



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – March 22, 2009

The Runaway Bunny

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Psalm 139:1-11

¹O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

²You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

³You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.

⁵You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

⁷Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁸If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

⁹If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

¹¹If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"

¹²even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

Romans 8:31-39

³¹What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³²He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶As it is written,

"For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor

life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We are not alone. God is with us. Always. This is the central message of today's readings. This is the central message of both the Old and the New Testament.

This message is so important that Matthew opens and closes his gospel with it. As the gospel opens, an angel tells Joseph that Mary will bear a son and "*they shall name him Emmanuel which means, 'God with us.'*" [Matthew 1:23.] As the gospel closes, Jesus commissions his disciples, concluding, "*And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*" [Matthew 28:20.]

That's the central message of the Bible. Have faith, which is to say, have trust: You are not alone. God is with you. Always.

So as I prepared to preach on these passages, I was not surprised to see that the matter has been well analyzed and illustrated before. But I ran across one illustration, one application that was so perfect that I think it's worth reading to you verbatim. See if you don't agree that this captures the message of the Psalmist and of Paul and of Jesus with astonishing clarity.

"Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away. So he said to his mother, 'I am running away.' 'If you run away,' said his mother, 'I will run after you. For you are my little bunny.' 'If you run after me,' said the little bunny, 'I will become a fish in a trout stream and I will swim away from you.' 'If you become a fish in a trout stream,' said his mother, 'I will become a fisherman and I will fish for you.' 'If you become a fisherman,' said the little bunny, 'I will become a rock on the mountain, high above you.' 'If you become a rock on the mountain high above me,' said his mother, 'I will be a mountain climber and I will climb to where you are.'"¹

^w Or *Is it Christ Jesus . . . for us?*

The story continues until finally the little bunny says, “If you become a tightrope walker and walk across the air...I will become a little boy and run into a house.’ ‘If you become a little boy and run into a house,’ said the mother, ‘I will become your mother and catch you in my arms and hug you.’ ‘Shucks,’ said the bunny, ‘I might just as well stay where I am and be your little bunny.’ And so he did. ‘Have a carrot,’ said the mother bunny.”

The Psalmist sings, “*If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, ¹⁰even there your hand shall lead me...*” [Psalm 139:9-10.] Paul writes, “*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, ... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” [Romans 8:39.] Jesus says, “*And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*” [Matthew 28:20.] The mother bunny says, “*If you become a sailboat and sail away from me...I will become the wind and blow you where I want you to go.*”

Now the first thing to say is that I think we can see why we so loved our parents reading *The Runaway Bunny* to us when we were children...and why we so loved reading it to our children when we were parents. The author, Margaret Wise Brown, has tapped into the central, indispensable message of all parenting, human and divine. She has given voice to the word that we most need to hear as children and the word that we most long to say as human parents. And she has given voice to the word that the God who created us most wants each and every one of us to hear and to trust. We are not alone. God is with us. Always.

As we read the story, we embrace the story’s core message, but we all know it requires a certain suspension of disbelief. After all, we all know in our hearts that the mother bunny is making promises she can’t quite keep. There are, in creation, a multitude of risks and dangers of separation that, actually, the mother bunny cannot overcome. To take only the easiest examples, she can’t actually become a fisherman, or a gardener, or a human mother. To take only the hardest example, we all know that the bunny mother’s life expectancy is heartbreakingly short.

We just smile and share the story with our children, notwithstanding its metaphorical exaggerations. After all, the story is not really deceiving our kids, because they and we are both in on the secret: the story is not

really about a bunny and his mother. The story is really about our children and us. The inside joke is that the bunny mother has been just a symbol, a proxy, a surrogate, for the reality of a human mother all along. And as awesome and determined as mother bunnies may be, human mothers are just as determined and even more capacious.

