

Near and Far

Acts 2:14a, 36-41

April 26, 2020

First Presbyterian, Luling

When we were little, we weren't allowed to watch much tv, and there wasn't that much tv to watch. On the tv that we had to get up and walk across the room to change the volume and the channel, we were regular watchers of Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers, though. I still love Sesame Street, though like any crotchety old person, I prefer the older ones to the newfangled ones. I love how they take concepts that everyone assumes kids understand, but only Sesame Street took the time to explain them.

Take the idea of distance. Is something close or is it far away? Parents are forever...um...fudging the truth on that. We're driving to grandma's house. It's "not too much further" they'll say, with an hour yet to drive. An hour! That's forever! Can we go to Disneyland? Oh no, it's too far away. You can begin to see why a kid might be confused about what is near and what is far. Sesame Street to the rescue, to explain this concept clearly.

For those of you who can't see the video, I'll describe it in a minute.

(play clip)

Suffice it to say that children in the 70's had longer attention span than they do now. Than I do now. Because Grover—he's the skinny, blue, furry monster--does this same thing over and over for almost 3 minutes straight. He runs up toward the camera and says "near." Then he runs away from the camera and says "far." Over and over, until he falls over with exhaustion. So kids can learn the difference between near and far.

Now, I'm quite sure that this came to mind because I saw it when I was little and it stuck in my brain, just as Sesame Street intended. And likely it is not what would pop into your brain when you read verse 39: *"For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him."* I can guarantee that Grover running around doing "near and far" was not what was in Peter's mind as he preached this.

We're picking up right where we left off last Sunday. It's still the day of Pentecost. Jewish people from all over the world have experienced the gift of the Holy Spirit, allowing them to understand each other's languages, binding them together in ways they don't fully comprehend yet.

Peter has told them all about Jesus, that his resurrection proves that he is Messiah and Lord, and that he was crucified. His speech is moving, because the crowd asks how they can make it right, they're so horrified by the crucifixion. Peter calls them to repentance, and to baptism. And then he promises that their sins will be forgiven and that they will receive the Holy Spirit.

And then he gets to the verse I already quoted. These promises—forgiveness of sins, the Holy Spirit, are for everyone. Because when you include you—the people right in front of him; your children—their families back home; all who are far away—presumably referring to Jewish people scattered throughout the Roman Empire; and then everyone whom the Lord God calls to him—that could be anyone. And indeed, the rest of the book of Acts mirrors this movement, from the Jewish community, to the Gentile community, to people near and far, anywhere God might be at work, which is anywhere.

The promises are for those who are near and those who are far. It's occurring to me that this pandemic and our quarantines are stretching the ways we understand near and far. The virus seemed far away, on the other side of the world, yet it was near to us in ways we didn't understand at the time. We're connected to those who are far away in all kinds of ways. And we are more and more connected, or connected in new and deeper ways, to those who are nearest to us. Our families, if we are sharing a house with someone. Our co-workers, if we're essential and still working. Maybe we've strengthened ties with families and friends who live far away but are brought near by phone or internet. I've certainly had phone conversations with friends who I haven't talked to in a long time.

In the spiritual sense that Peter is talking about, though, I think we would prefer to think of ourselves as those who are already near to God, who are already recipients of the promises Peter is talking about. Maybe this time of quarantine has been a spiritually fulfilling time for you, a time when you've felt nearer and nearer to God. And that's wonderful. The promises are for you.

But maybe this quarantine time has led you to question and to feel a wide range of emotions toward God. Maybe you've gotten angry, sad, discouraged, despairing, doubtful. That's ok. God can handle any of that. But maybe it's led you to feel like you're far away from God. The promises are for you too.

The word that Peter uses for "far away" is the same word that Luke uses in the parable of the prodigal son. When the younger son decides to come home, while he is still far away, his father runs out to embrace him and welcome him home. Same word. Same idea.

When we are far away, God rushes out to meet us, promises in hand. And when we are near, God says just what the father said to the elder son in the parable, “all that I have is already yours.” All the promises are for those who are near, too.

The promises of God, in all their complexities and abundance, are for those who are near and those who are far. For those who are moving between near and far. For those who are near today and far tomorrow and then back again. For those who don't even know quite where they are. The promise is for you. Thanks be to God. Amen.