

“Where Can I Go from Your Spirit?” / Psalm 139:1-12 / 8 September 2013

Why do you never stop staring at me? Why can't you just leave me alone, just for a little while? You never turn away, never rest! Can't you give me just a moment's peace? You're like that strange all-seeing eye on top of the pyramid on a dollar bill. Unsleeping, unblinking, completely unrelenting. Where can I flee from you? I could get on an airplane and travel across six time zones, but there you are, waiting for me at the baggage claim. If I rose up to the skies, if I tunneled deep into the earth, there you are. I could end it all and lie silently in the grave, but there you would be. I could hide in darkness so deep that no human eye could penetrate, but even darkness doesn't help. You're in the darkness. You're in the light, in the heights, the depths, the living, the dying. Where can I escape from you? Or is it myself that I want to escape?

That's the magic word: escape. The person who wrote this psalm is looking for a means of escape. Well, it's Kickoff Sunday today, when our church life returns to its regular program schedule. The long summer season with its many escapes has passed us by. The mountains, the beaches, the grand vacations, the camping trips, the picnics, the long sunny hours in the garden, the family reunions. Now, it's back to work for all the students, and the teachers, and all those many who are able to take a little breather in the hotter months. I hope you found some good means of escape—not from God, like the psalmist, but from your routine. In an age when our cell phones and laptops make us available pretty much all the time, constantly flooding us with news, and phone calls, and emails, and tweets, and updates, and incoming text messages, it's important that we set aside times and places for escape. But isn't it often ourselves that we need to escape?

Some of you have been asking about our trip to Hawaii, and I must say that it was as extravagant an escape as we have ever pulled off. I guess before actually going there, I just assumed the old TV show *Fantasy Island* was more or less a documentary of the fiftieth state. And it's not. Tattoo does not climb into a tower to ring a sweet-sounding bell when your plane arrives. Nor does a hula dancer in a grass skirt meet you off the airplane with a garland of flowers to place around your neck. There is no Mr. Rourke in a white suit. In fact, the airline employees, and the security guards, and the bus drivers are just as brusque and harried in Honolulu as they are in Pittsburgh. Even more so.

The thing that does meet you right off the plane is the world's most breathable air. In Hawaii, the air is so light, so unpolluted that you feel almost as if it could bear you away like a feather, as if you could float on it. It's the kind of air that our pink human lungs were meant to breathe, no fumes, no fine particulate matter, no density at all. After the air, there's the light. It's that clear seaside light that you find in the paintings of the old Dutch Masters. No haze, no yellowness at all. And after the pure air and pure light, there are the caressing ocean breezes, the insistent waves, the graceful, spreading trees—varieties I've never seen before—the tropical flowers and fruits. There are the mountains with lushest rainforest on the windward side and thorny deserts on the leeward side.

On the Island of Maui, we snaked along in our rental car on the infamous Road to Hana, which is an ancient footpath that ended up getting paved. It's a famously narrow road that grips the mountainsides one hundred feet above the ocean, allowing little to no room for oncoming traffic. When a car or truck comes toward you on that road, somebody has to find a place to pull over. On the Road to Hana, if you drive according to the unwritten rules of Pittsburgh motorist etiquette, you will find yourself yielding to long, long lines of traffic. People do not take turns. They scramble for position.

A whole parade of vehicles snaked along that dangerous roadway with us, and most of them were tourists, too, people from the mainland Indianapolis and Baltimore. All of these people were risking life and limb on this deadly drive, with a steep drop into the ocean on one side and a rock wall on the other, in a place far from any ambulance or hospital, and they were doing simply because the human spirit longs for beauty. This is the danger and the frustration that people will endure in order to stand and gaze for ten minutes at a waterfall tumbling down an emerald cliff, or to walk barefoot on a black sand beach surrounded by sharp lava rocks. This is what people will do to escape the computers,

and the desks, and the fluorescent-lighted cubicles where they work and live! In order to escape their everyday lives, they'll drive rented cars along steep precipices above the crashing waves! They'll compete for a single lane, playing chicken with oncoming buses! Safe, respectable people, people who use their turn signals back on the mainland, people who wouldn't change lanes on the freeway without first doing a shoulder-check, they get out here to the edge of the world, and somehow the rules change. Out there, they ride helicopters over the gaping mouth of an active volcano, spewing magma! Get them out here to a place so unknown, a place far away from their lawn mowers and their annual performance reviews, and out here they'll swim in waters where sharks are known to lurk. They'll zipline over rocky chasms, fifty-feet deep. At home, most of them—most of us—are play-it-safe people, but get us out there, away from our daily grind, and we might even eat raw shellfish!

And really, aren't we seeking escape, all the many mainlanders who descend on those eight islands each summer? Aren't we looking for a sense of freedom that our lives back home cannot afford? Aren't we fleeing from the little tunnels that we've dug for ourselves, the ruts of our own choosing and making—the responsibilities, the jobs, the conference calls, the committee meetings? We're looking for just a temporary loophole that frees us from the consequences of our life's long-ago decisions. For it's surely true that each of us made choices many years ago, and those choices turned around and made us, determining our lot in life, deciding things, eliminating other possibilities. When we look for escape, we're mostly just longing to be reminded that life is still full of infinite possibility, that life is still a thing of beauty and wonder, that possibility still outweighs necessity even in our safe, busy suburban lives. It's ourselves that we want to escape, but from the angry way that most of those mainlanders drove on the Road to Hana, it was pretty clear that we take ourselves with us...even to paradise.

