

“Where Can I Go?”

A worship service by Pastor Steve E-M
for FUMC Grand Junction, Sunday, January 22, 2023
The Third Sunday in Epiphany 2023

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Scripture Reading for the Day:

✠ Psalm 139:1-12 [NLT]

OPENING

(*Play with the feelings of exposure David could have had with the awareness of God’s thorough knowledge of him.*) God to David: “Pull up a chair, D, we’re gonna have video night!” David: “Cool! What’s playin’?” God: “Your life.” David: “Cool!”

What?! I mean, are there *NO* secrets? 😊 No parts of the “video” of his life of which he’d say, “Really...? Is it necessary to watch *ALL* of this?!”

Yet, such is the confidence that comes through in this psalm: There is nothing from the psalmist’s life that he does not entrust to God’s love, mercy, forgiveness, redemption.

Far from feeling dominated or threatened by God’s omniscience and omnipresence, the psalmist is comforted and liberated by this awareness. Begs the question: Are you and I?

TO THE SCRIPTURES

- Like the repeated occurrence of the word YHWH last week in Psalm 29, the Hebrew root/verb, **יָדָע**, features prominently in Psalm 139. This word, “yada” is translated “to know”, which, in English, is usually thought of as a “head-type” knowledge: something we are familiar with at the level of understanding or cognition.

But to the Hebrew mind, this word involved so much more. In fact, it is the same word in Genesis 4:1, where after the fall and expulsion from the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3, we learn that the man, Adam, “knew” his wife Eve and she conceived. **יָדָע**, “to know”, means to engage with intimately; to experience fully; as John Wesley might say, “the movement from head to heart”, incorporating both.

That’s what the psalmist is celebrating when he says in verse 1 (Ps. 139:1), “O Lord, you have examined my heart and know – **יָדָע** – everything about me.”

Again, the question that comes to mind to me is, do I have the faith, the relationship with God, to experience this as comfort and liberation or is that threatening to me?

In other words, do I really believe God is good – all the time! – or is God really out to get me for the times when I’ve been far less than faithful to Him?

Is our worship theme statement, *God is Holding Your Life*, really good news?

- Exposition of the psalm, “strophe-by-strophe”

Psalm 139 [NLT]

¹ O LORD, you have examined my heart
and know everything about me.
² You know when I sit down or stand up.
You know my thoughts even when I’m far away.
³ You see me when I travel
and when I rest at home.
You know everything I do.
⁴ You know what I am going to say
even before I say it, LORD.
⁵ You go before me and follow me.
You place your hand of blessing on my head.
⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too great for me to understand!
⁷ ...[Where can I go] from your Spirit?
Or...[where can I flee] from your presence?
⁸ If I go up to heaven, you are there;
if I go down to the grave, you are there.
⁹ If I ride the wings of the morning,
if I dwell by the farthest oceans,
¹⁰ even there your hand will guide me,
and your strength will support me.
¹¹ I could ask the darkness to hide me
and the light around me to become night—
¹² but even in darkness I cannot hide from you.
To you the night shines as bright as day.
Darkness and light are the same to you.

¹³ You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body
and knit me together in my mother’s womb.
¹⁴ Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex!
Your workmanship is marvelous—how well I know it.
¹⁵ You watched me as I was being formed in utter
seclusion,
as I was woven together in the dark of the womb.
¹⁶ You saw me before I was born.
Every day of my life was recorded in your book.
Every moment was laid out
before a single day had passed.
¹⁷ How precious are your thoughts about me, O God.
They cannot be numbered!
¹⁸ I can’t even count them;
they outnumber the grains of sand!
And when I wake up,
you are still with me!

¹⁹ O God, if only you would destroy the wicked!
Get out of my life, you murderers!
²⁰ They blaspheme you;
your enemies misuse your name.
²¹ O LORD, shouldn’t I hate those who hate you?
Shouldn’t I despise those who oppose you?
²² Yes, I hate them with total hatred,
for your enemies are my enemies.

²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my **anxious** thoughts.
²⁴ Point out anything in me that offends you,
and lead me along the path of everlasting life.

SERMON THOUGHTS

A word is in order concerning the language of the psalmist and common reactions today among those who misunderstand the Biblical language, forcing a literal interpretation upon that which can only be taken as allusion, meaning language that knows it is pointing beyond what it can put in words.

What I mean is this...the language of the psalms isn't intended to instruct, it is intended to evoke a sense of

- the reality of God,
- God's inescapable presence,
- God's overwhelming love and mercy,
- God's pathos in connection with human life, as Abraham Joshua Heschel has written [Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: HarperCollins/First Perennial Classics, 2001), p. 355 *et passim*]

I mean, how are we to capture in any human language the fullness of the divine revelation? We can't! That's why the New Testament writers identified Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Trinity, as the full revelation of God – the exact representation of God's being (Hebrews 1:1-3). The full revelation of God is a person not a text, the One who was the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the Word made flesh.

We cannot possess this One or wield Him as a club; we can only – and must – submit ourselves in faith to His Lordship over our lives and all of Creation and seek to live in the light of His loving presence.

This is important because language like that used in this psalm has been distorted into the worst kind of

deterministic theology one can come up with – all fine and rosy when things are going our way BUT making of God a monster when the full scope of the human condition is in view. One example: Offer a literalistic reading of Psalm 139 to those in Ukraine suffering the criminally evil Russian attack on their lives and national sovereignty by Putin's terrorist Russian forces and the nice, rosy self-righteous implications of such a reading become fragmented as if hit by an incoming missile.

CONCLUSION / WRAP UP

No, the language of Psalm 139 is intended **to build faith, to build trust** in God's complete knowledge of us, no matter how faithful or UNfaithful we have been.

The caveat is our repentance. This isn't a condition on God's unconditional love; it is the recognition that we must humble ourselves to receive this gift from God on God's terms and not our own.

But, there is no fear we should harbor; God's goodness toward us knows no limits – IF the faith of the psalmist is to be embraced and internalized for our own.

And THAT, my friends, is the best of any Good News I could possibly have to share with you! God is, indeed, holding your life – Relax, embrace, and enjoy it!