

“The Presence of God”

Proverbs 9:10; Psalm 139:7-12; Romans 8:26-28:1-8

August 24th, 2014 – Nativity United Church of Christ, Philip Siddons



There is a plaque on the wall of house that says “Bidden (or Unbidden), God is Present.” We don’t use the word “bidden” in our language but it means ‘Called upon or not, God is still here.’

The influential psychologist Carl Jung and his wife Emma liked the saying so much that in 1906, they had it carved over the front door of their home in Switzerland. Carl later saw to it that it would be etched on his gravestone.

But God being present (whether or not we ask for it) doesn’t refer to a loud-mouthed relative who crashes family gatherings as an unwanted presence. God is anything but an unwanted relative. We usually ask God for help when we are in trouble. We are hurting and we want things fixed.

Carl Young wasn’t the author of the saying but he read it back when he was 19 years old in his classic Latin studies. He found it in the writings of Erasmus,¹ the Renaissance scholar and humanist.² And Erasmus got it from the writings of the ancient Roman poet Ovid³ who cited the oracle of Delphi⁴ – literary works before the common era.

The ancient story goes that one day, the gods Zeus and Hermes⁵ went around, from house to house, disguised as ordinary peasants. They were asking the town’s people for a place to stay for the night. Everyone rudely and abruptly turned them away until they finally came to the ramshackle cottage of the elderly couple Baucis⁶ and Philemon.⁷ Although the couple was incredibly poor, they welcomed the two strangers into their house and shared (what little they had) with them. They were the only ones in their town to offer hospitably to these disguised gods Zeus and Hermes.

After serving their guests dinner, Philemon noticed that although she had refilled their wine cups many times, the wine pitcher was still full. Realizing that their guests must be gods, she and her husband begged the deities to forgive their impoverished home and surroundings.

Zeus said that he was going to destroy the town and all the people who had turned them away – not providing hospitality. But he said to the couple that they should climb up the mountain (with them) and not look back until they’ve reached the top. At the mountaintop, then, Philemon and Baucis looked down and saw that their village had been destroyed by a flood. But Zeus had turned Baucis’ and Philemon’s little cottage into an ornate temple.

The kind couple was also granted a wish. They chose to stay together forever and to be guardians of the temple. (*That was politically astute.*) They also asked that when it came time for one of them to die, the other would die as well. (*Kind of romantic.*) So upon their deaths, they were changed into an intertwining pair of trees, one oak and one linden.⁸

Recall the Genesis 19 story of Sodom and Gomorrah. After Lot and his wife entertained two strangers, who turned out to be “angels,” that city was destroyed for their inhospitality.⁹ (*Read the endnote on that.*)

Accordingly, Hebrews 13:2 says “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that, some have entertained angels without knowing it.” The possibility that unidentified strangers in need of hospitality could be gods in disguise – was ingrained in first century culture.

Then you remember the Noah’s ark flood story where the entire world was drowned by an angry Creator. (Perhaps today’s clergy might use these passages in reference to our congressional inhospitality to the Hispanic immigrant children fleeing for their lives.) It’s no wonder we are haunted, from our childhood, by the parental and mythological

stories of punitive divine wrath coming our way if we don't measure up.

But how did Carol Yung see his favorite phrase relevant to his time at the beginning of the last century? He said, about it, "It is a Delphic oracle though. It says: yes, the god will be on the spot, but in what form and to what purpose? I have put the inscription there (*on my house*) to remind my patients and myself, that: 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom.'¹⁰

So this morning, for you, where is God? And not only where is God, ... what is your God like?

Well each of us have different senses of what God is like, depending on ❶ the extent of our spiritual quest; ❷ our biblical studies and ❸ the diversity of our religious education. Our sense of God also depends on ❹ our parents' teachings and ❺ the intensity of our life experiences. Some of us, because of our parents and our judgmental and punitive early religious experiences, just have a collection of what we don't want our God to be. Most of the time, we leave it all up to the professionals, who verbally suggest what we should think for a few minutes, during religious rituals on Sunday mornings. Right?

