

God's Presence Brings Peace – A Visual Sermon on Psalm 139

Good morning. This morning, we are being asked to consider together how the words of the Psalmist might help us think about how “God’s presence brings peace.” I don’t know about you, but I confess that when I read Psalm 139 and meditated upon it, I was not immediately struck by images of peace in God’s presence. While the “green pastures,” and “still waters” of Psalm 23 seem an obvious place to look in the Psalms to find images of peace in the presence of God, what stood out to me the most in Psalm 139 was the Psalmist’s descriptions of various forms of *movement*. The Psalmist speaks of “sitting down and rising up,” of “fleeing to the heavens or down to *Sheol*, the land of the dead, or dwelling at “the ends of the sea.” Of course, the point of the Psalmist’s use of these images of movement is to declare how impossible it is to truly escape the presence of the God who is in all and who is the life of all and to confess that God’s presence with us is something that can bring peace in and even despite our differing circumstances. Nonetheless, I couldn’t escape this sense of movement through the Psalm.

I was also struck by how this Psalm made me think of our recent family trip out West. While our vacation wasn’t an attempt to flee from God to the ends of the sea, it did nevertheless take us far from home, into much higher elevations than we can reach out here in Southern Ontario, and it took us towards the Western edge of Canada near the Pacific Ocean. As a family, we went searching for new paths and dwelling places for the time we were away and looking back I can say that indeed we felt the presence of God and God’s peace while we were on our journey. As I thought about our trip further in relation to this Psalm, I also thought about how the physical journeys we find ourselves on in life often mirror and are intertwined with our spiritual journeys. As we transition from place to place, we experience moments of transition and change within ourselves. As we make new discoveries around us, we also learn new things about

ourselves. As we experience delays and unexpected twists and turns, we also experience delays in self-growth where we just feel stuck. And, as we experience the lows and highs of hurt and joy, fatigue and energy, chaos and peace on our physical journeys, so too do we experience these moments in our inner being. Seeing that our physical journeys are intertwined with our inner journeys, I decided to shape the remainder of my meditation on Psalm 139 and its emphasis on God's presence, with pictures from our family's journey through BC. I have selected several pictures from our trip, mostly of our kids in various scenic locations, and with those pictures I have accompanied a selection from Psalm 139 along with a question or a comment or a prayer or a word of encouragement for us this morning. And so, without further adieu, I offer the remainder of this sermon time as a part spoken, part visual sermon on Psalm 139 as seen through the experiences of our family.

Images 1 & 2: Lord, You Searched Me and You Know

These first two pictures come from Roger's Pass, a high mountain pass through the Selkirk Mountains of British Columbia. The pass gets its name from an American surveyor named A.B. Rogers who, in the late 1800s, discovered a pass through the rugged Selkirk mountains for the CP Railway. The view from the rest stop was breathtaking as we really felt encompassed by the mountains, even as there was set out before us a road to follow along our journey. As I think about A.B. Rogers, I think about the task of *surveying* – the opportunities it afforded our country – connection, growth, the movement of goods, treaties, new discoveries and new friendships; but I also think about the perils that have come too – surveying was, after all, a primary tool of the colonial project, to map out and claim ownership over land, often with the result of displacing those who did not operate with the same conceptualization of borders and ownership. As I think about how surveying can be used for good or for ill, to bring peace or

violence, I think too about God, the one who surveys the rugged mountains of our souls and knows us, but who does so for our Good, for our flourishing. And so, I find myself speaking this affirmation: God searches us out for our Good – to bring us Peace.

Images 3 & 4: It is You Who Know when I sit and rise

This image was taken in Victoria, BC at the corner of Government St. and Bellville St. right by the Victoria Legislature. We didn't do a whole lot of sitting during our time in Victoria – more so a lot of walking, but this was one of the rare moments that day where we stopped to sit or in Theo's case stand while we deliberated and then decided where to go next. When I think about sitting and standing, I think about the moments in life when we find ourselves in the transition between thought (sitting) and action (standing). Sometimes we face big decisions in life, and it can be easier to stay in place instead of stepping out to take risks or try something new. Thinking about this, I find myself praying: "God who knows when we sit and rise, be with us as we think through important decisions in our life, and give us peace of mind knowing that you walk with us as we stand up to act on decisions we've made with your help."

Images 5 & 6: My path and my lair You winnow

This picture was taken at Bridal Veil Falls Provincial Park near Chilliwack, BC. This was one among many pictures of us on forest paths, usually leading to some kind of feature sight such as a waterfall or an epic lookout. At this particular park, we went to see the Bridal Veil Falls, named after the 60-meter waterfall that tumbles down creating the effect of a veil. I think about the purpose or function of a veil – that it is there to conceal – and then I think about the Psalmist's talk of God winnowing our path and our lair, seeking us out in our hidden place. Sometimes we try to keep our ways concealed or we wish to hide in a lair or behind a veil of our own making – maybe we hide from God, from others, or from ourselves. But God knows our path, and can

identify our hiding place, regardless of how concealed we try to make it. This might seem anything but comforting – perhaps we wish we could hide and have our own space. But we need not fear God’s winnowing – for God identifies our hiding places so that God can be there with us and make for us a hiding place in God, a place of peace where we can face up to what we are hiding from in the presence of love. And so, I find myself praying: God who knows our secrets, be our secret place of peace, where we can view ourselves with your eyes of grace and love.

