

The Suffering of God

Who Is This Old Testament God?

St. John in the Wilderness

The Suffering of God – Session 4

God and World, Part 2 (Presence & Power)

Opening Prayer

**Come to our shut down places (Walter
Brueggemann)***



God and World

Presence and Power

Definition of Presence

✦ **More than just being there**

✦ **Involves**

- ◆ **Focus**
- ◆ **Attention**
- ◆ **Energy level**

Intensifications of the Divine Presence

✿ Word “presence” in the OT has different shades of meaning

- ✿ Jonah takes a cruise to flee “from the presence of the LORD” (Jonah 1:3) only to run into the Lord of creation “who made the sea and the dry land” (Jon. 1:9)
- ✿ Ezekiel describes the departure of God’s presence from the Temple, but still affirms God’s “accompanying presence” while in exile (Ez. 10:1-22, 11:16)
- ✿ Psalmist’s prayer to a God who has forsaken him implies that God is still present, though at some lesser intensity (Ps. 22:1)

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But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

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“I am a Hebrew,” he replied. “I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”

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Then the glory of the LORD went out from the threshold of the house and stopped above the cherubim. The cherubim lifted up their wings and rose up from the earth in my sight as they went out with the wheels beside them. They stopped at the entrance of the east gate of the house of the LORD; and the glory of the God of Israel was above them. (10:18-19)

Therefore say: Thus says the Lord God: Though I removed them far away among the nations, and though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a little while in the countries where they have gone. (11:16)

- **Psalmist’s prayer to a God who has forsaken him implies that God is still present, though at some lesser intensity (Ps. 22:1)**

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My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

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Intensifications of the Divine Presence

✿ Intensity levels of God's presence (p. 61)

- ◆ God's "structural presence"
- ◆ God's "accompanying presence"
- ◆ God's "tabernacling presence"
- ◆ God's "theophanic presence"

✿ God's presence may be more intense

- ◆ At specific times
- ◆ In specific places

✿ Worship at specific times and places

- ◆ Allows the people to come into contact with God's presence
- ◆ Enhances God's reputation (God's name & glory)
 - Ex. 20:24
 - Lev. 10:3

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You need make for me only an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your offerings of well-being, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you.

■ Ex. 20:24

■ Lev. 10:3

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Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD meant when he said, 'Through those who are near me I will show myself holy, and before all the people I will be glorified.'"

■ Lev. 10:3

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☼ God's "structural presence"

- ◆ Basic level of presence within creation

- Ps. 139

- Jer. 23:23-24

- ◆ Without this essential presence, other more intense levels of presence would violate natural order

☼ God's "accompanying presence"

- ◆ God promises to be with the people during their travel

- Jacob (Gen. 28:15)

- People of Israel during the Exodus (Ex. 33:14)

- People of Judah during the Exile (Jer. 29:12-14)

Intensifications of the Divine Presence

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◆ **Basic level of presence within creation**

■ **Ps. 139**

■ **Jer. 23:23-24**

*Am I a God near by, says the LORD, and not a God far off?
Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?
Says the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? Says the
LORD.*

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Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

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He said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."

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Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

■ **People of Judah during the Exile (Jer. 29:12-14)**

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Intensifications of the Divine Presence

☀️ God's "tabernacling presence"

- ◆ God promises to be present to the people at a specific location (ark, temple)
- ◆ "A gracious condescension to the need of the human for that which is concrete and focused" (p. 63)
- ◆ God "desires" this type of presence
 - Ps. 132:13-14
- ◆ Inherent problem is that the people may come to conclusion that God can be controlled through this presence at a place
 - Hinted at in 2 Sam. 7:5-7
 - God makes himself vulnerable by choosing to be present in this way

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For the LORD has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his habitation; "This is my resting place forever; here I will reside, for I have desired it."

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Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?"

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- ◆ **“Name theology” developed in the 7th century BCE**
 - Deut. 12:5,11
 - Reflects a new understanding of how God is present in the temple
 - May suggest somewhat less intense presence
- ◆ **More ancient concept of Glory of the Lord**
 - An intense presence of God
 - 1 Kings 8:11
 - Glory of the Lord departs from the Temple as described by Ezekiel (10:18-19)
 - Return of God’s presence is hoped for (Mal. 3:1)

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But you shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes as his habitation to put his name there. You shall go there...then you shall bring everything that I command you to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name: your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and your donations, and all your choice votive gifts that you vow to the LORD.

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 - So that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD.*

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See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.

