is still with Thee, nor leaves Thy sight.”

A plaintive sense of isolation is met with a feeling of enduring companionship.

The loneliness each of us has known at some time—or many times—in the past year finds a response in God’s unceasing presence.

The chorus of our opening hymn, “And I am Thine, I rest in Thee,” has reverberated in my soul this past week. I hope that it will go with you into the days ahead.

Such rest is not idleness or simple relaxation—although those can be good at times as well. We enter the restoration of our lives that is deep peace in the presence of God, well aware of the turmoil that surrounds us and the turmoil within ourselves.

As I struggle to attain such a peace in these days, there are times when I sense that this peace is simply there, sought or unsought. Perhaps this is your experience as well.

All of our being rests in God.

The Psalmist writes in astonished awe: “Such knowledge is beyond my understanding, a height to which my mind cannot attain.”

We don’t usually talk about the limits of our understanding in this university community. Yet we recognize that in spite of all the wisdom and understanding that surrounds us, the knowledge of God remains a mystery. Our intelligence, however vast, does not grasp it. Our words, however eloquent, neither grasp nor express the mind of God.

We speak of “divine omniscience”—the idea that God knows everything. We speak of “divine omnipresence”—the idea that God is everywhere. While such words and concepts might sound impressive, they really don’t take us very far.

Instead of speaking of omniscience, the Psalmist writes: “God, you have searched me and known me.”

Instead of speaking of omnipresence, the Psalmist asks: “Where shall I go from your Spirit?”

Nearby.

Far off.

This is not the either/or choice that the false prophets offered—usually suggesting that God was always close at hand to save. They cried “peace” when there was no peace. They spoke of the

unfailing protection of God as the city was under siege. They encouraged the people to see only part of who God is.

In Jeremiah's time, the most popular prophet of the day was Hananiah. Hananiah spoke of good things to come. And Jeremiah responded by saying, "I sure hope that happens, but I don't think that it will."

Hananiah was popular. The people liked what he said. But there is no Book of Hananiah that we read today. Two and a half millennia later, however, we still read the words of Jeremiah.

We read his words because, while Jeremiah doesn't always say what we would like him to say, he points toward the God of both judgment and mercy, the God who is both far off and nearby.

Recall, then, the questions of God through the prophet Jeremiah:

Am I a God who is near—the Lord's word—and not a God who is far off?

Can anyone hide in some hole—the Lord's word—and I not see that person?

Am I not the one who fills both heaven and earth?—the Lord's word.

God has always been good at asking questions.

The God in whom we live and move and have our being is as close to us as our breathing, the One who is near to support and strengthen us. You have known such a God at times. Some people want to know only this God—the One who is with us, even the One who is on our side, making all go well.

But you also know the God who is as distant as the farthest star, the God who seems far off and removed from our concerns and our crises, unheeding of our cries and complaints. Again, some people want to know only this God—the One so distant as to be insignificant, so far off as to be of no consequence in this world or in our lives.

Listen to those questions. We hear of the God who fills both heaven and earth, who is all in all.

Would we think that we could flee from such a presence?

Can we hide in a hole and not be seen?

Paul Tillich said that we can try to flee to a heaven of our own making, where God would be unnecessary. We can try to flee to a hell of our own making—and usually that is much more possible, a little closer by, where we can lament God's absence and live beyond God's reach. But at sunrise or sunset, in light or darkness, we live always in God's presence.¹

This is the sometimes terrifying, sometimes comforting awareness of God that the prophet understands. We might want to hide. We might think that we can hide. But God who is all in all knows the ways we live and God's judgment and mercy are upon us all. The warmth of God can become a burning fire. The strength of God at times feels like a smashing hammer, shattering our perceptions and our comfortable ways of thinking.

Have you not been aware of a searching light in the recesses of your soul? You know what it's like, don't you, to try to keep a part of yourself hidden from others—or even from yourself—only to have the nagging sense that you have been discovered by Another. “You discern my thoughts from afar . . . and you are acquainted with all my ways.”

This is not only about those things that you would like to keep to yourself. Remember when your highest aspirations, your deepest longings developed? It was as though you were being pulled beyond yourself, drawn toward something far greater. Can we not also say that the Spirit was present with you, giving shape to your dreams.

We are known, thoroughly, by God.

Were it not for the way in which God knows us, God's awareness would be too terrible to bear.

The good news is that we need not fear—the God who searches and knows us accepts us *as we are*.

Yes, our sin is known—and accepted.

Yes, our failed dreams are known—and accepted.

So, too, those moments when we have found the ability to love or the courage to give, the great hopes and aspirations by which we live today are known and blessed by the Holy One.

To truly know another human being is to understand and forgive. In God we find that knowledge perfected. So we are set free to be ourselves—simply who we are and who we are becoming.

In these summer days when the pandemic seems both waning and waxing at the same time, when we look toward gathering together once more, when the start of a new school year with all of the challenges it will bring is not far off, we are called to discernment. We are called to think through our ways and God's ways.

The task that is given to each of us individually and all of us together—and it is not a simple one—the task is to listen to all that we hear in these days, to look closely at all that we see, to listen and look with the Psalmist's faith and the prophet's skepticism. Our task is to discern truth from falsehood, true comfort from deception, true challenge from words of fear.

For some time now it seems as if we are being told either that everything is fine or that everything is going to hell in handbasket. There are also many voices today that speak of peace and protection.

What voices will we heed? How will we live?

We will live challenged by the words of the prophet who reminds us of the judgment and the compassion of God, who calls us to justice in the world and faithfulness in our relationships with one another.

We will live in the presence of the God who is nearby and far off, the God who is our life.

We will live knowing that our lives and our actions are of deep and lasting significance to that same God whose love and mercy are without fail.

We will live finding rest in the deep peace of God.

¹ Paul Tillich, "Escape from God," *The Shaking of the Foundations*, pg. 45.