

CHRIST IN YOU

April 12, 2009 – Easter
By Andrew Wilson

Psalm 16:8-11
Colossians 2:9-12

This past week a good friend from this congregation, Caroline Elder, had a stroke. Some of you know Caroline; many of you don't. She and George never had any children. George died two years ago at the age of 83, and Caroline has been confined to a wheelchair since well before that time.

I visited Caroline at Kaiser Sunset Hospital on Good Friday. She was hooked up to several monitors and was being fed through a tube. I didn't expect her to respond when I spoke her name, but she woke almost immediately and looked me in the eye. The left side of her face lifted in a flicker of a smile, so I knew at least that she recognized me.

I've been in similar circumstances many times, but I was still at a loss to know what to say or do. Because I had neglected to bring a Bible with me I couldn't do what everyone expects the minister to do. So I elected to just sit by her side, hold her hand, and look her in the eye.

I sat there for 15 or 20 minutes. I broke the silence every now and then with a bit of political news – the kind of news that ordinarily would have captured her interest – or a story about my daughter Holly. Each time I spoke I realized I wasn't saying what I really wanted to say. Or that she understood anything I was saying. But after a while that frightened look in Caroline's face went away.

As hard as it was to watch my friend suffer, it was even harder to leave. I knew that, with Easter and our trip to the Dominican Republic just ahead, I might not see her again, at least not in this life.

I took a deep breath, leaned in close, and spoke my heart: "Caroline, don't be afraid. The Lord is right here with you. He died on a cross on Good Friday; he rose from the grave at Easter; and he's not going to leave you in this situation. He's going to take care of you. He's going to work this thing out. And you're going to be with him forever."

Then I said a short prayer, told her I loved her, and left.

In life's deepest valleys the thing we treasure more than anything else is the presence of a friend. Nothing can take the place of presence, not photos, not phone calls, not lavish gifts, not even a live video chat. When we're sick or in trouble, we don't need pious words of encouragement nearly so much as we need the people we love to be present with us.

The same thing is true when life is good. Most of life's pleasures and diversions are hugely magnified when they're shared with other people. That's true of concerts, games, hikes, trips to the beach, ball games, dinners out, and even movies at home. Most of us enjoy such activities far more when we're with friends or family members than we do when we're alone.

The crucial thing is presence. The mere presence of someone we love makes all the difference.

Presence is a huge theme in the Bible. The theme is introduced at the very beginning, in the story of creation. God creates man and women, each as a gift to the other, and gives them the Garden of Eden to enjoy and oversee. The garden is a beautiful, but what makes it indescribably wonderful is God's presence.

In the Psalm we read today, number sixteen, David praises God for showing him the path of life. Though David is looking forward to a day of deliverance, his description of that day calls to mind Adam and Eve's experience in Eden:

[Y]ou will fill me with joy in your presence,
With eternal pleasures at your right hand.

- Psalm 16:11

But as we all know, Adam and Eve's pleasures don't last. When they disobey God, they spoil the whole arrangement. The image of God in them becomes distorted. God banishes them from Eden and drives them out of his presence. The sin of Adam and Eve is passed on in every succeeding generation. Humankind becomes so corrupted by sin, in fact, that people turn their back on God. They begin to make up their own rules and live according to their own passions.

The story of the Bible, we might say, is the story of how God pursues us, and reverses the damage done to us by that original sin. God's aim, from the start, is to re-establish fellowship with us, so we can once again enjoy his presence. To accomplish that, he has to do something that seems impossible from the point of view of humanity. He has to somehow destroy the sin that has become so much a part of us, and make us holy, as he is holy.

In Israel's history, God's presence was experienced by his people in many strange ways.

God appears to Moses at Mount Sinai in a flaming bush that isn't consumed. When Moses approaches the bush, God tells him to take off his sandals because he is standing on holy ground. Setting the pattern for future encounters with God, Moses hides his face in sheer terror. God promises to use Moses to lead his people out of Egypt where they serve as Pharaoh's slaves. And of course, eventually God makes good on his promise.

When the people finally arrive at Sinai, they come to what the Book of Exodus describes as the place of God's dwelling. They're forbidden to touch the place on penalty of death. Only Moses is invited into God's presence.

God later reveals his plan to move from Sinai. He instructs the people, through Moses, to build a movable worship house called a tabernacle that will become his new dwelling place. The tabernacle includes in its inner sanctum an ornate, gold-plated box called the Ark of the Covenant. God's dwelling place will not be inside the box, because God is not a physical object. Rather, God will be present, God explains, in an around the top of the Ark

Before the tabernacle is constructed, while Moses is on the mountain with God, the people become restless and create a new god for themselves in the form of a golden calf. God's anger burns hot against the people for their idolatry. He tells Moses he's going to send an angel to

lead them to the Promised Land. “I will not go with you,” he declares, “because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way” (33:3).