If you remember your Psych 101 readings, or if you just kept your eyes open as you raised children as a mother, or as a father, or as an aunt, uncle, grandparent or teacher, then you know that *The Runaway Bunny* is addressing the most fundamental issue of human growth and development: trust. In his masterwork, *Identity and the Life Cycle*, psychologist Erik Erikson identified trust vs. mistrust as the first of his eight stages of psychosocial development.² The first developmental task of the infant is to develop a trusting attitude in the midst of the uncertainties and threats of his environment; and, commensurately, the first task of the parent is to facilitate a trustworthy presence and environment for the child.³ Erikson put it this way, “At any rate, the psychiatrists, obstetricians, pediatricians, and anthropologists to whom I feel closest today would agree that the firm establishment of enduring patterns for the balance of basic trust over basic mistrust is the first task of the budding personality and therefore first of all a task for maternal care.”⁴ Moreover, though the task may be begun in infancy, the development and maintenance of basic trust is the self’s principal project for the entirety of life. Indeed, psychologists and theologians agree that an internalized orientation of basic trust is the cornerstone of a healthy personality.⁵

We don’t need Erikson to tell us this. We need only listen to ourselves as we parent. The baby hesitates before taking a first step, and we say, “you can do it, Owen, I’m right here. Daddy is right here.” The infant falls and skins her knee, and we say, “Ohhhh, that’s all right Katy, I’m here. Mommy is right here.” The child teeters on her bicycle, we run alongside huffing and puffing. “You can do it, Libby. You can do it. I’m here. I’m right here.”

In fact, the establishment of a secure, trustworthy base is the essential prerequisite for all courageous growth and development. The infant can withstand the anxiety of mommy going out of the nursery, because he has internalized the trust that she will come back. The child can withstand the anxiety of getting on that first school

bus, because she has internalized the trust that she will find mommy waiting at the end of the driveway when she comes home. You are not alone. We are with you. Always.

But let me ask you something. Aren't we being just a bit like the mother bunny? Don't we know in our hearts that we are making promises we can't quite keep? Don't we know deep down that there have been, that there are, that there always will be risks and dangers of separation that, actually, even the best intended parents cannot overcome? To take only the easiest examples, none of us can be perfect parents. We were all raised by imperfect parents, and we will all be imperfect parents. Heck, we won't always be there for our children even while we're physically with them, for we are all at least occasionally prone to the distractions of fatigue, emotional turmoil, or self-centeredness. And then there's the little matter that in less than a blink of an eye our children are launched out of our homes and off into lives where we hardly see them at all much less protect them. Then, to take only the hardest example, we too are subject to the remorseless mathematics of mortality. In just the past few years we have buried three young mothers out of this Meeting House. None of us know for certain just how long we will "be there" for our kids.

So when a mother tells her child, "Don't worry, I'll always be here for you," is she misleading her child? Are we telling our children a golden lie to keep them patched together just long enough to carry them until adolescence when they'll start to figure out the cold and lonely realities of life for themselves? As Paul would say, "By no means!"

Do you remember how we said the bunny mother was a symbol, a proxy, a surrogate, for the greater reality of a human mother's love? Well, the same is true of parental love. Rightly understood, parental love is a symbol, a proxy, a surrogate for the love of God. Of course, we do dearly and energetically love the children we care for; but they were God's children even before they were our children. God loves them as well - with us and through us and beyond us. Where our love is imperfect, God's love is perfect. Where our love is sometimes conditional, God's love is always unconditional. Where our love is finite, limited in time and space, God's love is infinite and

will surround our children for eternity, just as it surrounds us for eternity.

That's not because we've earned God's love. It's not because God happens to be in a benevolent mood this century. It's because love is the very nature, the very essence of God. Love is what God is and what God does. As John the evangelist wrote, "*God is love.*" [1 John 4:8.] Augustine turned it around and said, "Love is God."⁶ Luther took John a step further, writing, "God is nothing but love."⁷

I think the most adequate human picture of God's love would be something like light streaming from the largest sun we could possibly imagine. We stand on the surface of a planet bathed in that love. It never turns away, never turns off, never dims. Nothing in all creation could separate us from that infinite light.

