

Sermon Title: *God of history, God of mystery*

**Psalm 24**

<sup>1</sup>The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it;

<sup>2</sup>for God has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.

<sup>3</sup>Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in God's holy place?

<sup>4</sup>Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully. <sup>5</sup>They will receive blessing from the Lord, and vindication from the God of their salvation. <sup>6</sup>Such is the company of those who seek our God, who seek the face of the God of Jacob, Leah & Rachel.

<sup>7</sup>Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in. <sup>8</sup>Who is the King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle.

<sup>9</sup>Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in. <sup>10</sup>Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, this is the King of glory.

**Exodus 3:4-10**

God called to Moses out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." <sup>5</sup>Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." <sup>6</sup>He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Isaac and Rebekah, and the God of Jacob and Leah and Rachel." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

<sup>7</sup>Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, <sup>8</sup>and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, and the Jebusites. <sup>9</sup>The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. <sup>10</sup>So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

**For Reflection**

The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

-Martin Luther King, Jr.

When we talk about God, we're talking about that sense you have – however stifled, faint, active, or repressed it might be – that hope is real, that things are headed somewhere, and that that somewhere is good.

-Rob Bell, *What we Talk About When We Talk About God*

This week we come to *God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, part II*. I have to say, just having “God” as a topic has caused me considerable angst – I have read much more in trying to wrestle out a sermon and a series than normal.

And for this week’s sermon preamble, to again remind you to listen with appropriate skepticism of anything I might say about God, I want to repeat something I said in a sermon about five years ago – something I learned from Sheri Hostetler, pastor of First Mennonite in San Francisco. Sheri had, for a time, studied permaculture. Permaculture (as some of you garden and farming type people might already know) is a set of design principles based on natural eco-systems that can be applied to agriculture, housing, gardening, and even city planning. What we find in permaculture is that nothing in nature goes in a straight line.

-It spirals like a sea shell, or the rings of a tree; like a weather system; like a solar system or galaxy.



-It branches like the root system of a tree; like a system of rivers, tributaries, and creeks; like blood vessels and veins running through our bodies.



-It fractals like mountains, like crystals, and lightning.



-It moves in waves: like sound and ocean waves.



-Or, it meanders: like a stream or river, like our intestines –OR- like a journey of faith – like our views and thoughts on God.



The meander, in fact, is the most efficient way for water to run – the pattern allows nutrients and sediments to drop out and filter into soil. This is why the most fertile soil is always found in river valleys. A straight line gives you speed but you lose sedimentation – you lose the nutrients. There is a reason why our intestines meander over many feet – so food has the ability to drop as many nutrients off as possible on its way through us. Not only that, but straight lines can be dangerous – often nature moving in a straight line is destructive: a rock slide, an avalanche, or water breaking through a dam or levy – so powerful and fast that it wipes out everything in its path.



We too are nature, our souls are nature – we are organic matter. Sheri says, “Maybe our journeys of faith meander, curve, lope to the left and then to the right, curve back in on themselves because that is the most efficient way for them to run – because that is how the nutrients, the wisdom drops out and filters into the soil of our soul. Maybe our journeys meander because to go in a straight line might be dangerous – too much energy, too much change for us to really process and embrace; we might wipe out too much in trying to get somewhere fast.”



I kept thinking about this meandering image as I thought about my views of God – our views of God – that whatever I might say here about the topic and concept of God, it reflects a point in time on my own meandering journey – a snapshot of some of the ways that I understand God currently. I am sure this will change. Or, at least, I hope it will continue to change and shift and evolve over time, as the Spirit of God leads me to deeper understanding of who God is and who I am (who we are) in response to that.

And so three snapshots of a place I happen to be in my own meandering journey of understanding a bit of who God is:

First) God is in and through all. Second) God is out ahead of us. And third) God is on the move.

First, God is in and through all. And just to note, that most of this section comes from Jurgen Moltmann and Rob Bell – I will not cite each thought, but this is where the thoughts of this section come from.

The ancient Hebrew people believed that God created with a word – in Hebrew, *dabar* – God’s spoken word that goes forth and created all that is. But it is not just the word of God that creates, it is not just *dabar*, but also the Breath of God that is breathed into the creation – the Spirit of God that animates life – in Hebrew, *Ruach* (a word that appears more than 380 times in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament).

They believed that everything you and I know to be, everything that is, exists because of an explosive, expansive, surprising, creative energy that surges through all things, and holds all things together, the *ruach* of God. The word of God created, but what gives the universe its life and depth and fullness – this is the breath of God. They called this cosmic electricity, this expressed power, the divine energy, the *ruach* of God.

They believed that *ruach* flows from God because, as the writer of our Psalm puts it, “the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it.” All of creation infused with *ruach*, crammed with restless creative breath of God, full of unquenchable life force, brought forth by the God who continually renews the face of the earth.

When the Hebrews talked about the world, then, they talked about all of this life: stars and rocks and bread and tears and whales having a singular, common, creative source – whom they called YHWH (God) – who powers and energizes it all with the breath of life, *ruach*. This is part of what it meant to believe in *One God*. Not multiple gods like the neighboring kingdoms

they lived among. But One God. One common source. One creative word, one life sustaining, creative breath.

While they understood this *ruach* to be as wide as the universe and powerful enough to fuel and animate everything from humanity to the stars of the heavens. And, they also understood this *ruach* to be as intimate and personal as the breath you just took and the breath you're about to take. The *ruach* of God to live and dwell within each of us. In the book of Job, the author says, "As long as I have life within me, the *ruach* of God is in my nostrils..."