But listening to the scriptural fragments read this morning, (or reading the many passages listed for your further study), one of the big attributes of God is omnipresence. God is everywhere.

Perhaps we should keep this in mind in light of the massive recall that is, or should be, going on in our culture. One in six. Let's do some math.

If we divide ourselves in half (perhaps down this center aisle), then divide this one half into thirds, those of you, in the 7 or 8 rows toward the front, represent one out of six of us. Now if we were talking about an automobile recall, it would be that many cars that should be recalled from our parking lot – unsafe to drive home from here. But what is defective that would warrant such a massive recall in our society?

You guessed it, of course I'm talking about the male prostate gland. One out of every six of us males will get prostate cancer. What is even more chilling is

that it's one out of six of us white males but if you're African American, it is one out of four. One fourth!

The Maker should have recalled this defective part centuries ago and a successful class-action suit has yet to be achieved. One out of six males – one out of four on African American models.

There are clearly design flaws. The main fluid-draining conduit runs right through the middle of this little walnut-shaped part but it is integral to one of the higher orders of human experience. Location, location, location.

If you get any swelling (or irritation) in this flawed part, you're stuck with the ridiculous drama of having to know the location of every public drainage facility for miles around. Clearly Google, and all of their silicon valley partners, should have resolved this problem by now. They should have an 'app' for this fix.

The same should be said of 12% of women getting breast cancer. A similar recall should happen for the brain defects in those who blithely and casually dismiss the worthiness of 47% of the rest of the world who don't measure up, (*in their judgment*), to their station in life. "Takers," as they say, as opposed to "the job creators – like us."

Didn't society move beyond the 19th century classism portrayed in the PBS series *Upstairs Downstairs*?

The prostate cancer, with which you've been diagnosed, lingers on like a giant outdoor billboard plopped down on your front yard. The giant billboard says YOU HAVE CANCER! To our dismay, the giant billboard also appears in every living space of our lives– at home, work and at leisure. CANCER no less. . . . Me, for crying out loud.

So with your new diagnosis, you are clumsily weaving in and out of all of Kubler-Ross' s stages of facing *Death and Dying*. Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance. But if we stay stuck in the denial stage, we die.

Regardless of our grasp on reality, everything, now, seems temporary. No matter how many years we've enjoyed the comfort of our personal lifestyle and all of its familiar coffee shops, sporting events,

favorite shopping malls and TV shows, ‘this world is not our home and (*like it or not*), we’re just a passin’ through.’ *Everything* changes.

So with cancer, hanging out in every corner of our lives, there’s a real sense of loss. We’re jolted into realizing that we are now in the ever-shortening last stage of our lifetimes and we sense that our lives are going to change. Our lives will never be the same as before.

So, sitting in the patient waiting room, we cling to **trust**. At the cancer care center, their white coats are, actually, not necessary. There are these five million dollar IMRT machines buzzing their merry way around our bodies like R2D2 on steroids – dispensing radiation.¹¹ So we know the people they hired to work them must be competent or they wouldn’t have allowed them to manage such a mammoth financial investment of medical machinery. They could really forget the white coats and wear T-shirts and jeans if they’d like. For that matter, they could come to work wearing superhero costumes like Batman, Spiderman, Wonder Woman or The Hulk.

As patients, we have large amounts of **hope** and that’s the holy grail of the healing process. But we know that life will not be the same from this point on. Yet our frantic but unrealistic hope for lack of change always must give way to reality. “Life is what happens when you’re making other plans.” Reality always trumps and holds all that winning cards. And with whatever cards we’ve been dealt, we optimistically call the other side of our transitions “the new normal.” We say to ourselves, “I’ll get through this! Other people have had this.”

