

AUGUST 10, 2014  
1 Kings 19:9-15  
Being Home  
Rev. Adrienne Carr

I yearn for the screen saver on my old computer. It was of an island floating in a warm ocean. If I listened hard, I could almost hear the strains of the song “Bali Hai” wafting through the air. Now, on my new computer I have a gigantic wave that looks like it is about to engulf me. Very restful, that, but indicative of the way I sometimes feel.

Even with that wave, courtesy of Steve Jobs, I love the ocean. It has always been a source of wonder and refreshment to me. And because I returned yesterday from a week at the beach with my children and grandchildren, I am still in that state of wonder.

I have always connected the ocean to those beautiful words from Psalm 139:

“If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
<sup>10</sup> even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

The Psalm, despite its poetic imagery, is challenging to many folks because while some find comfort in its depiction of an ever present God, others find the description of God to be uncomfortably close. Some read into the words of the psalm, an outlook that perhaps the author did not intend. The ancient poet theologian appears to share a theology with John Calvin that, thankfully has been shunted aside. I refer of course to predestination. The psalmist puts into words the understanding that God controls the destiny of all life. There is no place in this outlook for independent decision or for transformation or for free will. No wonder the psalmist wants to run and hide somewhere far from the eyes of God. Yet when the psalmist finds the secret place, God is already there.

The psalmist also shares an outlook with the Roman Catholic theology of my childhood. God knows everything that I think and do and keeps count. If I lie or steal or cheat, God knows and carefully records my 8 year old sins. Scared to distraction, I go to confession and leave with my sins forgiven. So whenever the urge to do something wrong occurs like hit my obnoxious sister, a part of me reminds the other part of me that God is watching, divine pencil in hand. I choose not to deck her but my record is still checked off because even though I didn’t do it, I thought about it. I just couldn’t win and it was back to confession again. If I could speak to the psalmist, I would probably tell him to stop whining. At least he didn’t have to go to confession.

Therefore, I have consciously chosen to relate to the psalm as a source of comfort and delight. Our creating and sustaining God is infinitely caring and intimately aware of each of us. I discover what I would define as mystical elements embedded in the words, as I read the beautiful description the author creates about God being with us even in the womb.

For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.  
My frame was not hidden from you,  
when I was being made in secret,  
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.  
<sup>16</sup> Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.

And, this, indeed, could almost be a story of parent and child. When you were a child, did you ever go shopping in a department store with your mother? And, like me, did you get bored waiting as she went through the racks. Then, something caught your eye and you went across the aisle to investigate. When you turned back, she wasn't there. Boredom was forgotten. Panic had set in. You just wanted her to find you in that alien world where monsters dwelled under those racks. As you began to cry, suddenly she was there taking you into her arms and everything was all right. Such fear, such joyful relief, all taking place within the space of a few minutes that to both mother and child seemed an eternity.

One of the ways that we adults communicate with infants is through playing peek a boo. When the parent puts hands over face, the child is alarmed. That source of comfort and nourishment has gone. We play the game in part because when we reveal our presence, the smile on that baby's face lights up the room. Thus does the baby learn that Mom and Dad may not always be visible but their love and care are constant.

And, is there something in this psalm of the God who created whales and dolphins for the pure pleasure of enjoying their antics? At the farthest limits of the sea, does God say with a voice filled with love and laughter, "Peek-a-boo. I see you." Thus do I read whimsy into the words of the author. Thus does my own theology accommodate that same whimsy into my understanding of God.

James Taylor is a Canadian theologian and poet who has paraphrased the psalms into thoughtful contemporary language. He has written two versions of psalm 139. One of those versions unites contemporary science with the miracle that is each human life.

