



Sermon Preached by Greg Jones
"The Pervasive Presence of God"
February 21, 2010
Psalm 139:1-18

On a visit to New York City, Camilla and I went to the planetarium at the Museum of Natural History. Friends told us that it featured an outstanding show that was a "must see." Using the latest photographs from space probes and high-powered telescopes, the show provided a glimpse of the known universe. It began with our planet and then moved out to the moon, then Mars, Venus and eventually our entire solar system. It gave us a feeling for the tremendous distances between our sun and its nine planets.

For instance, the sun is over ninety million miles from earth, and our planet is relatively close. From the sun to Saturn is nearly 900 million miles. Then, once you get an inkling of the enormous size of our solar system, the show takes a step back and demonstrates that our solar system comprises only a small portion of the Milky Way galaxy. Distances in our galaxy are computed in terms of thousands of light years, distances far too enormous to comprehend. But, then the presentation shows that the Milky Way galaxy is only one galaxy in a region of neighboring galaxies. The show finally concludes by informing us that this grouping of galaxies takes up only a fraction of the known universe.

The exhibition is mind-boggling, and if you're feeling small and insignificant, this is not the show to see. But if you have an obnoxious brother-in-law who thinks he's the center of the universe, buy him a ticket!

Although this extravaganza can make you feel smaller than a grain of dust on Mount Everest, it is also awe-inspiring. I felt compelled to pray. My prayer was one of awe and wonder at the Creator of this breath-taking universe. I confess that my prayer was devoid of any rich prose or beautiful poetry. In fact, I had difficulty getting out any words beyond: "Wow!" This new and very striking picture of the universe has stayed with me, and not only has it prompted an occasional prayer of "Wow, God, what a creation!" it has also pushed me to contemplate the very act of prayer itself. What does it mean to say that I can communicate with the Creator of a universe so enormous that I cannot comprehend it? And even when I ignore the possibility that there could be living creatures on other planets in distant galaxies, does it make sense that I, one of more than six billion people on *this* planet, can expect to communicate with the creative force of the cosmos?

Although people in the ancient world did not know what we know about the universe, the author of the 139th Psalm gleaned from God a keen insight: God's creation is more than anyone can comprehend, and thus God's nature is greater than anyone can grasp. When he ponders God's

nature, he is wonderstruck. It dawns on him that **God is far beyond his comprehension**. And the more he tries to put into words God's nature, the more he realizes that his words represent the fullness of God's nature, about as well as a few drops of water represent an ocean.

Even in the three-story universe of the ancient world, in which people viewed the cosmos as heaven up in the sky just beyond the clouds, the earth in the middle and hell down below the earth, the psalmist recognized that no human being could grasp God's essence anymore than a new born baby could understand all of the knowledge on every website on the Internet.

The psalmist begins his prayer by declaring that **God's knowledge of us is all-encompassing**. God knows every single move we make. The psalmist says that God "knows when I sit down and when I rise up;" (verse 2) and God is "acquainted with all my ways." *The Message* translation of the Bible says, "I'm an open book to you, God."

However, after stating that God knows every move we make, it dawns on the psalmist that God even knows each thought that stirs in our minds. He says "God, you discern my thoughts...Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely." (verse 2)

The psalmist then anticipates what might be a vexing problem for some. In the ancient world, people imagined God sitting on a throne up in heaven and occasionally appearing on earth. God appeared as an angel to Abraham, as a fiery bush to Moses, in sheer silence to Elijah. But the psalmist shatters such thinking. Neither is God beyond the sky sitting on a throne, nor present on earth only occasionally. The psalmist boldly proclaims that **God is everywhere**. God is present in every corner of the cosmos. Again, *The Message* translation puts it well: The psalmist asks rhetorically, "Is there anyplace I can go to avoid your Spirit? to be out of your sight? If I climb to the sky, you're there! If I go underground, you're there! If I flew on morning's wings to the far western horizon, you'd find me in a minute—you're already there waiting!" And for us, today, even in a universe incomprehensible in size, there is no place where God is absent.

The psalmist seems to linger with this thought and then expands it. If God is everywhere, then **God is with every part of our being in every moment of our existence**. He says, "For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb." The psalmist realizes that God was even present within his mother's womb and involved in his creation. He's saying that not only is God with me wherever I go, like a constant companion who is always at my side, but God is actively involved in every minute change in my body, mind and soul.

The psalmist is declaring not only does God *exist* everywhere, but **God is personal**. God is intimately involved in my very creation. For the most part, before the coming of Christ, God was understood to be such an awesome power that people lived in fear. A few of the prophets pictured God as loving, but Jesus painted the most extensive portrait of God as a tender-hearted parent with a deep concern for each of us. However, even here in this psalm, we get a glimpse of God as personal and profoundly concerned about each of us.

