

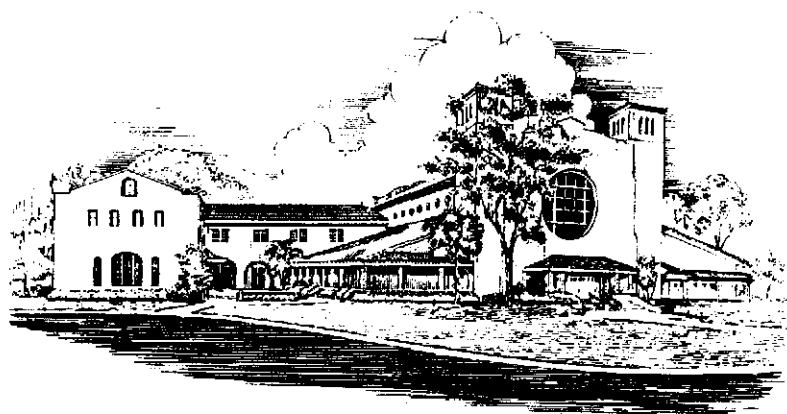
# First Church Pulpit

## **"THE ELUSIVE PRESENCE:**

### **Some Thoughts on the Nature of God"**

**Text: "Truly, Thou art a God who hides Thyself..."**

**— (Isaiah 45:15)**



## **FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

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**MARCH 22, 1987**

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Our sermon topic this morning is "The Elusive Presence: Some thoughts on the Nature of God". Assume for a moment, my friends, that the day will come, as come it will, when at last your life on earth is over. Assume further that you have arrived unharmed at Heaven's door, and you have entered safely inside. (I know that is a great assumption in some cases, but nonetheless, please assume it.) The angel assigned to you ushers you quietly into the presence of God. All right? He is seated there, comfortable and smiling.... It is all over now, and you are welcomed in your eternal home (Whew, I made it!).

It reminds me of a New Yorker cartoon I saw once, where an obviously successful industrialist has made it to Heaven. There he is in a great white robe, with a cute little harp. And, he runs into his former minister up there. The caption shows the man speaking to his minister, saying: "Dear Sir: I would like to thank you for all the tips you gave me, when I was on earth, about how to get here..." (I hope that some of you will have a chance to say that some day too.... (Ha, Ha, Ha...))

But alas, the Heavenly Father will look at you and say: "Welcome, sit down, I would like to talk to you for a little while. Tell me, John (or Sally), is there anything you would like to know? Were there any unsolved puzzles on Earth; any questions unanswered?" What might you want to ask? It is all over now, mind

you. You do not have to impress Him or anyone else. You are safely there. What would you want to know?

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Well, I think the first question I would want to ask, and it is not an uncommon question: "Please, Lord, tell me if you will, why is there so much suffering in the world, especially for the young? Why some have so many burdens to carry.... Why do teenagers have to die? Why can't the old, old people just slip quietly away when the time has come, without all the burden and pain of a lingering illness, which can go on for years? Why is there so much trouble for the good people of the world? Please, I humbly await Your answer."

My second question would be, arising of recent difficulties here and elsewhere: "Why is there so much violence in the world? How could You have allowed it to be so final and damaging? How can a whole human life be snuffed out by a silly little pop from a silly little gun, in the hand of a stupid little madman? How can a lunatic be permitted to kidnap a young girl, rape her, and kill her? Why? Why did not someone up here listen to her prayer? All she said was: 'Lord, help me! Why?'" And I could go on all day, and so could you. There you will not need to rush. In Heaven, you'll have a million years to talk with Jesus Christ, all by yourself. Then someone else can have a million also; and someone can have a million after that.... Won't that be grand?

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But, somewhere way down the list, I would want to pose a philosophical or theological question, which leads us to our sermon today: on "The Elusive Presence of God". "Why, Lord Jesus, didn't you make it a little clearer for those of us who tried so hard to understand? Why didn't you whisper to me one day: 'Richie, that's the way to do it...'. Or, 'Don't do that -- do it this way.' Why didn't you say: 'I'll be right there behind you, you can be sure... listen to my footsteps.' Why did I have to guess so much? Why were you silent when all that your people ask for is an itsy-bitsy teeny-tiny whisper? Some token confirmation...."