“Where can I go to get away from you?” the psalmist asks God. I wonder if it's not himself that he's really trying to escape. Can you detect a hint of frustration in the psalmist's voice? Nowadays we usually hear Psalm 139 as words of deepest comfort, as if to say, “Isn't it nice? God is always with me?” But I think when that first long-ago psalmist wrote this poem, he or she did it with just a hint of weariness, just a troubled little undercurrent of frustration. “Why can't I get away from you? Why can't I just go and do my own thing? Why can't I escape the consequences of my actions? Why can't I just go off and vacation in a spot—maybe just for two weeks—where all the things that matter to you can be cast aside for awhile—perhaps a place where you won't see me committing adultery, or being gluttonous, or drinking too much? Do you really have to tag along with me to Atlantic City, to Vegas, to the Meadowlands? Just let me take a little break from all your high and mighty principles, just a very short hiatus from the person I know I'm supposed to be. I just want a short escape.” If yours is a God of constant surveillance and the threat of punishment, then you'll probably want to sneak out behind the garage every once in a while just to get an occasional break.

This All-Seeing Eye is an ancient and venerable image of God. It's actually far older than Judaism, dating back to Egyptian religion and the “Eye of Horus,” where it was the very sun itself—whose scorching gaze could only be escaped in darkness, when nightfall came to blind the sun's eye. Some Buddhist texts call the Buddha “The Eye of the World.” It's an image that many of us have cherished all our lives long: God the watchful Parent, ready to intervene and settle the score, ready to reward the obedient and punish the disobedient. It's a comforting notion because the eye is protective, watching out for us. But it's also unsettling, for the eye sees and judges all our deeds. We used to know some Mennonite missionaries in inner-city Brooklyn, farmers from central Pennsylvania who did evangelism among Dominican immigrants. One of these fellows had a garage where he restored antique cars for a living. Because the garage was in a rough neighborhood, he suspended a large sign above the door with a threatening verse from the Book of Deuteronomy: “The eyes of the Lord are constantly upon you.” It was meant to scare off would-be thieves and vandals, and maybe it worked.

But is that really who and what God is, an eye in the sky? This understanding of God probably comes from our childhood belief that our parents can see everything. On one of our summer's camping

trips, Michelle and I were sitting by the fire, and Chloe went into the tent with her shoes on, which is a big no-no for tent campers. When you sleep on the tent floor, you have to keep it clean. I called from where I was sitting, "Hey, kiddo, I see you in there with your shoes on." Chloe was amazed. She asked, "How can you see me through the tent walls?" I jokingly told her, "It's called parent-vision. We can see you everywhere." I thought nothing more of it until Greta also tromped into the tent with her shoes on. Chloe quickly told her, "Take your shoes off! Don't you know about parent-vision?"

The problem with this understanding of God is that it places God outside the world, over and above it, observing it from afar. This "observer" God can be found in the pages of Scripture, to be sure. The writer of today's psalm loves and fears just such a God. But then along comes Jesus speaking of God in intimate terms. And along comes Peter speaking of God not as a distant and powerful person out there, beyond us, but as the One in whom we live, and move, and have our being. Then along comes John telling us very simply that God is love, and whoever lives in love lives in God: not retribution, not vengeance, not constant watchfulness, but love. If we feel the need occasionally to escape the very gaze of God, as the psalmist did, then maybe it really is ourselves that we long to escape, for God is not the petty one, the faultfinding one. That's actually us at our most judgmental. If we've made God in our own worst image as a critical parent, then it's no wonder we feel the need to escape that God's gaze. It literally is ourselves that we wish to escape, not the loving God of Jesus, or Peter, or John.

A woman told her husband, "Honey, the car has water in the carburetor." The man said, "Water in the carburetor? No, that's impossible." The woman said, "I'm telling you, there's water in the carburetor." The man said, "Okay, well, I'll go take a look. Where is the car?" The woman replied, "In the swimming pool." Some truths cannot be escaped no matter how hard you try to repackage them. The psalmist might say that he's trying to escape God and God's watchful eye, but when it comes right down to it, God's not watching and waiting for him to mess up. The psalmist is really just so tired of himself. He's tired of the faults that he thinks God is staring at, tired of trying to live up to what he thinks are God's standards, tired of feeling like a failure, for when your faith is mostly a list of rules, then you will never, never keep up.

And yet, it doesn't much matter whether we're trying to escape from ourselves or from God, because both things are infinitely beyond us. Wherever you find life, and breath, and the laws of nature, there God is, as much inside you as in outer space. What we really desire, all of us, is an escape deeper *into* God. For God does not stand outside of us, observing us and judging us. No, the God that we know in Jesus dwells within us, working with us to bring us to our fullest potential, working through our giftedness to bring about healing and well-being for the world. The all-seeing-eye on our dollar bills is the old Egyptian god Horus; it's not the God we know in Jesus. The God of Jesus is present in all things beautiful, and true, and good, present in you and in your neighbor. God is not far, but near, around us and within, yearning to change the world through us, drawing us away from the small, narrow selves that become so tiresome to us from time to time. God's very life is in the darkness and in the light, in the waking and in the sleeping, in the living and in the dying. And you can participate in the very life of God by throwing yourself into the life-giving causes that speak to your heart. There is no escape, and there is no one to escape. There is nothing left for us but joyful participation in the very life of God for the world.

Where can I go from your presence? And where can I flee from your Spirit? Nowhere. Absolutely nowhere. Amen.