At Cancer Care Center of WNY,¹² it’s a battle zone. You see a lot of suffering and pain. You see, on the faces around you, the fear, the pain and the depression. Sometimes the brokenness. You see folks shuffling in and you wonder how it is that they are still on their feet. In seconds, you can tell they have other medical problems that will necessitate even more extensive care in the time ahead.

The other day, in the waiting area, an elderly woman was brought in for therapy in a wheelchair (as many are). Shortly after arriving, she began to cry.

She was weeping from her unbearable pain. Whatever was the cause, (*maybe she had metastases to the bone*), the enormity of her internal pain could not silently be contained in her frail body. Fortunately, staff rushed over and helped her into an examination room for immediate pain management.

But despite all the suffering you see around you, you stay focused and resilient. Your energy and fortitude, in the midst of all that is going on with you, is remarkable. When you get your cancer diagnosis and go through all the 45 daily radiation treatments, you realize that you, and all the other patients there, are in the midst of a transition. But you also know that all of us experience transitions throughout our lives only this one is much more ominous.

All of you have already had transitions and you’ll go through more in the future. You’ll experience transitions in your relationships, in your careers and certainly in your health. You’ll even change your thinking on some of the things you once valued above all else. Some of the things you once pursued will be left behind and abandoned for other matters (that you have come to value as far more important.) As the old Simon and Garfunkel song said, “When I think back on all the crap I learned in high school, it’s a wonder I can think at all.”

And as much as we like to embrace our seemingly unchanging world, it all changes. It is constantly changing and we simply can’t control most of it.

When we think back through our transitions, we remember the difficult ones. But who were the people who helped us most during them?

They were “significant others,” right? It was a friend or relative who was particularly present with us when things got out of hand and when it was most scary. They listened to us when we made no sense – when we were crazy. They stayed with us to help us get more information. They were there for us to take in and absorb our frustration, our denial, anger, bargaining, depression and ultimately our slow and reluctant acceptance of the way things landed. They were “your person” as the Christina and Meredith characters portrayed in ABC’s *Grey’s Anatomy*.

I was a Protestant minister, on and off, for fifteen years. I loved that work and the many ways I could

participate in the learning and healing process. The teaching, the counseling, the writing and all those opportunities to be creative that were at the center of my career life for 60 to 80 hours a week. But I was burned out.

This is no news flash but like each of you, sometimes clergy would like to do a little something different in their career and their lives. Why would they be any different? I needed to get away from the seemingly endless hours of funerals, crisis counseling and the usual petty skirmishes over which color to paint the lavatories or the pitched battles and the blood-letting over whether to invest in the youth groups or the building repairs.

One year, I changed careers. I went into, advertising, technology and communications. At first, people were utterly shocked that I'd make such a change. But early on, I discovered that nothing had changed within me. I found the obvious truth that customers (*seeking marketing or technical help*) need the same focus and caring attention as those who were once my parishioners. Obviously different contexts and delivery of services but the same focused listening and human caring is needed.

So how is that relevant to this reflection on the presence of God? If you believe that God is present in your life (*even when God is the farthest thing from your mind*), how is God's presence relevant to you now (as you walk out this door and assume the transitions you know about and the coming ones that will utterly take you by surprise?

Despite all the irrelevant judgmental religiosity you may have seen through your years (from the institutional church and some people in those subcultural gatherings), **where is God present in your life now?** No matter how boringly traditional or intolerant some of the religious communities may have been through your years, doesn't it come down to how little time you and I actually have left? And quite frankly, you've had it with the trivial drama and the phony piety. You haven't got time for the pain. You want and need God to be real and present. So where will you find the reality of the presence of the living God?

I believe that you and I find the presence of God in the midst of our transitions. And we will also find God as we are present with others in their transitions. That's because it's in the very moments when you and I find ourselves off balance, taken back, . . . it's when we know that life will never, again, be the same. It is then, in those quiet moments, that we come alive to Who "our Person" is.