Moses understands the crucial importance of God’s presence. An angel won’t do; an angel won’t be able to handle the many dangers and pitfalls that lie ahead. Moses knows they need the Lord God Almighty. So he intercedes on behalf of the people with words that soften God’s heart:

“If your presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people of the earth?”

- Exodus 33:15-16

By this point in their journey, Moses and the people have become completely dependent on God. Though they’re still terrified of him, his presence has become a source of comfort and strength for them. They build the tabernacle, and God’s glory descends and fills it. From that point on, God confirms his presence with the people by sending a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to lead them.

After the people finally settle into the land God gives them, he instructs King Solomon to build a grand temple. The Ark that was included in the Tabernacle is housed in the Temple. When the Temple is finished in about, God’s glory once again descends and fills the place. With the whole assembly of Israel standing around the Temple, Solomon offers this prayer:

“[W]ill God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built! Yet give attention to your servant’s prayer and his plea for mercy, O Lord my God.... May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, this place of which you said, ‘My name shall be there,’ so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place.”

- 1 Kings 8:27-29

There are many things that make the people of Israel distinctive. They have unusual dietary habits; they observe the Sabbath; and they have a magnificent set of scriptures that is included in the Christian Bible. But what distinguished them as God’s people, in ancient times, was God’s presence with them.

In the time of Jesus, worship life in Israel was still focused on the Temple. The original temple – the one built by Solomon – had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. But a second temple had been built after Israel’s return from exile. And that second, smaller temple had been absorbed and replaced by a third grand temple that was built by King Herod not long before Jesus’ birth.

The problem, however, was that Israel had failed so often, and so grievously, that God had long since abandoned the Temple. The prophets testified again and again about the depth of Israel’s sin.

Ezekiel, for example, had a vision in which God’s glory departed from the Temple.

Jesus himself called the religious leaders of Jerusalem a brood of vipers. Just before his crucifixion, Jesus entered outer courtyard of the Temple and drove out the money changers and others who sold animals for sacrifice. He said to them:

“It is written... my house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers.”

- Matthew 21:13

But the situation wasn't hopeless. In the writings of the prophets, in that era after the exile, a new theme began to emerge. God's presence would return to the Temple in Jerusalem. And even more astonishing, God's Spirit would be poured out on his people. The Spirit would come not to select individuals, but to all of God's people. In other words, God would live not in a Temple made of stone and wood, but in the hearts of his people. He would enter them, and change them into obedient people. He would enable them to perform signs and wonders.

Another promise emerged in that period after the Exile. God would send a Messiah, a Savior, who would re-establish a Davidic throne in Israel. The Messiah would usher in a new era of peace, and would re-unite Israel as a worshiping community. His fame and glory would be known throughout the earth. Under his leadership, Israel would become a blessing to all the nations of the earth.

The New Testament writers help us to make sense of all these promises.

Of course they testify that Jesus was and is the promised Messiah. But they also insist that the promises regarding the Temple were fulfilled in Jesus. Listen again to that passage we read from Colossians:

[I]n Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.

- Colossians 2:9

Paul is saying that God is fully present in Jesus because Jesus is God in the flesh. He continues:

...and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.

- Colossians 2:10

In other words, if you have received Jesus Christ by faith, he is alive inside you. He has taken up residence in your heart. Your body has become that temple where he now lives.

After Jesus cleared the money changers out of the temple, a group of skeptics confronted him. They didn't understand his motives. They couldn't tell whether he was actually in favor of restoring the Temple, or if he was trying to undermine it. They asked:

“What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?”
Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”

- John 2:18-19

Though they couldn't understand it at the time, Jesus was making reference not to Herod's Temple, but to his own body. He would be torn down – he would die a brutal death on a cross. But three days later he would rise from the dead. And his resurrection would be the sign of God's victory over sin and death, and of his intention to be present with his people forever.

A few weeks after his resurrection, Jesus went to be with his Father. But he didn't leave his disciples alone. And he doesn't leave us alone. He gives his Spirit to everyone trusts in him. He grants his wisdom, power and strength to everyone who loves and serves him so that we can do the same works that he did when he walked the earth and we can be his very presence wherever we go.

Ashley Adamson, our new Director of Children's Ministry, told me a story on Friday that illustrates the power of Christ's presence in our lives. She spends much of her time during the week circulating in the classrooms at our Center for Children, telling Bible stories and singing songs.

As she was leaving one of the preschool rooms, a little boy said to her, "Goodbye, Jesus."

We try to discourage idolatry at our church, so she quickly corrected him. "I'm not Jesus," she said, "I'm just Ashley."

"I know," the boy said, "but you're the one who brings Jesus to me."

If you are a Christian – if Christ is your Lord and Savior – then you have his Spirit in you. And you are his face – you are his physical presence – in this world.

And if you don't know the Lord, but you hunger for his presence in your life, you can receive him by faith right now. He's standing at the door of your heart, knocking and waiting. He knows you, he loves you, and he longs to share his life – eternal life – with you.