

## “Of Turtles and Divine Presence”

Psalm 139:7-10

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As I mentioned last Sunday, I have a turtle collection. My interest in and admiration for Loggerhead Turtles led me to an interesting discovery some years ago. I found that the University of Arizona, among other research centers, tracks the movements of some Loggerhead Turtles by satellite. These researchers locate the Loggerheads in the wilderness waters of the Pacific Ocean to the west of the coast of Baja, California. They attach satellite-tracking devices to the shells of the Loggerheads. That way they know where they are. You can actually look up the maps with the coordinates of the latest positions of the Loggerheads on a sea turtle tracking webpage. It's quite incredible! In an unusual way, through the wonders of high technology, the Loggerheads' trackers are present with them in the deep waters of the Pacific Ocean.

So where is all this turtle talk leading this morning? I told you last week this is my so-called “turtle theology!” It is leading us into Psalm 139 where the psalmist asks a question and draws his own amazing conclusion. Here's the psalmist's question, or more accurately, two questions: *Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?*

The psalmist is addressing God and reflecting on God's knowledge and discernment of him. *Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?* Out of a heart and mind learning to trust God, the psalmist provides his own answers: *If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. At night and in the morning ... when it's dark and when it's light ... God is present with me. This is the psalmist's assurance. In a more direct way than any satellite tracking can ever achieve, the psalmist affirms that God monitors our going out and our coming in, our lying down and our rising up. God is intimately*

concerned with each one of us. God knows us and God is with us wherever we are. God is omnipresent, God is all-present.

This is no remote, distant, inconsistent God who intervenes now and then in our lives. This is the God who, in the words of Jesus Christ, said: “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of time.” This is the God who abides with us. Can we get away from God’s Spirit? Can we flee from God’s presence? No. God is all-knowing and all-present. Before we come to Communion I want you to think about God’s presence as *a pursuing presence, a protecting presence, and a providing presence.*

*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?* These are the psalmists’ questions. The answer to both is nowhere because God’s presence pursues us throughout our lives. This idea has been admirably expressed in Francis Thompson’s poem, *The Hound of Heaven*:

*I fled Him (that is, God), down the nights and down the days;  
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;  
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways  
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears  
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.*

Turn where we may, we find no rest or peace till at last we confess that evasion of God’s presence is impossible, that in nothing but surrender to God is fullness of life to be found. “Our hearts are restless,” said Saint Augustine, “until they find their rest in Thee.” God, in absolute holiness and love, pursues us. God claims us and God claims all we have – claims and holds us and will not let us go. Then, oh, how fearful we can become! A fear rises up within us – an irrational, speechless fear – and our one impulse is somehow, somewhere, to escape and hide ourselves.

Yet – *Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?* We know the answer: there is no place to hide. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, there are times when we all try to hide from God because we have done what is offensive in God’s sight. God calls out, “Adam, Eve, Ivan, my daughter, my son, my child, where are you?” Perhaps that is the most profound question we can be asked.

*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?* Intuitively, we know the answer to these questions ... questions that symbolize the deepest struggle our hearts are capable of. Intuitively, we also know what the moment of response is like ... *O Love, that wilt not let me go; I rest my weary soul in Thee.* God finds us ... we surrender ... and there is peace. God's presence is a pursuing presence.

God's presence is also a **protecting presence**. Those who have allowed themselves to be found by the pursuing God, who have responded to the claims of the living God, who have come out of hiding into the full light of God's love and acceptance revealed in Jesus Christ, are assured of God's protection against evil and ultimate destruction. Not that God's people are immune from evil ... not a bit of it ... there are occasions when we all have brushes with the dark, sinister forces of evil ... but in the final analysis God has shown through Christ that God has the last word over evil. Love has triumphed over hate, right over wrong, justice over injustice, peace over war, life over death.

In the meantime, evil is a reality which God's people need to reckon with and be protected from. There are sinister forces and spirits abroad. It would be naïve to think otherwise. God is our Friend, our Lord, our Savior, but there is a foe that seeks to undo us. Whether or not we choose to personify evil and give it a name, we recognize its reality. Without the saving power of God made known to us in Jesus Christ we are helpless in the face of evil. It is God's work through Christ that protects us from evil. This is affirmed on our behalf when we are baptized; it is re-affirmed when as adults we publicly profess faith in Christ and join the church.

The words of Jesus on the cross, "It is finished!" dealt the deathblow not only to sin and to death, but also to evil. Sin and death and evil will ultimately be over. The resurrection assures us, as Christ's followers, that we are not only pursued by Christ's presence to the end of our days, but also protected from evil by Christ's presence beyond this life into the next where a table is prepared for us in the presence of our enemies ... where a victory banquet will be held. But there is more ...

God's presence is **a providing presence**. *Where shall I go from your Spirit?*

Anticipating what Jesus would say about sending the Holy Spirit to be with us forever, the psalmist affirms that God had already provided the Spirit as a pervasive presence in his life.

No one is so tender as the Holy Spirit – so tender or so patient. One side of the Spirit's provision for us is comfort. We all need comfort at times. There are times when I cry out ... when you cry out ... for the provision of God's help and healing ... when we look for someone to convey the comforting presence of God's Spirit to meet our own needs.

But the promise of Jesus to send the Holy Spirit as a providing presence has another side to it. There may be a tender side to the Holy Spirit, but there is also a tough side. God's Spirit comes not only to comfort, but also to rally us, to bring us to our feet again, to revive us, to reinvigorate our faith, to put a new heart and courage in us when we are dispirited. God will not pamper and mollycoddle us. The Spirit whom God sent to us is a strong Spirit, who rouses us from spiritual sleep and helps us to face the realities of life unafraid.

The turtles being tracked by satellite technology do not know that there is a presence with them ... that there are those who pursue them, protect them, and wish to provide for them ... those who care about their well-being both now and in the future. But you and I know of a Presence in our lives ... a divine presence: God who is all-knowing and all-present, and all-loving ... God who cares for us – for our well-being – physical, spiritual, and emotional ... God whose presence pursues, protects, and provides for us.

My friends, we know both intuitively and intellectually that God is present ... that God is with us. And what is the appropriate response to this divine presence in our lives? We'll let the psalmist have the last word and lead us in our response: *Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.* What better prayer is there than the psalmist's prayer as we come to the Table of the Lord where we encounter the real presence of Jesus, and then as we rise from here to go forth in the power of God's pursuing, protecting, providing presence to live and work to God's praise and glory?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.