

July 25, 2021 Pentecost 9B
Your God is Too Small and Too Distant
Ephesians 3:14-21

About 60 years ago J.B. Phillips wrote a book called *Your God is Too Small*. He said: "The trouble with many people today is that they have not found a God big enough for modern needs." He was right.

If Pastor Phillips were writing today, he might title his book *Your God is Too Small-- **and Too Distant***. He might say: "The challenge for many people today is finding a God who is big enough to embrace the world and close enough to fill their emptiness."

Sometimes we do have a god who is *too small*. Without knowing it, we have substituted a puny god for the great and gracious God revealed in the history of Israel and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We have substituted the true God for a god we've created in our image. The substitute god we've fashioned is limited, narrow, and tame--does nothing surprising or amazing--and is boxed-in by our preconceptions. This god is stingy with mercy and has only enough love for "our kind of people"--our nation or tribe or race or family or social class or denomination. This god of our own making is predictable, safe, and boring.

And not much of a god.

Our god is too small *and too distant*. Do you remember Bette Middler's hit song "From a Distance"? I was intrigued that it was so popular with many Christians, because it struck me as a shallow hymn to a disinterested god. Its simple refrain summarized its lackluster faith: "God is watching us, God is watching us, God is watching us from a distance." Apparently, a lot of us believe in a remote, passive, and merely observant God. This far-away god doesn't come close enough to nourish and sustain us; instead, this god enlightens us about how to fend for and feed ourselves. Rather than being bread of life for our hungry hearts, this god is like a report from the agriculture department about anticipated wheat production.

A small and distant god leaves us feeling overwhelmed by change and threatened by emptiness.

Everyone knows we're living through an era of massive transition and change. Sociologist Daniel Yankelovich once compared what is happening in our culture to the shifting of the giant tectonic plates which lie beneath the surface of the earth. The slightest movement of those massive plates can rip apart the surface of the earth in an earthquake or cause the violent eruption

of volcanoes. He said: "The giant plates of American culture are shifting relentlessly beneath us. The shifts create huge dislocations in our lives. . . The landscape [is losing] its comfortable familiarity." And he said this 41 years ago. Think of the changes we've had in the last 40 years.

The shifts include:

Economic changes: In the last few years, we've had a roller-coaster stock-market, banking and foreclosure crises, and escalating real estate values.

Worldview changes: We've had a great migration to the United States. Whether because we deal with neighbors who are different from us or because we encounter diversity through the media, nearly all of us live in a multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-faith environment. Every day we rub shoulders with people who see and experience the world very differently than we do.

Technological changes: We're on the grid, or could be, 24/7/365. A lot of us have at least two email addresses to check. There are messages posted on our Facebook walls, text messages buzzing into our phones, and tweets twittering to and from Twitter. There are blogs to read and to update and voicemails--for two or three phone numbers--to check. We don't know yet what it will mean for the way our minds work that we're constantly connected and "on the grid," but we already know that greater volume and velocity of information don't always lead to deeper wisdom and richer relationships.

Some of the changes bewilder and frustrate us; others amaze and delight us. Whether we consider them "positive" or "negative," the shifts keep happening and the ground beneath our feet doesn't feel solid. All the while, we're also trying to cope with more immediate and personal changes: illness, family crises, challenges at work and school, the limitations imposed by aging, and inevitable transitions brought on by the simple passing of time.

In Arthur Miller's play *The Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman, who had lived more in his own imaginary world than in the real world, found the crushing weight of reality dismantling his comfortable charade. He admitted to his Uncle Ben: "Well, Dad left when I was such a baby and I never had a chance to talk with him, and I still feel--kind of temporary about myself."

Everyone is temporary. Everything is impermanent. Our vulnerability to change sometimes overwhelms us; and when it does, a small god can't help us.

And a distant god can't do anything about the emptiness which threatens us. We all live through seasons which demand more than we can possibly

deliver. Work grinds on, but our energy is long gone. Needs pile up, but we're at risk for caving-in. Opportunities multiply, but we're divided. The schedule is jammed full, and our hearts are alarmingly empty.

Maybe that's how things are for you now. You've spent your emotional accounts into near-bankruptcy; you're way over your limits; you've maxed-out your soul. Foreclosure on your identity has begun. You're at risk for losing who you most truly are.

A small, distant God leads to a life where most days most of us just get out of bed, put on our uniforms of responsibility, our fake smiles, our masks of habit, and our armor of protection, and do what we have to do. There's a kind of grace in our being able to do so; but I know from listening to people's hearts that there are a lot of people--more than you might imagine--who worry and wonder about how much longer they can cope with all the demands, respond to all the pressures, and meet all the expectations they feel bearing down on them. In them, I hear echoes of T.S. Eliot:

Remember us--if at all--not as lost

Violent souls, but only

As the hollow men.

The stuffed men. [*Selected Poems* (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1936), p. 77]

Eliot describes a lot of us. We're hollow and, therefore, stuffed. The hollowness we feel unsettles us and makes us restless. So we stuff it with noise, food, drink, drugs, busyness, or money--with whatever promises temporary relief and might help us to make it through the night.

Eventually, the emptiness threatens to consume us; it moves to take over everything else. When it does, a small and distant god can't help us.

Thankfully, as Paul's prayer for the Ephesian Christians reminds us, we don't have a small and distant god. The real God, revealed to us in the history of Israel and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is magnificent, mysterious, and mighty. Paul prayed:

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. ~Ephesians 3:16-19

The real God is vast beyond our comprehending, beautiful beyond our appreciating, and wonderful beyond our imagining. God encompasses

everything: past, present and future; near and far; what we have discovered and what remains hidden. God is above and beyond, among and within, high and holy, close and compassionate.

God's great love leaves us breathless with astonishment. Paul prayed that we would know what he admitted was beyond knowing: the breadth and length and height and depth of love. It includes everyone and everything, radiates with a redeeming grace which envelops all our shame and guilt, and shines with a dazzling glory which fills every shadowy corner of our hearts and of the universe with hope.

Thankfully, this prayer isn't a list of assignments for us to carry out or expectations to meet or demands to shoulder. The God who has been made known and real to us in Jesus isn't standing over us with a clipboard and a checklist. There is nothing in this prayer that hints at a self-help project or a self-improvement regimen.

The prayer simply and compellingly invites us to realize how much God loves us--to experience God's surrounding, encompassing, and holding us with love. And it promises us that God will fill us when we are empty, make us strong when we are weak, and keep us rooted and grounded when everything is changing.

I invite you to experience this prayer for yourself. I put the verses on the sermon notes part of the announcement bulletin. Take it with you. Spend 5 minutes with it every day this week. Ask God to thrill you again with a sense of wonder and majesty, to fill you with God's own life, and to show you all you can comprehend about the wide embrace of divine love. Receive God's strength, so that you may live faithfully and joyfully in these challenging times of change. Open yourself to God's fullness, so that the once-empty places in you may overflow with abundance and glory. We have a vast, loving, and powerful God who is "at work within us" and *"who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."* ~ Ephesians 3:20-21