Intensifications of the Divine Presence

“God’s dwelling among the people is an act of grace, based on promise....It is God’s gracious act of condescension to be near and accessible, to provide for the people’s need for that which is concrete, and to be assured in such a tangible way that God is always with them and for them. And, because God loves them, God would like nothing better for himself.” (p. 65)

Divine Presence & Divine Absence

✦ Divine absence doesn't include structural absence

◆ OT uses terms

- Hide
- Withdraw
- Forsake

✦ Human actions can force God to withdraw

- ◆ 2 Chron. 15:1-2
- ◆ 2 Chron. 12:5

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The spirit of God came upon Azariah son of Oded. He went out to meet Asa and said to him, "Hear me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin: The LORD is with you, while you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you abandon him, he will abandon you."

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Then the prophet Shemaiah came to Rehoboam and to the officers of Judah, who had gathered at Jerusalem because of Shishak, and said to them, "Thus says the LORD: You abandoned me, so I have abandoned you to the hand of Shishak."

Divine Presence & Divine Absence

✦ Other side of divine absence is divine wrath

- ◆ Results when God withdraws his protective presence allowing adversarial forces to come into the remaining space

- Is. 64:7

- Jer 12:7

✦ Divine absence in the Psalms is the cause of lament (with sin lurking in the background)

- ◆ Ps. 44:23

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There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.

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I have forsaken my house, I have abandoned my heritage; I have given the beloved of my heart into the hands of her enemies.

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Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever!

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O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?

Divine Presence & Divine Absence

- ✦ **Nevertheless, God's intends salvation for his people**
- ✦ **Human autonomy requires that God maintain a certain amount of distance**
- ✦ **Otherwise**
 - ◆ **Relationship with God would be coercive**
 - ◆ **People would not be able to respond to God with genuine love**

Divine Freedom and Accessibility

- ✿ **God's presence should not be interpreted to mean that God is there for us to use**
- ✿ **"God *desires* to be as effectively present as possible, in all times and places." (p. 67) (Ps. 132:13-14)**
- ✿ **God's withdrawal is not a matter of God's freedom**
 - ◆ **Protection of God's people (Ex. 33:3)**
 - ◆ **Protection of God's reputation (name) (Ez. 43:7-9)**
 - ◆ **May serve God's larger purpose of salvation for all people**

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Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.

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He said to me: Mortal, this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet, where I will reside among the people of Israel forever. The house of Israel shall no more defile my holy name, neither they nor their kings, by their whoring, and by the corpses of their kings at their death. When they placed their threshold by my threshold and their doorposts beside my doorposts, with only a wall between me and them, they were defiling my holy name by their abominations that they committed; therefore I have consumed them in my anger. Now let them put away their idolatry and the corpses of their kings far from me, and I will reside among them forever.

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Divine Freedom and Accessibility

✦ **God's presence is linked to God's promise**

◆ Hag. 2:4-5

◆ Gen. 28:15

◆ Ex. 29:45

◆ Ex. 20:24

✦ **When God makes a promise, God is limiting his options and opening himself up**

Divine Freedom and Accessibility

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Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the LORD; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD; work, for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear.

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✦ God's presence is linked to God's promise

- ◆ Hag. 2:4-5
- ◆ Gen. 28:15
- ◆ Ex. 29:45

I will dwell among the Israelites and I will be their God.

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You need make for me only an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your offerings of well-being, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you.

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Divine Freedom and Accessibility

- ✦ **Even established worship structures are a gift that can be abused**
- ✦ **God's name matters if God is to accomplish his salvific purpose for all**

Immanence and Transcendence

✦ Common assumption is to

- ◆ Immanence \equiv Presence
- ◆ Transcendence \equiv Distance

✦ Better understanding would be

- ◆ Immanence \equiv Relatedness
- ◆ Transcendence \equiv How God is God in Relatedness

Immanence and Transcendence

- ✦ OT often uses word “holiness” to speak about transcendence
- ✦ God’s transcendence/holiness not mutually exclusive with God being present
- ✦ *For great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel. Is. 12:6*
- ✦ “The transcendence of God is thus manifested by the *way in which* God is present among his people. It is not just that any God or God in some attenuated form is present among the people, it is the Holy God, a God who does great things and, in terms of Hos. 11:9, is compassionate and merciful in every way with Israel.” (p. 70)

Immanence and Transcendence

I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

- ✿ **“The transcendence of God is thus manifested by the *way in which* God is present among his people. It is not just that any God or God in some attenuated form is present among the people, it is the Holy God, a God who does great things and, in terms of Hos. 11:9, is compassionate and merciful in every way with Israel.” (p. 70)**

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Immanence and Transcendence

- ✦ Holiness of God is linked with an inability to approach God
- ✦ Not an inherent property of holiness, but may appear when sin intervenes
 - ◆ Ex. 19:21
- ✦ Moses and tribal leaders meet with, and even dine in God's presence (Ex. 24:9-11)
- ✦ "God is 'transcendent in relationship.'" (Sponheim as quoted by Fretheim, p. 71)
- ✦ "God remains transcendent in His immanence, and related in His transcendence." (Heschel as quoted by Fretheim, p. 71)

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- ◆ **Ex. 19:21**

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go down and warn the people not to break through to the LORD to look; otherwise many of them will perish.”

