

God is Present
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
Bob Stillerman
4-23-2017
Psalm 139:1-14

I didn't know the psalmist. As a matter of fact, I don't know his or her name, or where he or she lived, or even when he or she lived. All I know is that at some point in history, this person (or persons) began to write. And somehow, thousands of years later, we still have their thoughts.

So...I'm going to make up a story. Imagine two psalmists sitting on a wall in Jerusalem. They are poets really, people who spend their days thinking of how God works in the world. And each day they seek to express God in creative prose.

One psalmist says to the other: "You want to understand the bigness of God? I dare you to think of a place or a time, or even a person, with whom God is not present. Find one example, just one, and dinner is on me!"

"You are on!" says the other psalmist.

The psalmist closes her eyes. She takes a few deep breaths to center her thoughts. She relaxes her shoulders, and her toes, and even her fingertips. She grabs a notepad, and begins to make a list.

Well for starters, God is in this moment. And God is in me.

And come to think of it, God seems real familiar with me! God knows my thoughts. And my intricacies. And all my movements. And even which route I am taking home from church today. It's like God can complete my sentences. But it's more than that – it's like God envelops me in this warm blanket; it's like God steers me to places I need to go; it's like God's got first-hand knowledge of who I am, and where I am, and what I am, and even more, what I can be, and what the world can be. And WOW, God is SO present! And that presence makes me happy. It's a knowledge that is too wonderful for me!

Okay, but maybe I am giving God too much credit. After all, Google knows my every thought, too – like how do they know I am searching for a Walgreen's in Charlotte, or when *House of Cards* premieres on Netflix, or when Aldi is gonna have some more of that 75-cent baby food?!? And to be fair, my partner, or my mother, or my best friend could probably finish most of my thoughts as well. So God knows me, but I mean, come on, I leave a pretty discernible trail of fingerprints. Maybe, I'm just not very complicated. Yeah, take that God! Maybe I'll get a free dinner after all!

But the psalmist is thorough. Next, she changes course. She wonders, "Where can I go from your spirit, or where can I flee from your presence?"

She tries to imagine darkness. She tries to imagine emptiness. She tries to imagine God's absence. She sleeps in Sheol, but still God's echo reaches her; she imagines she's a bird and she flies to the farthest limits of the sea, but still she feels God's breath; she closes her eyes, even puts her hands over them, but still God's bright light shines through. And she comes to a simple conclusion: It was you who formed my inward parts; you who knit me together in my mother's womb. And I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made, and wonderful are your works that I know very well.

The psalmist wants to win her free dinner, but she knows it's a fruitless pursuit. God is present. And when you've experienced God's presence, you begin to understand that there's no way to un-imagine, or un-hear, or undo such presence. It's just that big. And that full. And that wonderful. And it's so much better than a free dinner!

Friends, this morning, we have the privilege of dedicating Amaya Rose Byrd to God. And here's what I think that means. I think it means that we have promised to help her feel the inescapable presence of God. If we are doing Sardis Baptist Church right, it means we are witnesses to the presence of a good God in a good world – a good world, where little girls are empowered to grow into strong women, emboldened and encouraged to share the good gifts that God has given them.

Young Amaya has quite a journey ahead of her – somersaults and skinned knees; Kindergarten and Camp Caswell; awkward teenage years; adult responsibilities; new places and faces; relationships and jobs – some fulfilling, some not so much; thoughts to think, and songs to sing; a life to be lived with all its triumphs and heartaches. And whether her life takes her through the halls of Sardis or the straights of Saskatchewan or the even to the rings of Saturn, one thing will be constant: God will be present. And God will love her. And God will protect her. And God will write a remarkable story.

As the pages of Amaya's story unfold, each of us has the chance to bear witness to God's presence in her life. For just like you and me, Amaya is fearfully and wonderfully made! And if we keep our covenant, Amaya will know this truth. And in knowing such a truth, she'll learn another: Wonderful are all of God's works!!!

Today, Amaya has been told of her value, and of God's works. Tomorrow, and the next day, and the next, begin the task of helping her to know this truth, and to know it very well.

May God give us the strength and the love and the grace to make it so! Amen.