

Psalm 139:1-18

Growing up and still to this very day, Psalm 139 is my favorite psalm. It is one of the most beautiful assurances of God's deep and abiding love for each of us. This psalm reveals the truth of who we are in God's eyes: fully known and eternally loved- so much so that whenever I'm asked to share my call or faith story, this psalm always makes the cut. Psalm 139 continues to be quite an epiphany in my life and I hope in yours as well. The psalmist's experiences of God are personal, intimate and real. Though I didn't read the entire psalm this morning, I encourage you to do so because it speaks the painful truth of being troubled by real enemies, real injustice and the appeal to a God who will not and cannot let that be the way forever. I must confess that as much as I love this psalm, I've never preached on it- until today.

Have you ever felt known? I mean really known?! Some of us are private people and prefer not to share about ourselves on Facebook let alone with anyone else while others of us tend to overshare. Perhaps for those who share a lot, sharing even the intimate details of their lives is comforting while for others, it is horrifying. Regardless, being known is very relational and intimate. The psalmist paints a picture of a God who knows the psalmist well. So well, in fact, that the word "know" is mentioned **seven** times here. Being known is very complex; **it is feared but also desired; burdensome but also beautiful; shameful but also grace-filled.** "Contrary to all efforts to protect ourselves, God invades our privacy and knows us better than we know ourselves" (*FOW*, Dave Bland). According to the psalmist, God knows everything -down to the last detail. The psalmist cannot

fathom this much knowledge. Yet, knowing all that God knows, God still remains with and cares for the psalmist.

The psalmist then asks the rhetorical questions, “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence” (v. 7)? Through the litany of places the psalmist lists: heaven, Sheol, which is the abode of the dead, the farthest limits of the sea, and darkness...God is there. In other words, God is everywhere. “There is no place so far, so desolate, so isolated, so ordinary that God cannot be in it” (*Connections*, John W. Wurster). Again, this may leave some of us feeling dis-ease or creeped out while others of us feel reassurance and comfort. How have you experienced God being present in your life? Was it in the moment or in retrospect? Maybe it was a feeling that you should do or not do a certain thing? Or maybe you felt God’s hand when you were at the farthest limits of the sea or in the midst of the darkness?! John, the Gospel writer, describes when God put flesh on and moved into the neighborhood in the person of Jesus Christ-“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of the people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (vv. 1-5). As David sang this morning, no matter the storm, darkness, or the farthest limits of the sea, God, the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, is with us.

This psalmist declares that God is a weaver and a knitter of his life- his Creator- from the first stitch until the completed garment. The psalmist is so overwhelmed by this epiphany that he praises God, confessing and affirming that

he is “fearfully and wonderfully made” because God’s works are wonderful and the psalmist knows this well (v. 14). Can you imagine the psalmist’s words as your own words? “In a time when the worth of human life has been vastly cheapened, the psalmist affirms God’s supreme valuing of human beings” (*FOW*, Allen C. McSween, Jr.). Do we really believe that the work of God’s hands has worth and is wonderful? And if so, how does this knowledge affect the way we respond to God, ourselves, our neighbor and our world?

We’re told that all the psalmist’s days- before they yet existed- were written in God’s book (v. 16). The psalmist cannot begin to count God’s thoughts as they’re more than the sand (v. 17). Can we even begin to imagine the vastness of God? “Before we were, God was. God precedes all things, every step, every breath. God indeed is the one in whom we live, move, and have our being” (Wurster). And in the end, God is still with the psalmist (v. 18). One of my favorite affirmations of faith is that “in life and in death, we belong to God” (*A Brief Statement of Faith*, PC(USA)). God’s care for the psalmist spans before his birth into and beyond his death. These words hold God’s promise to each of us, as Jesus also said to the disciples: “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). “The psalmist trusts that no extremity, whatever it is, can separate him from the loving presence of God. This trust is also seen in Paul’s comforting words to the Christians in Rome” (*FOW*, Timothy A. Beach-Verhey). “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” (Rom. 8:38-39). Nothing- not even death- can separate us from God’s love. That is the promise...that is the good news!