Now, it is important to note that the Hebrews were careful not to say that God is the flower or sunset or the stars – they didn't say creation is God, because they understood that in giving life to everything, God also gives creation freedom to be whatever it's going to be, with all of the possibilities and potentials for good and bad; beauty and chaos; love and loss that such freedom might lead to.

While God's life force created and animates all that is – they did not say that those things were God.

So, I find this ancient concept of *ruach* to name that sense that a bit of the divine dwells in each bit of the creation, and that the same divine breath that stirs me to want my life to matter – that makes me want to love and give and work for justice – this is the same divine breath that moves and animates my daughter, my neighbor, my aunt who is estranged from our family, the people I meet at Corpus, the Syrian who waits in a refugee camp, those living in North Korea & Iran, and the immigrant deciding this moment whether or not to try to cross the desert into the United

States: The Breath of God flows through and animates us all – each person made in the image of God, and sustained with the breath of God – each piece of creation, infused with the breath of the Creator. *Ruach*. May we have eyes to see.

## II. God is out ahead of us.

I think one of the key questions about God that we face in our time – that people have probably faced in most generations - Is God out ahead of us, with a better, more inspiring vision for our future than we could ever imagine? Or did we pass God somewhere – in our efforts to be greater, faster and more technologically and scientifically sophisticated – did we pass where God wanted us to be? Is God behind us, back there in the past, calling us to return to how it once was? In many ways this is one of the central questions of our time, not just about God, but about everything: Is our best possible future lie in an idealized past era, or is our best future actually in the future? Is God calling us to meander further forward? Or, to turn around and retrace our steps?

Let me be clear that to say that God is out ahead of us does not mean that there aren't things in the past that we should value and learn from – it is not to say that there are not ways of being in the past that should instruct us for the future. Nor is it to say that we should embrace each new technological advance or movement of our society – many of the ways we advance and things we develop are not forming us in the ways of God's kingdom. To say that God is out ahead of us is to say with Dr. King, that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends

toward justice.” I think this would imply, that in King’s prophetic vision – God is out ahead of us, bending the arc toward justice, love, and equality for all people.

Author and speaker Rob Bell asks, “Why do we think slavery is wrong, or human trafficking is wrong?”<sup>1</sup> For most of human history, this was not the case – for most of human history it was thought to be okay for people to own one another, but we don’t think that anymore. Or, why do we believe that Black Lives Matter? Why are there women from all over Idaho marching right at this very moment? Why do we believe that women should be valued and paid equally, that they should have control over their own bodies? Again, for most of human history, this was not the case?

We feel this in our guts, in the core of our being – most of us are at this church (when we could be in countless other churches), because, at least in part – in the core of our being we have a feeling that we must continue to work for equality, justice, peace, love and dignity. We can call that feeling a lot of things: ethics or evolution or something else – but we call it God. That we are not just a random collection of cells. It is not just by chance that we feel those feelings deep within. We sometimes call it the Holy Spirit, *God out ahead of us*. God nudging us forward, or pulling us forward, or calling us to see a bit more how God sees. Jesus called that vision *the kingdom of God* – it is what he called his disciples to, what he showed us in his life.

There at the Burning Bush, in our second scripture, God says to Moses, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings. And I have come down to deliver them.” You see, in Egypt it

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<sup>1</sup> Rob Bell asks this question when he is a guest of the podcast *The Liturgists*.

was okay for people to own other people – the gods of Pharaoh apparently sanctioned this arrangement – that a few should own and benefit from the backbreaking work of many; that people could be owned and beaten and only valued for what they can produce. But, to the One God, to YHWH, to the God who is out in front of us – this arrangement was not okay. This One God hears the cry of the oppressed and seeks to pull us out of that, until eventually there is no more slave or free, male or female, Jew or Greek, Egyptian or Hebrew but all are one in the God of Jesus Christ. This is God out ahead of us.

### III. And finally, God is on the move

In Adult Sunday School we are doing a few sessions that correspond with the sermon series, and last Sunday we made a chart listening images and ways of thinking about God from different eras of our life: childhood, early adulthood, and currently. At the end of the discussion, and as I looked at my list of my views of God from early adulthood, I realized that much of my preaching is against my early adulthood views of God – preaching to older views of God that still want to hang-on, that won't totally let me go.

The view of God that I preach against the most, is the view of a God who created the world and then stepped back to watch. In theological terms we call that *Deism*, that God set things in motion and now watches it all unfold – sometimes people call this the “watchmaker God.” You have probably never heard me say “Deism” before from up here, even if you have been here every Sunday the past five and a half years, but still I preach against this view quite

regularly. I am preaching to myself, that the God of the Universe is for us, is still active, is still moving, is still out in front of us – that God is still working.

And I struggle to feel that every day, I struggle to look around and say “look, God is here, God is moving among us” – that is why I am still preaching this to myself so frequently. I believe it on my best days. And I would say I believe it most days. But I do not believe it every day. That is why I begin my sermons with the prayer I do each week, “God, make us aware of your Spirit’s presence among us...” My prayer is not, “Holy Spirit come.” I am declaring to us and to myself – that God is already here – that God’s presence is already here with you and with me and with us. That we just need to be aware of that Spirit. That is what I hope. That is who I want to be.

As I have said before, quoting – I am not sure who, “Belief is simply living as if it were true.” And I have no doubt that believing in an Active God who is For me and For us has made me a happier person, a more loving person, a more hopeful person. I don’t think I have to do it all on my own. I am not alone. I just have my part to play.

And so, Thanks be to God:

-The God whose life giving breath is in and through all that is

-The God who is out ahead of us, inviting us toward fuller and deeper love

-The God who is still on the move; still shaping, renewing, and transforming.

As we meander toward deeper knowledge and understanding,

may we talk passionately and personally about this God;  
may we live passionately and personally with this God.  
Amen.