Knowing what we know about the incomprehensible size of God's creation and believing that God is present everywhere in it at every moment and that God is personal and loves each of the six billion people on earth, what is your mental image of God?

When I was young, it was the elderly man with the white beard that Michelangelo painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. At some point in my youth that image ceased to work.

How do you picture God? As a king? As a shepherd? As a rock? Thank goodness the Bible gives us numerous images and does not settle on one, because whenever we finite creatures attempt to imagine the Creator of an incomprehensible creation, we will come up short. The best we can do is draw upon metaphors. And it is critical that we always remember that they are metaphors because in the same way that the size of the universe is well beyond comprehension, God is always much

more than our brains can grasp.

But we need something, so we use analogies. We say God is like a king or a righteous judge or a good shepherd. In the ancient world, in which the king was the most powerful force in a person's life, it's easy to see why they spoke of God as a king. In the same way that the king was the sovereign ruler of the land, God was pictured as the sovereign ruler of the universe. And so the Scriptures portray God sitting on a throne ruling from on high. The question for people who live in the 21st century is: Does that metaphor still make sense to us today? Does it help us when we pray?

A good number of people tell me that they have trouble praying. Often they say they cannot get much beyond simple prayers they learned in childhood. And sometimes when we dig a little deeper, we discover that their image of God simply does not fit with their image of the universe. An old man in the sky, even a very, very large one, seems limited in a universe whose distances can only be measured in light years.

I suspect that I am not the only person in this sanctuary who finds it problematic to imagine God as a stern-faced older man sitting on a throne issuing commands to his subjects. In the same manner, a righteous judge leaning over the bench handing down rulings or a kind shepherd leading a lamb back to its flock. With the contemporary picture of the universe that is in my mind, those metaphors simply do not work. They limit my understanding of God rather than expanding it.

Now, I would love to be able to say that I have landed on the perfect metaphor, but I cannot. And while I find that somewhat frustrating, I also know that it is the only way it can be. If God is much greater than any person can comprehend, then every metaphor will fall short. And that's why I think we should follow the Bible's lead and use multiple images for God.

For me, one of the most helpful metaphors for God is the wind. The Scriptures often speak of the Spirit of God, and the Hebrew word "ruach" means both spirit and wind. The second verse of the Bible says that "When God began to create the heavens and the earth...the spirit of God" or "the *wind* of God swept over the face of the waters."

Wind is a helpful metaphor because it is not tied to one place like a physical being. When we imagine a king, a judge or a shepherd, we imagine a being that can be in one place at a time, but the wind can be everywhere. The wind swirls around us, touching everything in its path. Like God, we cannot see the wind, but we can see and feel the effects of it. When we are in harmony with God, God is like a tailwind pushing us down the path. And when we are in opposition to God, God is like a fierce headwind that we are fighting against.

The notion that God is something like a wind that blows throughout the cosmos is far from ideal, but it does provide a way of imagining God as surrounding us at all times and existing throughout the cosmos like a pervasive presence. In addition, it encourages a dynamic understanding of God rather than a static one. It pushes me to consider God's ongoing activity in my life today, rather than a wooden portrait that seems frozen in the past.

I'm still struggling with this, but I have found that it helps to use multiple images. Sometimes when I pray, I imagine a bright light. It's warm, but like the wind, it's still impersonal. So sometimes I picture loving arms on my shoulders.

When I pray for others, I picture the people for whom I'm praying. And if the person needs healing or comfort, I picture God as a warm glow surrounding them.

During the weeks of Lent, I encourage you to experiment with a variety of different metaphors that will expand and enrich your image of God. Experiment with lively images that not only comfort you, but also challenge you to broaden your understanding and help you to see God from new angles.

The writer of today's Psalm provides us with helpful guidelines. He reminds us that God is

always more than we can imagine, thus every metaphor is partial and limited. The psalmist reminds us that God is everywhere, and therefore God is always with us and will never abandon us. He reminds us that God is personal. Thus, God does not simply love all of us in general, but each one of us as the unique person we are. And finally, God's knowledge of each of us is all-encompassing, and therefore, our loving Creator can help us better understand ourselves and the life we should lead.

During this Lent, I'm issuing a prayer challenge: Experiment with fresh and provocative images of God, you may find that it injects you with a spiritual spurt of growth.

NOTES

1. Marjorie Suchocki, *In God=s Presence*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1996), p.5.