



## God With Us Always

### Sermon for the 11th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 16C, August 21, 2022

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

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[Jeremiah 1:4-10, Psalm 71:1-6, Hebrews 12:18-29, Luke 13:10-17](#)

The summer before my final year in Seminary, I was preparing at home in Coeur d'Alene for my General Ordination Exams. In addition, I was an intern of sorts here at St. Luke's. During that summer, our priest had to go on leave (and eventually retired in the following Fall) for medical reasons. My ministry here involved meeting with the homebound members whom Fr. Bob had been visiting monthly with Eucharist and prayer. In addition to Eucharist, I was to provide answers about the challenges facing the congregation and Fr. Bob due to his illness.

I had been away at seminary for two years at this point so I was visiting people whom I knew of or knew. However, I didn't have the relationship with them to compare with the ones I had developed with the choir as a past organist and choir director. I wondered: Who was I? What did I have to say to them really? I was so nervous about each meeting. So before I walked through their doors, I recalled the power of God's words to Jeremiah: "You shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, Do not be afraid for them, for I am with you to deliver you."

Having experienced directly the power of that presence, I have been able to keep the promise of the power of God's presence as a ready truth during my years of ministry. As long as I put my trust in God's power, in God's words... and not my own, then all has been very well indeed.

Jeremiah trusted God in spite of his very real doubts! He ran into challenges throughout his story in his tale in the prophets of our scriptures. Still, he continued to say what God commanded him to say. He trusted that all would be well as long as he spoke what God called him to say. Jeremiah deeply trusted in the power of God's promised presence in his life.

God's power is so difficult to define. The writer of Hebrews writes of this intangible power. The writer says, "You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them." None of what the writer says can be touched or felt, yet, though hard to describe exactly, it can be experienced. We are at a loss of words to define that experience concretely. For our own descriptions of the existence of God's power in our midst, we need metaphors, comparisons, similes, ... it's like this or perhaps like that!

In the second paragraph, the writer says that God's power is such that it can shake the earth and the heaven. If you know Handel's Messiah at all, you know there is a wonderful aria for the Bass soloist in the first half of the Christmas oratorio: "Yet once, a little while and I will shake the heavens and the earth, the sea, and the dry land. And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come."

This passage is from the prophet Haggai and Hebrews echoes this passage here to describe to us how God's power has so shaken this world with the coming of the Messiah to be our midst. Still because of God's power, **we** cannot be shaken because of our faith in our ever-present God. The Hebrews writer says: "... Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks... for indeed our God is a consuming fire."

So again, we receive a description of the all-encompassing power of God in terms that can make us think of Moses and that mysterious burning bush on the holy mountain. God KNEW of the problems of the Israelites. God came to MOSES to free them from Pharaoh's power using God's overwhelming power. Then that same fire, in the form of the Pillar of Fire led them all to the Holy Mountain where they began their own purification in the desert as God's chosen people.

Our challenge is to grow in our ability to truly trust in God's eternal and powerful presence that surrounds us always. God is not promising us magic tricks and supernatural ability but an abiding presence that can **keep** us safe in our life in God's love... always.

The gift of our Gospel invites us to ponder God's **power** and God's presence. When I read of the bent-over woman, I am reminded of a gentleman who was a member of my congregation in Boise. He was "bent-over" just like the bent-over woman in today's story. He had to turn his head sideways in order to see the person whom he was addressing. As he walked, he could mainly see the floor and could barely lift his head to see forward. Yet he insisted on walking up to our altar rail. Always. The Eucharist was the meal that sustained him weekly for his life and ministry of love to others.

I see him in the bent-over woman... someone unable to speak to someone face to face; bent from a degenerated spine due to whatever disorder or extreme osteoporosis afflicted him. So think of this woman this morning. Bent-over for eighteen years. Still she comes to synagogue, to the gathering, to hear God's word. Regardless of her uncomfortable, crippling, and seemingly never-ending situation, she comes to hear, worship and praise God.

Most likely people have gotten used to her and ignore her in her infirmity. Still, Jesus sees her immediately. With a word, he declares her "free from [her] ailment." He touches her and she can stand up straight for the **FIRST TIME IN ALMOST TWO DECADES!** Here is the power and presence of God's consuming fire, indeed! She immediately praises God... just as much as I know that Peter in Boise praised God even though he was never freed until his death. Truly, God's power touched them both.

Can you imagine the excitement in that synagogue that Sabbath? The joy? The awe? Here in their midst, this young rabbi, this young teacher, had touched her and she was healed. What an example of God's presence there for them all to witness!

Well... not all of them, though. The leader was "indignant" says Luke because Jesus healed her on a Sabbath. Jesus rebuked him quickly because he was trying to put a fence around God's power... as if we humans could limit God or God's love! Imagine God only being able to be present with us Monday through Saturday because **WE** say so!

In each of our lives, we are invited to discern God's presence in our lives daily and relish it and respond. Remember the writer of Hebrews... God's presence is apparent to us just about anywhere... a blazing fire, darkness, gloom, a tempest. Perhaps we are aware of God in a soft breeze, a waving leaf, the expanse of Big Sky country here in the west or beside the ocean. Maybe you saw the Aurora Borealis this past **week**.

The miracle of this wide world we inhabit reminds us constantly of the One who is greater than us all; of the One who never leaves us; of the One whose abundant love carries us through all of our challenges and joys. Always.

AMEN.