And if that were all there were to it, then you would be asking me right about now: "Well, um, then how come I don't always seem to see that light, feel that warmth, experience that love? Actually, preacher, sometimes it seems like right when I need God the most it seems like I'm all alone down here." And the answer has nothing to do with whether God's infinite love is flooding you at every second. It is. It has to do with our turning away.⁸

Sometimes, in every lived life, we turn away from our heavenly parent just like the Runaway Bunny tried to turn away from his mother. We turn away from being God-centered, God-determined, God-made to being self-centered, self-determined, self-made. As we turn, we get a severe case of the "yes, buts."

Yes, God is love, but I think I'd rather earn my acceptance on my own. Yes, God is love, but I think I have to earn my acceptance on my own. Yes, but God can't be pleased that I am estranged from my brother. Yes, but God must be angry that I'm an alcoholic. Yes, but I betrayed my family. Yes, but I'm too short, too fat, to dull-witted. Yes, but I'm different from most folks. Yes, but I'm concerned about my sexual orientation. Yes, but I lost my job. Yes, but I have a chronic disease. Yes, but I can't make the mortgage payments. Yes, but the marriage failed. Yes, but I threw my son out of the house. Yes, but I'm not religious enough.

Probe deeply enough and you'll find that almost every one of us has a private little "yes, but" that we think has,

or will, or might, threaten our membership in the “God loves us” club. And right here is the tragedy of human existence. It is certainly true that God’s love for us is unconditional, without any if, ands or buts. But it is also true that every single “yes, but” tends to nudge us out of alignment, tends to turn us away from seeing the light of God’s love. Every little anxiety that maybe we’ve fallen a bit short of God’s admission requirements tends to undermine our trust. Maybe now we are alone. Maybe God is no longer with us.

So Paul summons up all of his spiritual insights and all of his rhetorical gifts to settle the “yes, but” hash once and for all. Paul brings the first eight chapters of Romans to a climax with a series of rhetorical questions. Really, he says, what’s left to say? Is someone is against you? What can that possibly matter if the Creator of heaven and earth is for you? Do you seriously believe that God would give up his own son for you and then squander his sacrifice by letting you go? Has someone (and that someone is most likely you, yourself) charged you with falling short of the mark? For crying out loud, your lawyer is Jesus, and his daddy is the judge, and they both already told you that you were forgiven! Seriously folks, what’s left to say?

My friends, it all comes down to this. The indispensable prerequisite for our courage, our growth, our human flourish is a fundamental orientation of trust in a world filled with perils. Paul didn’t ignore the dangers that shake our trust. He had suffered each of them personally, and he listed them: hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness and sword. And yet, despite all this, despite all these dangers, the answer to all our “yes, buts,” the foundation of our trust is just this: as Pastor Richard Halverson put it, “There is nothing you can do to make God love you more! There is nothing you can do to make God love you less. God’s love is Unconditional. Impartial. Everlasting. Infinite.” Or, as Paul put it, “*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”

And when, by the grace of that same God, when all those years of Sunday school lessons finally sink in, when we experience the truth of that conclusion,

accept that gift and trust that promise deep within our souls, then we too will find ourselves nudged back to the light, just like the Runaway Bunny. And we too will profess our trust to God, “Shucks, I might just as well stay where I am and be your beloved child.” And God will say, “have a carrot.” **Amen.**

1 *The Runaway Bunny*, Margaret Wise Brown, (New York: Harper & Row, 1942).

2 *Identity and the Life Cycle*, Erik Erikson (New York: W.W. Norton, 1980) at 57.

3 *Ibid* at 64-67.

4 *Ibid* at 64-65.

5 *Ibid* at 58.

6 “Homily VII on the First Epistle of John”, Saint Augustine of Hippo.

7 *Luther’s Works*, “Lectures on the First Epistle of St. John”, at 218-221.

8 *Theologica Germanica*, Anonymous, trans. Susanna Winkworth, (London Printing, 1901) Chapter 1: “...the sun lighteth the whole world, and is as near to one as another, yet a blind man seeth it not; but the fault thereof lieth in the blind man, not in the sun. And like as the sun may not hide its brightness, but must give light unto the earth (for heaven indeed draweth its light and heat from another fountain), so also God, who is the highest Good, willeth not to hide Himself from any, wheresoever He findeth a devout soul, that is thoroughly purified from all creatures.”