“God’s Everywhere-ness”

a sermon by

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

Scripture: 2 Samuel 7:1-14a; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34; 53-56

As many of you know, my family and I recently visited my husband’s parents, who live in Harper’s Ferry, WV. Harper’s Ferry is poised at the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers. I had the privilege of a run along the Potomac on a particularly humid, hazy early morning, and stopped at this point of confluence. The closer I got, the louder the sound of the rushing water, the more eddys and rocky rapids, and the more PURE JOY I felt. God was there, surrounding me, filling my ears, in the wetness of the humidity on my skin, in the smell of the wet summer dirt, in the tiny pops of color that emerged on the trail in tiny wildflowers—God was physically embracing me. God’s boundlessness was so clear.

In the presence of God’s immensity, I found myself calmed…All the attention I had been giving to problem solving various issues, small and large, was drawn instead to God. Any anxiety I had was dissolved into wonder, into the delight of a child who sees something massively cool for the first time. My body, my life became part of the breathtaking opera that was God in that place, at that moment.

As I stood there, I thought about David’s request to build God a temple, in our reading from second Samuel today. I smiled, even chuckled a bit. I imagined my Sunday school image of God in his long white robes with his hands out and his “are you kidding me?” face on—

*“Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?"*

In the undeniable presence of God’s boundlessness, David’s request seemed utterly ridiculous to me. How could God be contained within a temple, constrained to be in the same place all the time, so everyone knows exactly where, and is even prescribed how, to access God? And yet, the desire to try to physically possess God has been the Church’s response, and even my own, many times. For, if we confine God to a space at least, if not an entity, we can comprehend…we can then control access to God.

Indeed, this passage signifies the point in the Hebrew Scriptures when the move is made from everyone having access to God in their nomadic, fairly egalitarian societal structure, to God being part of a hierarchical religious institution. Not too far in the scriptures from now, Solomon, David’s son, will build a “house” for God—the Temple, which will be part of the establishment of the State. Access to God will be tightly controlled, and will be restricted to only those at the “top.”

This transition reverberates in our own Church even today, millennia later. How often are we, and *the* Church, trying to possess God, rather than giving ourselves over to being possessed *by* God?

The Episcopal Church as a whole has begun to critique itself for the ways in which it has tried to possess God—to confine God to a group of individuals, to a way of worship, to a space.

At General Convention, the triennial gathering of the governing body of the national Church, much discussion was had encouraging the church to return to the rushing water, and remind itself of the boundless of God. A resolution to approve Same sex marriage passed, acknowledging the sacramental presence of God in every marriage; money was allocated for church planting—providing resources for “non-traditional” church communities forming all over, in Laundromats, outside among communities of individuals without housing, in homes, at bars; a recommitment was made to anti-racism work. Each of these acknowledges the everywhereness of God.

We, too, are called by our readings today to critique the ways in which we as a community, and we as individuals, may consciously or unconsciously attempt to confine God.

It is easy to get so caught up in the functioning of the church—programming, building maintenance, even our liturgies and music—that we come to forget that all of that exists not as an end in itself—but so that we might go out into the world with eyes that can better see where God is, and join God. Church, itself, can become our whole focus, the only place we look for God. But church, at its *most* divine, is an experience of God that instills in us an undeniable yearning to follow God into the world…to seek God in every place and experience.

None of this is to say that we should not have programming, or a beautiful church building, or moving liturgies and expressive music. We need all of that to slowly, over time, transform our eyes and hearts to be organs that can, indeed, see God at work EVERYWHERE. I say this only to remind ourselves of the EVERYWHERENESS of God--Just as God reminded David, and the writer of our Epistle reminded the Ephesians (remember, God is available to the Gentiles just as to the Jews), and as Christ modeled for us in our Gospel passage (healing crowds upon crowds all over the region of Gennesaret, despite desperately needing rest). God is boundless, preferring always to travel among God’s people.

You all in this place, have allowed yourselves to be possessed by God. Your joining with God among the people of Haiti in varied ways from medical missions to providing seeds which will feed children from their school gardens is an example—your feeding ministry with the unhoused community of the Plaza Hotel is another—your hammering and nailing alongside the people of Appalachia yet another—your careful, loving creation of the healing garden for Lisa Hafer, still yet another. The passion of the Spirit has overtaken each of you who has been closely involved in these experiences of joining God at work in the world.

And many of us have allowed ourselves to be possessed by God in our non-church lives—the passion of the Spirit has overtaken us as we delight in our friends, spouses, or children…Or even, for many among us, as we go about the work of our careers.

And, there are still some of us I suspect, who may not yet have been possessed by God. Or, even if possessed at times by God, spend a good deal of time trying to possess God—to pin God down to a place, a person, something that can be understood, even managed. I fall into this all the time.

And, Our community, as a whole, likely still falls into this. There are likely things we are very tied to because we have always done them, even though they may not be filling us in the way they used to. Or, because we think that is what a “good” church does.

And, we *more than* likely, spend a little too much time in our comfort zone, instead of setting something comfortable aside so we have space in our lives, both individually and as a parish, to explore the unfamiliar.

What can we let go of, so that we might allow our attention to be drawn to the sound of the rushing water, and the train zooming past?

God is moving about among God’s creation…behind us, beside us, ahead of us wherever we go. May we, as we worship and study and question and celebrate, together, be possessed by God with an overwhelming urge to join in. AMEN.