The overall spirit of Psalm 139 is not fear but trust, not guilt but praise, not judgment but grace (Beach-Verhey). “Ultimately, the psalmist recognizes that when the knower is God, the vulnerability is worth it, and he resigns to God’s inescapable presence in his life, embracing it by confirming his own identity in light of how God sees him” (workingpreacher.org, Shauna Hannan). How about us? How do we live out our lives in light of how God sees and loves us? Our personal piety calls attention to our own thoughts, words, and actions wherever we may be. And as most of us know, “the personal cannot be divorced from its social consequences. Facing these challenges, each of us stands naked and vulnerable in the presence of God remembering God’s promise. **God’s wonderful works call forth in us greater compassion for every created being and greater commitment to the stewardship of God’s creation. God’s wonderful works invite wonder and reverence for the sanctity of life as we honor and protect all forms of life. Awesome, intimate, and personal knowledge of God leads to social commitments**” (*Preaching God’s Transformative Justice*, Galloway) and a **desire to know and serve others.**

The late Peter Gomes, one of America’s leading preachers and a scholar at Harvard, once said, “There is an indisputable fact that we are created, made, formed, invented, patented in the image of goodness itself- [God Almighty]. Therefore, we are the heirs of the promise, all of us, male and female, white and black, red and brown, rich and poor, bonded and free” (Peter Gomes). This psalm is not just for the psalmist. It’s for you and me- all of us. God knit each of us together; we are fearfully and wonderfully made because if that’s true for me, it’s certainly true for you. What a framework for our lives and our calling from God!

“The psalm writer does not know all the details of Paul saying that nothing can separate us from God, nor does he yet know about Easter, but he knows God—more, he knows that God knows him; therefore, he is willing to open himself to wherever this God is taking him, confident that there can be no separation” (workingpreacher.org, Fred Gaiser). Like the psalmist, we’re are invited to respond in grateful praise to God through all of our many actions and relationships” (Beach-Verhey). God created us to be in community- loving God and our neighbor. The prophet Micah gives us an idea of what is required of us. “To do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God” (6:8).

The song Darby just sang, *Up to the Mountain*, was written by Patty Griffin, whose inspiration came from Dr. Martin Luther King’s last speech, *I’ve Been to the Mountaintop*. The modern-day prophet and preacher would’ve been 92 years old this past Friday. Tomorrow we will celebrate his legacy and give witness to the work of racial and economic justice that still needs to be done today. Even though he’s been dead for over fifty years, his prophetic words still sadly ring true. *In the human rights revolution, if something isn't done, and done in a hurry, to bring the colored peoples of the world out of their long years of poverty, their long years of hurt and neglect, the whole world is doomed... We are determined to be people. We are saying -- We are saying that we are God's children. And that we are God's children, we don't have to live like we are forced to live.*

When we live in a world where all aren’t treated equally as fearfully and wonderfully made by God, there is justice to be done; love to be humbly shared. If we do not take the time to learn from and help others experiencing injustice, what will happen to God’s wonderful works? MLK Day is usually a day of service

where we commit to volunteering or to speak out against injustices (not just for a day but every day); however, with the pandemic, I'd like to invite you- if you cannot volunteer- to consider reading something that challenges you about injustices OR join a Bible study such as JustFaith OR reach out to someone of a different race or socio-economic status and get to know them. This shouldn't just be a practice for MLK Day or Black History month but for every day of our lives. In the words of a prayer by my OT professor Walter Brueggemann, "We remember Martin Luther King in gratitude... and chagrin. And we pledge, amid our stressed ambiguities, to dream as he did, to walk the walk, and to talk the talk of your coming kingdom. We pledge, so sure that your truth will not stop its march until your will is done on earth as it is in heaven." In the name of the One who knows, loves and is present with us fully- fully enough to lead us- as agents of justice, reconciliation, and love- up the mountain and through the valleys of our lives- we pray. Amen.