

A Faithful Presence

Opening Convo, Sept 19, 2022
by James E. Brenneman, President

There is an “aliveness” to the Rocks, and Sands, and Hills and Trees. There’s a throbbing aliveness to God’s faithful loving Presence in the heartbeat of millions of hydrogen and oxygen atoms pushing and pulling against each other in each glass of water we drink. To tweak a phrase from Voltaire on his view of infinity, God’s animating faithful and loving Presence is “a circle whose center is everywhere, whose circumference is nowhere.”

Welcome to the 151st new school year at Berkeley School of Theology in the year of our Lord 2022, that is, the year 5783 for those following the Jewish New Year, that is, the year 13.8 billion, since the Big Bang. Whether it’s 150 or 2,022 or 5,783 or 13.8 billion – we decided against candles on the birthday cake lest we burn the whole place down in the process.

In celebrating our 150th anniversary, we chose as our theme Scripture, Psalm 100:5. “God is good, whose steadfast love endures forever, whose faithful presence extends to all generations.” Let’s focus our attention on the part of the text that speaks of God’s faithful presence, whether 13.8 billion years ago, or 150 years ago, or today or a billion years, hence.

For those of you who follow the Myers-Briggs 16-personality types, I am an ESF/TJ. That means stereotypically speaking, I am prone to process information by paying a lot of attention to information that comes in through my five senses. I am, by nature, an empiricist, my earlier undergraduate studies being in the natural and biological sciences. According to *Psychology Today*, based on my Meyers-Briggs type, the animals I most resemble are horses, the vampire bat and, likely, our dog, Farley.

Like a bat’s echolocation, or my dog’s extraordinary nose for molecular level smelling, it’s almost as if every nerve fiber in my body, every mental synapse in my brain, is on high alert like a radar collecting and processing data from my five senses. I have a kind of a sixth sense, as well, that “feels,” even empathizes with nonhuman flora and fauna, even inanimate objects. As a kid, I felt the wear and tear of the tires on our car when we traveled across country. I wished for them rest at every rest stop that the rest of us took.

So, you can imagine the first time I visited Sequoia National Park and stood beneath those giant sequoia trees in Grant Grove and discovered they had been standing right there in CA before Moses stood before the burning bush 3500 years before. I felt the same spiritual ripple up my spine that I have since felt when I first stood at the entrance to the Old City of Jerusalem or washed my feet in the Sea of Galilee or watched the

sunrise while standing at the top of Mt. Sinai. In all these places, all my senses were on high alert -- I sensed, I knew, I was truly standing on holy ground.

When the Psalmist speaks of God's faithful loving Presence stretching from generation to generation, or enduring forever, he isn't just speaking quantitatively about a period stretching forever backwards and forwards. The Psalmist (like others in Scripture) describes here a certain subjective quality, an eternal quantum dimension to divine faithful Presence. This is a divine Presence of love that pervades every cell, every synapse, every atom, every quark and all the hundreds and millions of spaces in between.*

When the book of Deuteronomy describes God as a Rock, it does speak of a quality of God's enduring strength, but in a more literal, empirical and imaginative sense, it speaks of God's faithful, holy enduring and loving Presence in and around and through the zillion pulsating atoms that make up the rock, too. There is an "aliveness" to the Rocks, and Sands, and Hills and Trees. There's a throbbing aliveness to God's faithful loving Presence in the heartbeat of millions of hydrogen and oxygen atoms pushing and pulling against each other in each glass of water we drink. To tweak a phrase from Voltaire on his view of infinity, God's animating faithful and loving Presence is "a circle whose center is everywhere, whose circumference is nowhere."

Elsewhere the Psalmist (139) makes this radical claim that there is absolutely no place on earth or in heaven (or in *sheol*) where you and I can go, and God's faithful Presence is not there already. The prophet Isaiah agrees (6:3): "the whole earth is filled with God's presence." The Apostle Paul (Acts 17:28) borrowing from the Greek poets of his day, says that in this Divine Presence, "we live and move and have our being."

When I was in college, I spent one semester washing pots and pans in the school's cafeteria. Every single day, I came to work, I groaned and swore under my breath that I was stuck doing such dirty, greasy, gross work. I couldn't wait until I got switched to the shift making donuts at 5am, just to be rid of scrubbing those pots and pans. To make matters worse, every day, my co-worker, Maria Rosales, a new immigrant mother of three, who'd already been working since the morning rush, was one of the most cheerful people in the whole kitchen. Every day, day in and day out, she'd chant, "¡Este es el día que hizo el señor! "This is the day the Lord has made!" To which I responded, "Dios mio! OMG! Are you kidding me? Do you understand what it is we are doing -- scrubbing these blankety-blank-blank disgusting pots and pans?"

Many years later in seminary, I read the little diary of Brother Lawrence, written in 1666, entitled *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Lawrence had served as a soldier in Eastern France, where he was wounded in action, which led to a lifelong disability. One day, while standing in front of a tree stripped of its leaves, while considering the idea that in the spring its leaves would be renewed and it would flower and bear fruit, he sensed God's divine Presence in what otherwise we'd call the natural process. He was so moved by a sense of God's loving Presence in that tree, that he converted right there

and then, and joined the nearby Carmelite monastery, where for the last thirty years of his life, he scrubbed greasy pots and pans in the monastery kitchen. Dios Mio!

“We ought not to be weary of doing little things for the love of God, who regards not the greatness of the work, but the love with which it is performed,” he wrote. “Think often on God, by day, by night, in your business and even in your diversions. God is always near you and with you.” Practice, dear ones, the Presence of God.

As we begin this new school year, dear ones, if you learn nothing else, I implore you, let us, above all else, learn to practice the Presence of God. When we wake up, in our daily routines, in every hour, moment by moment, let us be alive to God’s faithful loving Presence. In every book we touch, every word we read, every person we meet, let us sense God’s faithful Presence. When we stand beneath the beautiful 150-year-old redwood grove just outside these doors, let us be alive to God’s presence in the wind blowing through their leaves, let our spines shiver in the sprinkling of the dappled sunlight through their branches, let us hear God’s voice burning in us, let us take off our shoes, for this very place, this very corner of God’s universe we call Berkeley School of Theology, is holy ground. As the nature-loving mystic, Meister Eckart put it so well, “God is at home here.” God is at home here at Berkeley School of Theology. Dear students, faculty, administrators, staff, members of the board of trustees, alums, family and friends, welcome, welcome, again, to this world house of study. Welcome home!

*[*Note: This sermon was inspired, in part, by the poetic rendition of Ps 100 written by scholar, poet, former Professor of Theology & Worship @ BST, now Academic Dean/VP at GTU, Dr. Jennifer Davidson]*