When we wake up with gratitude that someone has really been there for us, emotionally, intellectually, physically – what we are walking up to is the presence of God's Spirit Who has come to us in those moments. God's Spirit compassionately, patiently, knowledgeably . . . indwelled in the person right in front of our eyes.

Maybe it's someone who has been with you all these years or someone else who mysteriously has appeared on the scene – seemingly out of nowhere – they were there – right when you need them. Maybe God has been showing up in your life in the presence of a caring medical professional or even another patient as you wait your turn for your cancer treatment.

Think back through your transitions. You remember, those who were there when you needed them – perhaps when you hadn't even asked for it. It was God making an appearance when you were in that transition. Bidden or unbidden.

That's why you have the faith you do. You have found God to be a loving Presence in your life and you know you're not making this up.

We take comfort in the Romans 8 passage promising that God is always near us. That God is so in-tune with us that when we are devastated and can't find the words to express it, God's Spirit utters our anguishing groans for us. At times, we have felt abandoned and lonely but God has always been present and will never leave our side. God is "Immanuel" – God with us.

God's love is unconditional. God never takes eyes off us. God isn't any more present with us in one moment than another. God is always by our side ●when we quietly pray ●when we're cussing out the driver who cut us off and ●when we've just received the life-changing news that our life can't go back to

the way it used to be. Bidden or unbidden, God is present. So deal with it, Jung is saying.

So try, in the next few months of your life, to get an elevator speech on ‘Who God Is’ to you. Go to a class here or somewhere else. Read the descriptions of God and see if they make sense to you:

- Omniscient (*all knowing*).
- Omnipresent (*is everywhere*).
- Omnipotent (*can do anything*).

Read and study the gospels – there is much we understand about God from Jesus’ teachings.¹³

With all of our years of taking in these Biblical and life stories, in What and Who we understand God to be, it all seems to come down to this (at least for me).¹⁴

“God is a Spirit Who is infinite, eternal and unchangeable in being, wisdom, power, holiness, goodness, justice and truth.”¹⁵

Try that 17th century sentence for your elevator speech on ‘Who God Is’ – or make up one of your own. And you know, every religious leader who has spoken in this space, so far, believes that statement. The Muslim, the Hindu Sikh,¹⁶ the Jewish Rabbi and the host of UCC clergy who have spoken here. But what do you believe?

Despite our usual mediocre mindfulness of what a big deal God is, . . . despite our personal lack of perception of the reality of the presence of God, . . . God is here – really!

Maybe that’s why Bob Dylan said of our culture:
*We “make everything from toy guns that spark
To flesh-colored Christs that glow in the dark
It’s easy to see without looking too far
That not much is really sacred”¹⁷*

The Presence of God. So where is God now for you, whether or not you’ve called upon God? And Who is God in your life? What is sacred in your life?

Here is the difference that cultivating and deepening your mindfulness of the Presence of God will make in your life. You will transform your life from waiting for the other shoe to drop to becoming the author of the novel of your life.

Instead of living your life, waiting for something outside of you to change and motivate you to change –

put on your existing shoes and walk directly to your next transition. Create your own next transition – make your own changes for your life. Move into the challenges that you can create. Because if you compassionately respond to the transitions right in front of you (and those going on in the lives of those around you) – there you will experience the living presence of God. And you can’t have a more exciting and fulfilling life than that. ■



Further Biblical References Worth Reading

1 Corinthians 3:16

1 Kings 8:27

2 Chronicles 2:6

2 Chronicles 6:18

Amos 9:2-3

Deuteronomy 31:8

Ephesians 2:22

Genesis 28:15

Isaiah 6:3

Isaiah 40:12

Isaiah 57:15

Jeremiah 23:23-23

Joshua 1:9

Matthew 28:20

Proverbs 9:10

Proverbs 15:3

Psalms 145:18

Psalms 16:8

Psalms 33:13-22

Psalms 139:7-12

Psalms 41:1

Psalms 34:18

Psalms 139:7-24

Revelation 21

Romans 8:26-28

End Notes■

¹ 1466 – 12 July 1536. Erasmus was a classical scholar who wrote in a pure [Latin](#) style.