"Why didn't you give us a little more proof, so that when those arguments came up (And I have been in them since I was in college), as to whether God is, and what He means.... Why did I always have to lose them? Why is it that the best I ever managed on the existence of God was a draw?" I mean, John the Baptist saw the dove descending; Jesus heard a voice; Elijah saw the fire come down; Paul had his vision; and even Oral Roberts tells us God tells him what to do.

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(Now, He tells Oral also, by the way, -- this is an aside, but I never fail for an opportunity to go that way, do I? -- He also told him how to raise some money. Now I wonder what would happen, if I said to you all: "Raise enough money for our new Family Educational Building by the end of March, or God will take me to Heaven". (Now that would be a real choice for you:

Do you want a new building, or a new pastor? That would be your chance!).

It reminds me of a quick story, listen now, of a man whose wife was in the hospital, and she was critically ill. His friend asked him: "How are things going? Is she going to get better?" The man said: "I don't know." The friend said: "What do you mean, you don't know? The doctor just talked to you. What's going to happen?" The man said: "I don't know. All he said was: 'Expect the worst.'"

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Our sermon is entitled "The Elusive Presence". Elusive, a beautiful word. I borrowed it in this context from Samuel Terrien, one of the great Biblical scholars of this century. It means "hard to comprehend", or by Webster's definition, "different things to different people"; or "tending to escape your grasp." Just when you think you have it, that is, it's gone. Not that God is gone. We had enough of "God is dead" in the Sixties. It simply is that He is elusive, which brings us directly to our Scripture lesson in Isaiah 45: "Truly, Thou art a God who hides Thyself." There are three ways I want to look at it.

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I. First, I want you to look at the literal words of the text, and think it through with me. Often repeated in other forms and places in the Bible, it says: "God is a God who hides Himself." The idea is introduced in the Garden of Eden

story, where God appears to tell Adam what is expected of him. He then comes back later to tell Adam and Eve what the punishment will be if they disobey. But at the time when they have to make the critical decision which will affect the future of their lives and ours, God is not there. He goes away. It is the Bible's way of saying from page one that God allows us the freedom to choose. He gets out of the way, even if we are destined to make an incorrect choice. He permits us the freedom to make fools of ourselves. Not that He has to, the Bible teaches, He simply chooses to; else there would be nothing authentic to our humanity. If we are to learn and grow, and become the ones He wants us to be, in our struggles and our joys, He must hide Himself for a while and remain silent, when we think we need Him the most. He is saying: "You need to do it on your own, or life has no meaning at all." He hides Himself when we have to struggle.

Then, too, I think the Bible says that God sometimes hides Himself when we are evil. Deuteronomy 31 tells how, when Moses was about "to sleep with his fathers", a warning is issued to the people. "If you do evil, I will hide Myself." That is frightening, but it is the Bible's way of saying that God has a limit beyond which He will not go. And if you continually ignore Him and disobey His word, and follow on in the same sins, He will go away, He will hide Himself.

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But then, turn the page, this is more important to us I think, for the most part: God hides Himself sometimes at the moment of our success. There is the story of Uzziah in the Bible. He became King when he was sixteen, and remained for over fifty years. Then, it reads: "When he finally got what he wanted, when he had everything: all the power and the money and the fame", the Bible slips in a little phrase: "He was faithful until he was strong." When he trusted himself and turned his back on God, God also turned His back on him. God said: "If you want to be on your own, Uzziah, fine. If you say you don't need me, I will step back, and we will see." He hides from us in many different ways: when we demand it; when we are haughty; when we are afraid; when we are sinful; when we turn our backs on Him. He is "elusive": not gone, simply hiding.

