

## ***“Where Is God in This?”***

Rev. David Gregory

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Easter 5



### **First reading**

*John 14:8-12*

from *The Message*, by Eugene Peterson

Philip said (to Jesus), “Master, show us the Father; then we’ll be content.”

“You’ve been with me all this time, Philip, and you still don’t understand? To see me is to see the Father. So how can you ask, ‘Where is the Father?’ Don’t you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I speak to you aren’t mere words. I don’t just make them up on my own. The Father who resides in me crafts each word into a divine act.

“Believe me: I am in my Father and my Father is in me. If you can’t believe that, believe what you see—these works. The person who trusts me will not only do what I’m doing but even greater things, because I, on my way to the Father, am giving you the same work to do that I’ve been doing. You can count on it.”

### **Second reading**

*I Wake Close to Morning*

by Mary Oliver

Why do people keep asking to see  
God’s identity papers  
when the darkness opening into morning  
is more than enough?  
Certainly any god might turn away in disgust.  
Think of Sheba approaching  
the kingdom of Solomon.  
Do you think she had to ask,  
“Is this the place?”

I'm David Gregory, and I'd like to welcome you to the Community Congregational Church, a spiritual home for anyone from anywhere, and based in the San Francisco Bay Area. We like to think that our voice represents a liberal and progressive form of Christianity, one that we make no apologies for. We have long been champions of contemplative spiritual practice, justice for everyone and everything, including the earth, and the beauty of divine creation in the earth and in the arts. We have sought to embrace the teachings of Jesus and to share them in ways that make sense in a post-modern world.

The Protestant Mainline—of which we are a part—has been thought of as dying or dead. It is easy to see why people think that, and it may actually be true, depending on your terminology or the tools you use to measure the health of religious movements like ours. But the cultural effects of the Covid-19 pandemic are pointing to a different possibility . . . the one that says liberal Christianity hasn't been dying. It's just been hiding. That may feel like a strange thing to say, but hear me out.

For the last four or five decades, forms of Christianity more conservative than ours have been employing whatever new technology came along. As a result, their voices have been defining Christianity for the last several generations. We, on the other hand, have continued to preach from our pulpits, often tucked away in the familiar embrace of our all-important church buildings, with our paper bulletins and well-worn hymns and liturgies, while our evangelical and Pentecostal counterparts have flooded the airwaves—and lately the internet—with their own interpretations of who Jesus is. We have struggled to get other sides of this story into the arena, but thanks to a pandemic, this struggle may be nearing an end. You might say that the progressive church is being outed, and suddenly finding out how important and liberating it is to leave our technological closets.

At CCC, we used to think that our mission was to bring the public up our hill and into our building to hear our message. But now the opposite is true. Our mission is to take the church and its message outside of the walls into the public square, which has led us to produce the Sunday video you can find on CCC's Facebook page and on our website. This morning we have a message for you, and it revolves around the question, "Where is God in all of this?" a question that everyone of us has asked at one time or another.

These are the first words that fly out of our mouths in times of crisis, trauma, and loss—the kind of loss suffered by a woman named Wanda Cooper-Jones. In 1994 on Mother's Day she gave birth to a son whose name was Ahmaud Arbery, and for the first time in a quarter century, she is today facing Mother's Day without him. In south Georgia, about two and a half months ago, her son—who was black—went for his usual run through the neighborhood, and two white men, a father and a son, decided to play the police, the prosecution, the judge, and the jury, pronouncing him to be responsible for some undocumented burglaries in the neighborhood. He was shot and killed for two reasons and two reasons only. He was running, and he was black. That is all. It was not until three days ago that the men were charged in his murder, and this after a cell phone video of the crime surfaced and the public outcry against this expression of white supremacy and racism became so great.

This is one of those times I might overlap with the people in Mary Oliver's poem who decide they need to see God's identity papers—the same ones for whom the sunrise ought to have been enough. Or maybe I'm in the same category as that disciple named Philip who said to Jesus, "Show us your Father and it will be enough." It's like saying, "We need just a bit more evidence, because it doesn't seem like

this is the way things should be going. Perhaps you could enlighten us a little.” And when speaking of the corona virus, we’d say *Where is God in all of this?*—in the suffering of the families who’ve lost or are losing loved ones, or those whose jobs have evaporated, whose businesses are being lost, whose livelihood and futures are hanging in the balance.

Where God is right now depends, of course, upon how you think of God in the first place. And this is, by the way, a prime example of a progressive Christian viewpoint coming boldly into the market place. As our friend John Philip Newell told us during his visit to CCC not long ago, Western thought has generally taught us about a God who exists outside of ourselves, and that we access truth primarily through the intellect. Eastern thought, on the other hand, leaves us with the impression that divinity exists within everything. As Newell likes to say,

*God is the Life within all life, to be found at the heart of all that has being—within the light of the rising sun, within the early morning breeze, within the waking consciousness of our minds and bodies every day.*

Jesus’s response to his friend Philip was basically, “You still don’t get it? You’re still looking for God? Look at me. I and my Father are one. And you and I are one.” We might say it this way: God is in you, in me, in everything. God, or Life Energy, or Holy Spirit, or wind, or breath, or Divine Wisdom or Ground of Being, or Christ Consciousness; God is here. The only far-away God is the one we invent in our shame, our guilt, or our fear; our separateness is an illusion we create in order to mollify the anger we think has to be there. How else would we explain how any of these horrific things even happen?

The truth is, horrible things do happen, and when they do, God is here, in the warmth of a mother’s embrace, in the sharing of loving memories, in the person you meet on the sidewalk who steps six feet aside to let you pass, in the grocery worker who risks her health to serve you, in the friend who hands you a delicious dinner at your curbside. God is here whenever someone treats others the way they would like to be treated.

We need not explain these circumstances in terms of a far-off angry God who finds it consistent with his character to visit a plague upon his wicked children. This is incongruent with everything we know to be true. Let’s bring a different God out of the closet with us—one who loves us, who gives nourishment and shelter within the arms of her love, and more importantly, empowers us to mature in wisdom and grow up in all things. Let us express our deepest gratitude and appreciation to the One from whom all blessings flow.