² *Collectaneas adagiorum*, a compilation of analects from classical authors published in 1563.

³ *Publius Ovidius Naso* (20 March 43 BC – AD 17/18), known as Ovid.

⁴ Ovid 20 March 43 BC – AD 17/18), known as Ovid 1] in the English-speaking world, was a Roman poet best k1st Reading for Kids: Proverbs 9:10
The fear (or reverencing) of the LORD (God) is where wisdom begins, and knowing holiness demonstrates understanding. (International Standard Version) Ovid was kown for his work *Metamorphoses*.

⁵ Jupiter and Mercury, the Roman names for these Greek gods

⁶ Meaning “tender”

⁷ Meaning “loving disposition”

⁸ Baucis and Philemon do not appear elsewhere in Greek myths but the sacred nature of hospitality was widespread in the ancient world.

⁹ As an aside, our culture has horribly botched the biblical context of that story about Sodom. The people were burned up in judgment because they were going to gang rape the two angelic guests – but it was customary, in that ancient culture. They did this whenever they conquered another army. After winning a battle, they raped them, treated them like objects (*like women in that ancient their culture*) as they marched them along in chains in what they called a “triumph parade.” It wasn’t their sexual orientation – just their tradition of torture and violence. So the word “sodomy” today is a total misreading of the Genesis story and the ancient Greek historical context.

And we should never forget that Lot, himself, should go down in history as the most heinous coward as he offered the mob his daughters, just to get them to stop knocking at his door.

¹⁰ Proverbs 9:10



This is the carved wooden that Emma and Carl Young actually had above the doorway of their home. Obviously they had a lot of patients and friends who could read Latin.

¹¹ Intensity modulated radiation therapy (IMRT) is a state-of-the-art radiation delivery system that is used to treat difficult-to-reach tumors. Western New York Cancer Care Center has 3 of these 5 million dollar machines at their Harlem Road clinic alone.

¹² Or any cancer treatment center, for that matter. But Cancer Care of Western New York is located at 3085 Harlem Rd #200, Cheektowaga, NY 14225 (716) 844-5500

¹³ God cares for us like a shepherd for a lost and vulnerable sheep. Like an outcast minority who despite being hated, he extends himself to a crime victim thrown into the gutter. God is certainly like Jesus who spoke the truth to the powerfully corrupt and even after torture, uttered only compassion for the violent haters who were killing Him.

¹⁴ from the shorter Catechisms

¹⁵ This is from the **Westminster Shorter Catechism** is a [catechism](#) written in 1646 and 1647 by the [Westminster Assembly](#), a [synod](#) of English and Scottish theologians and laymen intended to bring the [Church of England](#) into greater conformity with the [Church of Scotland](#). The assembly also produced the [Westminster Confession of Faith](#) and the [Westminster Larger Catechism](#). A version without Scripture citations was completed on 25 November 1647 and presented to the [Long Parliament](#), and Scripture citations were added on 14 April 1648.

¹⁶ Sikhism is a **monotheistic religion**, and the basic Sikh belief is represented in the phrase Ik Onkar meaning "One God." 2. History: Sikhism was founded in the Punjab region in India in the 15th century by **Guru Nanak Dev**. Sikhism broke from **Hinduism** due, in part, to its rejection of the caste system.

¹⁷ From Dylan’s 1965 “It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)” song from his *Bringing It All Back Home* album, The full quote of the stanza is: “Disillusioned words like bullets bark, As human gods aim for their mark, Make everything from toy guns that spark, To flesh-colored Christs that glow in the dark, It’s easy to see without looking too far, That not much is really sacred.”



Psalm 46:10

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