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II. But secondly, I think we need to say that if God hides Himself from us, the Bible also says that we hide ourselves from God. This, too, goes back to the Garden. Do you remember the aftermath of the story when Adam and Eve have already taken of the tree which they were not supposed to take: "When they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the Garden in the cool of the day (Isn't this cute?), they hid themselves, so that God could not find them". Often, we do that too. Let me give you an example (as if you needed one!).

Suppose you have committed a grievous

wrong to someone you love, and you owe them an apology: your father, your husband, your children... maybe even your boss. And suppose you are afraid of what he or she will say. You procrastinate and hide from it. As a little boy, I used to hide when my father was coming home: "Wait till your father comes home from work!" I used to hide from him, as Adam and Eve hid from the Lord in the Garden. God went looking for them and He found them every time, and every time my father went looking for me, I can assure you, he found me, too. In this case, the Heavenly Father said: "Where are you?" The man and his wife said: "We heard you walking in the Garden in the cool of the day, and we were afraid." You bet they were. Because if you know what you are supposed to do, and still do not do it, you have reason to be afraid of the presence of the Lord. Forgiveness is not the issue. Forgiveness is assured. But God has limits beyond which He will not go.

Then, as the Bible moves along through the centuries, there are other reasons why and how the people hide themselves from God. Hmmm? Sometimes we are too busy. The Bible knows all about that: too determined to get what we want, when we think we want it and need it, we keep on keeping on, fast track, sure and certain that we know how to do it. You can rush by a good thing and never see it. Edwin Teale, a naturalist, writing in Wandering Through Spring, tells a lovely story. He writes about how in a rock cliff in Arizona he walked right by a nuttall-poorwill. The curious things about this little whippoorwill is that he can hide in

the crevice of the rock, and blend his feathers, so that you cannot really see him, much like a Florida chameleon. Dr. Teale said that he walked by that crevice two dozen times, but he never saw the bird, and he was looking for it. And when he finally discovered it, he was amazed.

Sometimes, too, I find people who do not really know what they are looking for. Many people who are enthusiastic and faithful in the service to the church, never advance their ideas and concepts of God beyond the third-grade-Sunday-School-class, and spend the rest of their life looking for a third-grade God. Nothing wrong with Sunday School, we all should go and have gone, and our children and grandchildren should too, but you have to advance, right? You would not want anybody in charge of your life and your future, or the architecture of your home, who had a third-grade education, would

It reminds me of a Peanuts cartoon: Charlie Brown and Lucy are together again. They are looking up to the Heavens, gazing up at the bright stars. Lucy says to little Charlie Brown: "What do you see up there? What I see", Lucy keeps on talking as she always does... "I see Orion, and the Pleiades, and the planetary conjunction of Mars and Jupiter; I see a Quasar. I am searching for the dark holes in outer space.... Charlie, what do you see?" He says sheepishly, "I was going to say I see a duckie and a chickie, until you started to talk..."

I once asked a businessman of great reputation to pray with me in a hospital. He said: "Really?" I said, "Sure. Offer a little prayer; I will too." He said: "I only know one." I said: "Well, pray it." He prayed: "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. Amen." Now, that is not a bad prayer. But later on, when I got to know him better, I said: "Let's talk about prayer... about the communication between you and God (Are you with me?). We can also hide ourselves in grief. I know people whose eyes have been so filled with tears they could not see the bright and morning star. You can hide in your intellect, so superior above religious feelings. There are so many from Missouri: "Show me, or I will not believe it!"

Sometimes (and then we will turn the page to our third point), and maybe this is one which will characterize most of us the most, I call it lethargy, a vagueness about what we believe, the ordinary acceptance we take of extraordinary truth. You talk to high school students, or their grandparents, and for the most part you get the same sort of thing: It's vague. If I came through the pews today, or to those of you who are listening by radio, or to those who will read this, if I asked: "What do you believe?", how would you answer? Would you say: "I know Him whom I believe in, and I am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I committed unto Him against that day." Because if you do not, especially if it is out of lethargy, please come out of hiding. It's

worthy enough for us to care about.