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Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank.

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Presence, Relationship, & Power

- ✦ **God's power is not exercised at either of the 2 poles of deism or determinism**
- ✦ **How did the people of Israel understand God's power?**
- ✦ **Consider *Is anything too hard for the Lord?* (Gen. 18:14)**
 - ◆ **Usually interpreted as God is limited by those things that would violate God's "godness"**

Presence, Relationship, & Power

✦ Fretheim adds

- ✦ God's promises confine God within self-imposed limits
- ✦ Intensity of God's presence is limited by the relationship itself – how responsive the people are
- ✦ Relationships of integrity require power-sharing

Presence, Relationship, & Power

✦ What does God's power look like in the world?

- ◆ Power-sharing makes cooperation possible
- ◆ Gen. 1 suggests that creation itself participates in the creation process
 - Gen. 1:11, 24
- ◆ Blessing also appears to be a role shared by God and creation
 - Deut. 28:4
 - Ps. 65:9-13
- ◆ Human sin may affect the ability of creation to participate in this process
 - Hos. 4:1-3
- ◆ Humans also participate in the creative process through the command to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28)

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■ Gen. 1:11, 24

Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation; plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." (v.11)

And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." (v.24)

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Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your livestock, both the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock.

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You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it. You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth. You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness. The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.

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Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel; for the LORD has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing.

◆ Human sin may affect the ability of creation to participate in this process

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God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

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Presence, Relationship, & Power

- ✦ **God's power in the world is expressed as "power which enables more than power which controls" (p. 74)**
- ✦ **"The future of God is made dependent in important ways upon how the creatures respond with the power they have. Therefore, one must speak of divine risk *and* vulnerability, beginning with creation." (p. 75)**

Presence, Relationship, & Power

- ✦ **In historical context, God exhibits a similar type of power-sharing strategy**
- ✦ **By giving his creatures freedom to make decisions, God has imposed limits on himself**
 - ◆ **For ill – Judg. 5:23**
 - ◆ **For good – Ps. 132:1-5**
- ✦ **God must often act in the best way possible given the prevailing circumstances**

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“Curse Meroz, says the angel of the LORD, curse bitterly its inhabitants, because they did not come to the help of the LORD, to the help of the LORD against the mighty.”

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O LORD, remember in David's favor all the hardships he endured; how he swore to the LORD and vowed to the Might One of Jacob, "I will not enter my house or get into my bed; I will not give sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids, until I find a place for the LORD, a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob."

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Presence, Relationship, & Power

“The results of God’s efficacy in and through such instruments always has mixed results, and less than what would have happened if God had chosen to use power alone. Hence, as an example, force and violence are associated with God’s work in the world, because, to a greater or lesser degree, they are characteristic of the means of those in and through whom the work is carried out. In order to achieve God’s purposes, God will in effect ‘get his hands dirty.’ It is necessary for God to enter into compromising situations, and work with whatever potential there is, in order to move toward God’s salvific goals.” (p. 76)

Presence, Relationship, & Power

- ✦ Because God shares power with his creatures, God accepts the possibility that this power may be used to oppose him
- ✦ God's commitment to relationship means that God will not act with coercion
- ✦ Possible to see God interaction with people in 2 ways
 - ◆ Leading to repentance
 - ◆ Further "hardening the hearts" of the people – Ex. 8:15
- ✦ Deut. 32:36 suggests that the complete devastation that results from this combination of sin & "hardness of heart" may be the necessary prerequisite for the people to respond to God

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But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart, and would not listen to them, just as the LORD had said.

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Presence, Relationship, & Power

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Indeed the LORD will vindicate his people, have compassion on his servants, when he sees that their power is gone, neither bond nor free remaining.

- ✦ **Deut. 32:36 suggests that the complete devastation that results from this combination of sin & “hardness of heart” may be the necessary prerequisite for the people to respond to God**

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Presence, Relationship, & Power

- ✦ **God works with, through, and sometimes in opposition to the actions of people**
- ✦ **Sin has consequences both for ourselves and our children**
- ✦ **God's will is for salvation**
- ✦ **Actions of the people sometimes limit God to acting on behalf of the future (when God acts at the point of devastation)**

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