



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker  
March 24, 2019 Sermon

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## To See Your Face - Again

Psalms 27:4-9, 13-14; John 14:1, 15-21

### Preface to the First Scripture Lesson:

In the Bible, seeing God, seeing God face to face, is something both deeply longed for and deeply feared. Deeply longed for because it is what we were made for, our heart's deepest desire—but also because we don't have it yet. So in the Psalms especially, we get verses like this:

*My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.  
When shall I come and behold the face of God?*

And this:

*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?*

And this:

*Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord!*

But also deeply feared because, well . . . Who can stand before the Lord? Not the unrighteous. "See God," Biblical wisdom holds, "and die."

You can see this in Moses. At the beginning of his career, when he first encounters God in the burning bush, Moses "hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God." So also later, the Israelites, terrified at the prospect of seeing God, send Moses up Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments in their stead: "You go up," they say to him, "because if we go, we will die." The unrighteous cannot stand before God. Moses does go up; in fact he speaks to God so frequently through the years, that, at the end of his life, of all the tributes paid to him, this was the highest: "Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend."

Our first Scripture Lesson, Psalm 27, expresses first the longing to see God's face ("Your face Lord do I seek"), but also, if you listen closely, the fear ("Do not hide your face . . . do not turn away . . . do not cast me off or forsake me"). In that way the Psalm, I think, speaks for all of us. Listen now for God's Word . . .

### Preface to the Second Scripture Lesson:

"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down his life for his friends." Jesus says those words to his disciples on the night of his arrest. During Lent, I'm preaching on them in hopes that they will acquire a deeper meaning for us, and Easter, therefore, a deeper joy.

Needless to say, on that night, the night of Jesus' arrest, the disciples are troubled. Over supper, Jesus has told them that his hour has now come: he is going away, leaving them, and where he is going they cannot follow. Worse still, he has told them that one of them is going to betray him.

The disciples may not understand all of this, but they understand enough: they will never see him again. So needless to say—he is their teacher, their friend, and their Messiah—they are troubled.

But Jesus reassures them. He tells them he will not leave them orphaned: he will come to them again. And in the meantime, he will send them the Spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit, to be with them in his absence. And that absence will not be forever. He assures them that they will see him again—in the land of the

living.

Listen now for God's Word . . .

### **Sermon:**

"It's good to see you," that's the characteristic greeting—and characteristic expression—of friendship. And you can hear a great deal about friendship in those five words—"It's good to see you."

First, you can hear this: A friend is someone who wants what is good for his or her friend simply for the friend's own sake. Not for *my* sake, because there's something in it for me, because I will somehow benefit, even if just by the association and the shared feeling—but simply for my friend's *own* sake: a friend wants what is good for his or her friend simply for the friend's own sake.

And you can also hear this: A friend loves his or her friend simply for who the friend is; not for what they have—money or position—or even traits they possess—talents, virtues and goodness—No, a friend loves his or her friend simply for *who* they are, simply that they are: a friend loves a friend simply for the friend's own sake.

And you can also hear this: friendship—like all other kinds of love—is delight in the mere being, the very existence of another. "It's good to see you." That's the characteristic greeting—and characteristic expression—of friendship.

And that night, the night of his arrest, Jesus calls the disciples his friends: "I do not call you servants any longer," he says to them, "but I call you friends." Which means he wants what is good for them for their own sake, and he loves them for who they are, and he delights in them for their very existence.

And that same night, he also tells them he's leaving them.

It's not hard to imagine what they must have been thinking, feeling at that point: "I—we—will never see you again." His presence—his presence there with them that night—is already beginning to be overshadowed by his impending absence.

It's a strange thing: this felt mixture of both presence and absence; strange, but we feel it all the time: always, even if we're not always aware of it.

We feel it whenever we say good bye to someone we love—even if it's not forever, even if it's only for a relatively short time, or we don't know how long a time. It's what can make good-byes so poignant: the person is still there, with us, we're still together, and we know—we're sure—we'll be together soon, soon enough, whenever that may be. But already, as we're saying our good-byes, already, our being together is beginning to be overshadowed by our impending absence from one another. You can feel it.

Oh, of course, most of the time we don't dwell on it or mention it, we don't even think about it—don't allow ourselves to. Soon enough, we'll be back together again. But even so, it's still there, we still feel it, as we say good-bye, if only a little bit, even if we can't—or won't—acknowledge it.

We certainly feel it, much more deeply and more explicitly, when we say our final good-byes to someone we love, when that person is dying—that's when we really feel that strange mixture of presence and impending absence. And later, after they're gone, it can get turned around: we can feel a strange mixture of present absence and remembered presence.

If you want to know what I mean by that last phrase—"present absence and remembered presence"—think of that picture. That picture—it doesn't matter where it is—in a frame on your wall or on your desk, on your refrigerator or your phone, tucked away in your dresser drawer or in your wallet, or buried in your heart, it doesn't matter—think of that picture, that picture of that person or persons you will never see again—whose face or faces you will never see again—at least this side of heaven.

