

ALWAYS WITH YOU

As I was reflecting on Psalm 139 in preparation for this sermon, the two questions the psalmist asked God kept jumping out at me.

“Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?”

Of course, God didn’t personally respond to those questions, but the psalmist went on to answer them himself, declaring in poetic terms that we can never run away, hide or escape from the Lord. I want to take a few minutes this morning to reflect on that.

Is there any place, anywhere, either on the surface of the earth, under the sea or in the heavens above, that we can go where God isn’t? Can we ever get away from the Lord?

A little girl was moving with her family from Boston to Cleveland, and she was very excited about it. The night before their departure she said her prayers as usual: “Bless Mommy and Daddy and my brother Joey and my dog Toby and my cat Princess . . .”

Then the little girl finished off with, “This is goodbye, God. We’re moving to Cleveland.”

“Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?”
Could the answer be “Cleveland?”

Some years back, *The Los Angeles Times* reported an incredible story that happened in Encinitas, California. This is what the newspaper wrote.

Hospital officials and family have just one explanation: 18-month-old Grant Taylor Huff was blessed with something far more powerful than luck when he fell from an 80-foot cliff and plunged unhurt into the churning surf below. “The Lord has something else in mind for this child,” his grandmother, 62-year-old Margaret Oakley, said Monday as the curly-haired toddler played in the living room of her ranch-style home.

The toddler, who was in Oakley’s backyard with a 4-year-old cousin, fell after he crawled over a two-foot retaining wall onto a neighbor’s property and slipped. He apparently rolled and bounced down the steep slope for 30 feet before he was launched into the surf another 50 feet below, authorities and

relatives said.

In keeping with Grant's remarkable luck, a couple walking their dogs on the beach below noticed something fall from the sky and found the boy struggling in the surf as the high tide washed over him. Jim and Maria Lindsay pulled Grant from the surf, "conscious and alert and crying," said San Diego County Sheriff's Sgt. Rob Morse. Other beachgoers helped carry Huff up the steep stone steps leading from the beach and flagged down a sheriff's deputy, said Morse, who arrived at the scene as the wide-eyed little boy was being hustled into an ambulance.

Monday, the Costa Mesa, California youngster was released from the hospital after a good night's sleep and a battery of X-rays that showed no injuries. "I would say he was accompanied by a guardian angel on the way down," Mark Morelli, spokesman for Children's Hospital in San Diego, said Monday. "When I got to his room this morning, the youngster had not only eaten breakfast, his mother was playing some music and he was dancing on the floor in time with the rhythm.

"They went over everything twice because of the description of what had happened at the scene," Morelli said. "They couldn't believe that there was virtually no injury."

"He's fine today, very active, running around like crazy," said his mother, Joanne Taylor, 31. "But he's still a little nervous."

"Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?" It would seem that 18-month-old Grant Taylor Huff couldn't escape from God, even while falling from an 80-foot cliff into the roiling waves of the Pacific Ocean in Encinitas, California.

"If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast."

A young girl asked his grandfather, "Poppa, how big is the world?"

"It's getting smaller every day," Poppa replied.

"But how big is it?" the granddaughter persisted.

"It depends on which world you're referring to," he said.

"There's more than one world?"

"Yes, there is," he replied.

"Where in the world is God?"

The man asked his granddaughter to bring him a piece of paper and a few of her crayons. "Come here and let me show you." He drew a small circle in the

middle of the page and said, "This is your world. It's where you live. It's right here in this neighborhood. It includes all the people you know and love. God is there.

"Within that world is the world within your mind. That world is the places and things you think and make up and believe. They call it your imagination. God is there.

"Next, there's the world you live in, the world we call 'the earth.' That's the whole world with all the people God has created. With all the new ways of communicating, that world has gotten smaller. I can text my brother in Australia, or call my uncle in England. I can email friends who have computers anywhere in the world. God is there.

Now, remember, like you, each of the people in the world has a world of their own," the grandfather said, and he began drawing many small circles.

"Like a gazillion?" she asked.

"Well, somewhere around there. But in each one of those gazillion-odd worlds, God is also there."

Now, drawing a bigger circle around the whole thing, Poppa said, "This is the biggest world. We call it the universe, but we have no idea how big that is. Some people say it's so humungous that it can't even be measured. It just goes on forever. But God is there, too."

The young girl then took a crayon and drew a tiny heart within the biggest circle. "What's that?" Poppa asked.

Not answering, his granddaughter kept looking at the picture. Poppa waited a moment for her to respond. "That's grandma. She's in God's heart, right?"

Poppa was quiet now. Then his granddaughter pointed to the heart she drew and asked, "Is this where heaven is, Poppa?"

"Yes, and there's a little bit of heaven right here, too," he said as he hugged her.

The young girl sighed and said confidently, "So, no matter what world we're in, God is there."

"That's right," said Poppa. "And I don't know where in the world I would be without Him."

"If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast." "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I

praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. . . . Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”

Someone asked a wise rabbi named Joshua ben Karhan this question:

“Why did the Holy one, blessed be His name, choose to speak to Moses at Mount Horeb out of a thorn bush?” Rabbi Joshua answered, “So as to teach us that there is no place on this earth free of the presence of God. God is everywhere, even in the lowly, even in a thorn bush.”

“If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,’ even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.”

Mark Redfern wrote, “My friend Kendall had been living with AIDS for seven years. When he was first diagnosed, he told a few relatives. Then he wished he hadn’t. Some expected him to die almost immediately and expressed surprise when he didn’t. Some were so distressed that Kendall had to spend enormous amounts of his limited energy consoling them. And some were afraid they might catch the disease from him and began to avoid him. So only after a few disclosures, he kept quiet. “He even began to wonder if God would turn away from him.

The first spring of his illness, he spent a weekend at a retreat center. The burden of his terrible secret was almost more than he could bear. As he walked the grounds of the retreat center in a gentle rain, lifting his face to heaven, weeping, he became aware that the rain was mingling with his tears. In that moment came a comforting realization: ‘I knew I wasn’t alone in my sorrow. I felt that God was crying with me.’

“God’s ‘tears’ reminded Kendall of God’s powerful promise in Romans 8:38-39: ‘For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.’

“This promise of God in Scripture gives Kendall strength to face each new day. He said to me, ‘It’s the thing I cling to that keeps me going.’”

We can’t hide or run away from God, or God’s love.

As I conclude this sermon, I return to the same questions I asked when I began it. “O Lord, “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?” In other words, is there any place, anywhere, either on the surface of the earth, under the sea or in the sky, that we can go where God isn’t? Can we

ever get away from the Lord? And in faith I respond to those questions by repeating the same answer the author of Psalm 139 gave.

“If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. . . .”
“If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,’ even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.”

So, when you’re burdened by life, find yourself in the darkness and begin to believe you’re alone in your despair, I pray that you will remember the words of the psalmist, and find comfort and assurance that wherever you are, in heaven or on earth, and whatever circumstances you find yourself in, good or bad, joyful or sorrowful, peaceful or painful, God is with you. Always.

Thanks be to God. Amen.