Image 7: Knowledge is too wondrous for me

This picture was taken at the Tantalus Lookout in Squamish, BC along the Sea to Sky Highway. If there is anything that I could describe as “too wondrous,” it is mountains like these. They are simply awe inspiring and at least for me, they draw me into God’s presence. Not only that, they put me in my place, reminding me of how small I am. Being reminded of our smallness in God’s presence is, I think, one way of attaining peace in this world. Sometimes I wonder if so much unrest in this world comes through our attempts at being bigger and more important than we are. I wonder if Adam and Eve’s sin was that they simply bit off more than they could chew (pardon the pun). In our hubris, we often do that. Interestingly, the name of the Tantalus mountain range derives from a Greek mythic figure named Tantalus. As the story goes, Tantalus was rich and regularly dined with the Gods but one day, after angering the Gods at dinner, the Gods punished him by making him “stand in a pool of water beneath a fruit tree with low branches, with the fruit ever eluding his grasp, and the water always receding before he could take a drink.”¹ As I think of these mountains and my smallness, as I think about Adam and Eve and Tantalus, I think of how there are some things that are meant to be beyond our grasp and I pray: God, give us peace in knowing enough to know that it is good to be small.

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tantalus>

Image 8: Where can I go from your Spirit

This image was taken along the #1 highway on our way East towards Golden, BC. I don't know what it was that caused me to pull over – it wasn't even a designated lookout -- but I was drawn to this particular view and just had to stop. As I look at this image now, I am drawn particularly to the cloud, an image of God's presence throughout the scripture. We saw a lot of clouds on our trip—you will see more in some upcoming pictures—and as I think about the clouds, I think about how they image God's accompanying presence on our journeys. So, here's my challenge to you: next time you look at the clouds, acknowledge the presence of God's Spirit with you.

Images 9, 10, and 11: If I soar to the heavens, You are there

These next three images come from a few different stops along our trip. The first here comes from Squamish, BC where our whole family got to climb real rocks on granite crags with a local climbing guide. Here is Theo fearlessly ascending this crack-climb and showing us how it's done. The next picture comes from the Malahat Skywalk, a spiral wooden ramp leading up to a 32-meter viewing deck for panoramas over sea inlets & mountains on Vancouver Island. This was a stop that was recommended to us by Stu and Lois. The boys and I climbed to take in the views and slid down the huge slide weaving through the wooden structure while Melodie, who is not a big fan of heights, took a much-needed nap. Finally, this third picture comes from our ride up the Revelation Gondola at the Revelstoke Mountain in Revelstoke, BC. The ride begins at an elevation of 512 meters (1,680 ft) and finishes at 1,676 meters (5,500 ft). It was a cloudy day, so we passed through the clouds which made it feel like we literally soared to the heavens. The Psalmist's image of encountering God even on the heights is, of course, common in scripture. Moses famously ascended the mountain and entered the cloud on Mount Sinai and there he dwelled in the presence of God. In the New Testament too we have Jesus along with Peter,

James, and John climbing a mountain where the disciples see Jesus transfigured before them as God speaks from a cloud. The heights are places of isolation but also of revelation, of new perspectives afforded us by distance from everything else – perhaps that’s why they named the Gondola the “Revelation” gondola. But no matter the distance away from the ground we achieve on the heights, what is revealed to us is in the Psalmist’s words is that when we are isolated from everything else, we are yet still in the presence of the one who fills heaven and earth.

Images 12 and 13: If I bed down in Sheol—there You are.

These next two images come from Victoria again, this time from Beacon Hill Park, which is near Victoria’s coastline. We were unsure if this area of the park we were in was normally this barren and parched, or if it had been the lack of rain that had caused such a yellowed, bone-dry landscape. Walking through, it felt like the grass around us could ignite with the smallest spark – it didn’t feel like a place with a lot of life in it. This area of the park was only a short walk away to this next image, which is of the Moss Lady. Unfortunately, either due again to dry weather conditions or work to reconstruct the sculpture, the Moss Lady’s body did not look very mossy. Instead of moss growing on the earth, the dried barren earth looked like it was cracked, its shape barely being held together. I think of the Psalmist’s words, “If I bed down in Sheol” together with these pictures of barren, dry, and cracked earth, and I think about the current state of our world’s climate and the daily news of yet another wildfire or another raging storm and I wonder, about those places that it feels God’s life-giving, peace-making presence is lacking. I find myself praying: “God who is present with both the living and the dead, be present with all life threatened by the powers of death. May your peace be felt as rain on a parched earth and fertile moss on the dry, cracked body of our earth.”

Image 14: If I take wing with the dawn...