Think of that picture, and you'll feel once again that strange mixture of present absence and remembered presence. You can see that person, that face, that smile, hear that voice, they're right *there* in the pic-

ture, almost as though they were right *here*, still with you, right next to you, in this world. And yet at the same time, you feel that sense of absence—grief, with its peculiar, familiar, stabbing pain: that strange mixture of present absence and remembered presence.

And it doesn't have to be a picture, or an image. Anything in the world, indeed the world itself, especially the world itself, can do it. As a young man, Augustine lost a dear friend. He describes his grief this way:

*My heart was made dark by sorrow, and whatever I looked upon was death. My hometown was a torment to me; my father's house, a strange unhappiness. Whatsoever I had done together with him [my friend] was, now that I was apart from him, turned into a cruel torture. My eyes sought for him on every side, and he was not given to them. I hated all things, because they no longer held him. Nor could they now say to me, "Here he comes," as they did in his absence from them while he lived.*

For Augustine, in his grief, the world has become a strange mixture of his friend's present absence and remembered presence.

And so our world too, when it comes to God: we feel it all the time, even if only a little bit, even if we can't—or won't—acknowledge it:

*My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.  
When shall I come and behold the face of God?*

Present absence and remembered presence: Augustine and the Psalmist speak for all of us, I think. A

<i>Pictures on the nightstand, TV's on in the den</i>	<i>Everything is everything</i>
<i>Your house is waiting,</i>	<i>Everything is everything</i>
<i>For you to walk in,</i>	<i>But you're missing</i>
	<i>You're missing</i>

contemporary American poet, writing about those who went missing after 9/11, puts it this way: You're missing, Lord: that strange mixture of present absence and remembered presence.

*Answer me quickly, O Lord; my spirit fails.  
Do not hide your face from me,  
or I shall be like those who go down to the Pit.*

You're missing, Lord: When shall I see your face? God's present absence and remembered—and longed for—presence.

But with Jesus, it was supposed to be different. "The kingdom of God is at hand," he said. "I and the Father are one," he said. "Whoever sees me, sees him who sent me," he said. His miracles, his teaching, his very being—even the opposition he engendered (the Messiah would not come without opposition, the prophets had warned)—all of it showed that Jesus was the promised one, the Messiah, Emmanuel, God with us—or so the disciples believed.

And now he tells them he's leaving, going where they cannot go. His presence—his presence there with them that night—is already beginning to be overshadowed by his impending absence. And worse still, if such a thing is possible, it is because of their own unrighteousness—one of their own number is going to betray him.

And so it seems that, soon enough, everything will be everything again. They will never see him again: and so, once again, they will be left with that strange mixture of God's present absence and remembered presence.

You're missing: *How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?*

Needless to say, they're troubled.

What Jesus asks them to do is believe: "Believe in God," he says to them, "believe also in me." More particularly, Jesus asks them to believe in his friendship for them, to believe that he wants what is good for them for their own sake, and that he loves them for who they are, and that he delights in their very existence. "Greater love has no one than this," he says to them, "to lay down his life for his friends." And he asks them to believe that, because he lays down his life, they will see him—see his face—again.

"It's good to see you," that's the characteristic greeting—and characteristic expression—of friendship. And one day, Jesus assures them—and us—we will hear those words from him. We will see the face of God without fear.

And if that proves too hard for the disciples—and for us—to believe, Jesus will send the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit, to teach us and to pray for us, to care for us and to comfort us, to guide us and to give us faith sufficient for the day. And what that means is that God's absence will not define this world or our lives in it. Instead, God's friendship with us in Jesus Christ will.

And what that means is that while, yes, there will be times when we feel the present absence of God in our world, nonetheless, even then, the Holy Spirit will be present to comfort us in those times, even if we can't—or won't—acknowledge it.

And what it also means is that there will also be times, when we will see the glory of God, the face of God, present in this world, here and now.

As when Jacob saw the face of his brother Esau, his brother ready to forgive him, after all Jacob had done to him, after all their years apart. And Jacob, who knew the face of God having just spent the night wrestling with God, says to Esau: "[F]or truly, brother, to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favor."

Or as when John Ames writes to his young son, the child of his old age:

*I can tell you this, I'd leave [everything], on Christmas Eve, on the coldest night of the world, and walk a thousand miles just for the sight of your face . . . That is just a way of saying I could never thank God sufficiently for the splendor He has hidden from the world, and revealed to me in your sweetly ordinary face.*

There will be times when we see the splendor of God, the face of God in this world, especially in the faces of others, often where we least expect it. That's what we must believe.

And the promise of Jesus' death and resurrection—greater love has no one than this: to lay down his life for his friends—is that one day we will see God and all those we love face to face—forever. Forever. And then we will say to one another; It's good to see you—again.

*I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord  
in the land of the living.  
Wait for the Lord;  
be strong, and let your heart take courage;  
wait for the Lord!*

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.