He writes:

No wonder you know me so well, God.  
Before my mother knew I existed,  
You wrote the genetic code of my cells.  
You created my life.  
Wombs and worlds are one to you;  
You are the essence of all life,  
As once you shaped the cells  
That formed my fingernails and my hair,  
So still you guide me through each day.  
Even if I am only a fleeting thought  
Flickering through your mind,  
I am in good company.  
All of creation owes its existence to you, God.  
I can no more imagine your thoughts  
Than I can recall every detail of my dreams.  
But you are not a dream,  
For when I wake, you are still with me.<sup>1</sup>

The Psalm and the paraphrase pose a question for me. Just how close to my existence is God? There are two major theological descriptions of God's relationship to the created order. You may have heard God described as Transcendent. This is descriptive of God the creator or the first cause who is distant and remote from the created order. This theology has been

---

<sup>1</sup> James Taylor, *Everyday Psalms*, p. 171

described as the work of a clockmaker who creates a clock that never needs winding. The clock begins to tick and the watchmaker goes off to other work. He will occasionally take a look at his invention but his work is done.

The second description is that of Immanence. This theology describes God as intimately involved in every aspect of creation including humanity. The psalm as Taylor interprets, expresses God's immanence not only within the human community but toward all the created order. There is wonder in his words as he reflects on the interconnectedness of all creation, including humankind.

I celebrate the idea of the Immanent God, totally present in my life. When I was young, as I described, God seemed to be distant and forbidding. It took me years of study and reflection to recognize the reality of God in my life and to discover that God is a patient presence, allowing God's human family to grow into awareness of the divine no matter how unclear that awareness is. I am still learning how to be loved.

But I am not at all sure that my personal definition of God is fully immanent. I think that like the psalmist, I want a little breathing space to continue to discover who I am and what I want to be when I grow up. But these big words, immanence and transcendence do not define the living God who cannot be controlled by human definitions.. They are simply theological constructs used by scholars to grasp some part of the profound immensity of God.

And what those theologians do not say is that it is the joy and responsibility of each of us to find our own comfortable understanding of God as God exists in our lives.. And as I said my experience has taught me that my understanding will continue to change as I age and change.

How do you define God in your life? Have your ideas changed as you have grown from child to adult? I invite you to take time to think about what you know or understand or feel now. Is your understanding different today from what it was ten or thirty or fifty years ago? Have you grown into your comfortable place with God? Or, is God like that emergency cord found in trains and subways with a sign that says: "Do not pull unless there is an emergency." And we all live somewhere in the vicinity of that pull cord, don't we?

The other paraphrase by James Taylor has these words that challenge us to experience God in every aspect of our lives:

How can I have a life of my own?  
If I study science you are there.  
If I explore economics, you are there.  
From charmed quarks to exploding galaxies,  
From Icebergs t dinosaurs to industrial toxins—  
Wherever I turn, you will turn up too.  
You insinuate yourself into every crevice of my life.  
Even if I bury myself in my work, you break in,  
And upset all my careful apple carts.  
You drag me forward by my lapels;  
In the small of my back you keep shoving me.  
I cannot keep you out of my life,  
You are my permanent partner.<sup>2</sup>

The choice is yours and mine to see and to experience the wonder of God in every element of creation, including the human mind that is capable of finding cures to terrible

diseases; better predicting massive storms or earthquakes; implementing changes that will slow the progress of climate change; and, to wage peace.

I believe that at this time in human existence, every rock and quark and human life cries out for the wonder, for the light, for the strength and knowledge to use what is in our incredible minds, in our DNA and in our hearts.

Our God who is within the womb, loving us from the moment of conception is there in all our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual growth spurts. God does leave us space, the space called free will. The beloved hymn: *I was there to Hear Your Borning Cry*, puts the words of the psalmist into a celebration of God's presence throughout life. In one memorable line, we sing: *I'll be there in case you wander off and find where demons dwell.*<sup>2</sup>

God honors the human right to explore new horizons, even if they are dangerous; yet God is there in the aftermath of bad choices, accompanying us into and out of those painful moments of discovery.

All the challenges and all the fears that we face throughout our lives are not met alone. We may not see or even feel God's presence, but God is there – from here to the farthest limit of the sea, God is with us. Amen.

---

1. James Taylor, *Everyday Psalms*, p. 171

2. *Ibid.* p. 171

3. *Borning Cry*. John Vlvisaker, *New Century Hymnal*, p. 351