This next image comes from our airplane ride home on Friday morning. This time around Theo was able to sit by the window and watch as we lifted up into the morning sky on wings. I think about wings and about their symbolism in scripture. Wings are sometimes spoken of as a symbol of hope and renewal, like in Isaiah 40:31 – “those who hope in the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall rise up on wings like eagles.” Wings enable movement and freedom. I am always amazed by how quickly airplanes moves you from one place to another within Canada. That said, I confess that I also quite prefer the slow, easy, peaceful taxiing on the runway after landing to the fast takeoff, the mid-air turbulence, or the sudden reverse thrust at landing. As I think about wings, I also think about growth and new stages of life – we use the image of “spreading our wings” to talk about growing up and so I think about my children and about all the children at BMC. I also think about how wings appear throughout the Psalms as an image of safety and peace, and so I pray this prayer for our children: God, as our children spread their wings, may you hide them under your wings and give them peace.

Image 15 and 16: If I dwell at the ends of the sea...

These next two images come from our journey towards and time on Vancouver Island. The first one is of our ferry ride to Vancouver Island. The second image comes from the southern shore of Victoria looking out into the Salish Sea which leads out into the Pacific Ocean – this is the western “end” of Canada. The Psalmist’s image of dwelling at the ends of the sea is meant to evoke an image of travelling to and then living at the limits of the world, the place beyond which you cannot go further. This picture looking towards the Salish Sea is very near a historic point called “Clover Point,” the landing spot of the first colonizers of Vancouver Island and an area

that colonist records indicate was covered in red clover, tall grasses, and ferns.² This landscape had been tended by the Salish peoples long before the colonists arrived, but it changed quite profoundly with the colonial project. Despite retaining the name “Clover Point,” the native plant species that used to flourish can barely be found on the Island any more.³ As I think about the Psalmists words and about Clover point, I think about limits – about the colonial project to overcome the limitations of the sea and find lands new to dwell in – but I also think about the Indigenous Salish people, and the limits imposed on them after the arrival of European settlers. I also think about God’s presence in life’s limitations – as the one who sets limits for us and asks us to be content with them lest we do damage to ourselves or others in the process. This makes me ask: “What limitation is God asking me to be at peace with?”

Image 17: There, too, your hand leads me...

This image is from the Harbour in Victoria. As I look at this picture of Jaren looking out into the Harbour, I think about the hand of God leading him as he goes to high school next year, and I find myself praying that God would lead him in this new stage of life. I think too of all the parents who have prayed this prayer for their children over the years and who continue to do so, and I find myself praying now: God, lead our children as they make significant life transitions – as they journey to new places and face new challenges, grant them your peace.

Image 15: For you created my innermost parts, wove me in my mother’s womb... [Lake Louise, AB]

This image is actually no long in BC but in Alberta. Perhaps you recognize Lake Louise in the background. What is not evident from this picture is that we actually stood in this majestic spot for no more than 5 minutes as it was very busy, and we were on some significant time

² James Douglas in Hargrave 1938: 420-421, as cited by Akrigg and Akrigg 1975: 357.

³ <https://www.ou.edu/cas/botany-micro/ben/ben226.html>

constraints, so we had to try to soak in the view as quickly as possible. As I look at this picture of my children and think too of all the many children of God's world, I marvel at the mystery of life. In our modern, Western, scientific mindset, we often think we have a grasp on how life is enabled to exist. We know so much biology and our scientific instruments have enabled us to see some of the earliest moments of life as well as the different moments of development and change. And yet, what cannot be discerned through microscopes or explained in a textbook is the mystery of how any of this wondrous life can be at all – how it came to be in the first place and how it doesn't all just fall apart or disintegrate into nothing. In his book *Tokens of Trust*, the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams once described God's creative action as ongoing, a creative presence akin to "a...white heat at the centre of everything."⁴ I like this description. I challenge you to take time this week to be at peace for a moment and consider how God not only created back then but creates and enables life to exist in every moment.

Image 16: Wondrous are Your acts...

This picture is again from Lake Louise. As I look at it, I feel it is a fitting image to end with given that it seems to incorporate into one shot so many of the images we have been exploring thus far. The image shows height and depth; it displays clouds, the mountains, and the waters. And there are those small creatures, tiny little dots on the water, people enjoying the wondrous view – a gift of the one whose presence in the world brings peace. We may not be standing at that vantagepoint this morning, but here we are, God's small little creatures in this small sanctuary in beautiful Bloomingdale and we too are called to echo the Psalmist's words, so in closing, let us do that together in saying these words together: "Wondrous are your acts, O Lord."

⁴ *Tokens of Trust*, 35.

Now, I had said this was the last picture, but just for fun, I have one more for you. This was taken at Qualicum Beach on Vancouver Island. Apparently, the church's pastor was on vacation – I'm not sure if the sign was meant to convey that the church would be a lot more fun without the Pastor or what, but the kids thought I just had to pose in front of it. Now, I want to invite you to turn in your hymn books to #533, "Quietly, Peacefully." It is a beautiful hymn that plays with some of the rich images of Psalm 139 and ultimately calls us to find our deepest peace and fulfillment in the presence of God. Howie will lead us in the song, with the congregation being invited to sing the refrain parts.