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III. So first, God hides Himself, and we hide ourselves, but thirdly, and gratefully, in the puzzlement and mystery of it all, I am saying, God reveals Himself: in Nature, in our dealings with each other, and in Jesus Christ, His Son, our Lord. The Bible teaches God is a Divine Mystery, and hidden; but He is also a human revelation there for all to see. No one has seen the Father, but we see the evidence of His creation everywhere we go, and especially in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Curiously, He appears in those very places where He is hidden. In Nature, the Psalmist says: "When I consider the Heavens, the Moon, and the Stars which Thou hast ordained, what is man that Thou art mindful of him?" Romans II says we are without excuse, Nature unfolds it before our eyes. Einstein, from the depth (or height) of his intellectual agnosticism looked around the world, and he concluded: "God does not throw dice." He is not some gambler up there, crossing his fingers, playing hunches, hoping it will turn out all right. Einstein said that the Universe is orderly. You can trust the One who made it all.

God is seen in Nature, and He is seen in History. An intellectual woman wrote a professor friend of mine to say, having read Will Durant's History of Civilization, that as each volume ended, the covered civilization was in decline,

about to disappear. Then, she said, "You open a new volume, and the civilization is indeed gone, but the Church and Christ are still there." The enduring power of God prompted G. Ernest Wright to say: "God is a God who Acts, in History."

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God's Power and Peace are shown in our sadness and worry, too. The other night I sat with a man at Navy League (A good organization here in Fort Lauderdale, a lot of you know it and serve it). We got to talking about religion, as pastors often do when they sit with laymen at public functions. He told the story of years ago, when he had been in an oxygen tent here in Fort Lauderdale. "For three straight weeks, they wouldn't have given a penny for my life", he said. "I kept praying that God would spare me. Then into my room, in the middle of the night and the confinement of an oxygen tent, I felt the Presence of God in a way that I did not know was possible." He is no wild fanatic, just a sensible man of God. In the middle of his sadness, he found what Isaiah called "The Treasures of the Darkness". And they are many.

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The Bible teaches that in the bewilderment of trying to serve in a world that is topsy-turvy, as we reach out to touch our fellow men and women, God is also revealed in the process of sharing the love He gives. Peter Berger in his wonderful book called The Rumor of Angels tells the story of a young priest, who went to work in the

slums of a great European city. He was asked why an intellectual, who had everything to give, would go there. Someone asked: "What are you doing there?" He replied: "I came down here, into the misery of this slum, so that the rumor of God would not disappear from the Earth!" God is a God who hides Himself, but He is also revealed here, and there, and everywhere.

In the Bible the words from Isaiah 45: "He is a God who hides Himself", are spoken first to Cyrus. It's important to know what Cyrus was "The enemy", a Persian King who had conquered Babylonia. Cyrus did not even know it, but God was using him secretly to bring His will to earth. How astounded Cyrus would have been, if he had discovered it! But whether you know it or not, at this or any other time, God is at work within the shadows, nudging you, pulling you, guiding you where He wants you to be.

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Some of you have heard my little closing story, but I want to offer it anyway. It means so much to me, and to many whom I love. It ends where we began. It is the story of a woman who finally is at home with Christ in Heaven. He is sitting there talking to her. Remember? She says: "Will you please tell me what was going on? Why couldn't I find you?" He replied: "Well, look down there, dear. All along the pages of your life, each and every year, every step of all the way, even when you did not know it, my footsteps, see them?.... There are two

sets of footsteps, mine following yours. I was always there, even when you did not know it.

But then, she objected, looking carefully, "Wait a minute. There are some times, often the moments of my worst difficulties, when there is only one set of footprints. Where were you then, when I needed you the most?" He replied: "My little friend, where there is one set of footprints, those were the times when I was carrying you. I cradled you in my arms, and took you where you had to go, even when you did not know it."

Right? The Elusive God is a way only in our-sight. His Presence is assured. For now, and evermore. Amen.