

“You Have Searched Me and Known Me”

***Psalm 139; John 1:43-51**

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The psalms, almost placed smack in the middle of the Bible, are the prayer book of the Bible. Some of the psalms, most beautiful in poetry and inspiration, lift us to the majestic, the grand, and the cosmic creation. Take for example Psalm 104:

*“Bless the Lord, O my soul.
O Lord my God, you are very great.
You are clothed with honor and majesty,
Wrapped in light as with a garment.
You stretch out the heavens like a tent....”*

Or Psalm 148:

*“Praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord from the heavens;
Praise him in the heights!
Praise him sun and moon;
Praise him all you shining stars...”*

When heaven and nature sing, as they do in these psalms, our normal human self-centeredness however briefly, are replaced by awe. Our down-turned eyes are drawn upward. We are moved to contemplate the larger and higher purposes to which we are called from our sometimes frivolous and mundane pursuits. When I take the dog out for a walk and look up in the winter sky which has been surprisingly clear lately, Psalm 104 and Psalm 148 come to mind and help me to worship the Creator as a response to the wondrous and seemingly almost infinite stretches of space. Psalm 139 moves in the opposite direction. It moves from out there to down here, and to the inner heart of every human being...and the individual believer. The 139th Psalm is the most deeply personal prayer in the entire corpus of the Book of Psalms. It is one of the most personal expressions of faith we have anywhere in the Bible. It imagines an internal world that is as vast and wondrous as the world out there. It is a world of “inward parts” created and known by God that perhaps can be the basis of a healthy Christian self esteem, and yet on the other hand create reverent fear because every part of our being, including what we don’t know, is known to the Almighty God. This psalmist demonstrates a maturity in faith and trust in God, perhaps not rivaled elsewhere in scripture; it is a world inside of us that God loves enough to search and know, even if we sometimes don’t have the courage to examine or slow down enough to consider.

We note in our call to worship from our Old Testament reading of the call of the young boy Samuel some 1000 years before the birth of Christ. It was necessary that there was an inward journey and receptivity in order to hear the voice of God and say, “Speak Lord for your servant is listening.” I have deliberately paired our inward and personal psalm with the gospel reading from John of the first call of the disciples. Unlike the other gospel accounts, John highlights that Nathaniel came to faith in Jesus Christ, because Jesus almost miraculously knew that Nathaniel was under a fig tree with his friend Philip

even before Jesus had physically had come near. Jesus had foreknowledge of Nathaniel, which parallels the reflection of the psalmist, *“You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away...Even before a word is on my tongue you know it completely.”* To be a follower of Jesus is to be known to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ even before we ourselves have that knowledge, and part of the following of Jesus is the courage to go not only on an outward journey of service, not only putting into words the reasons for our faith and giving an account of the hope that is within us, but it is also the courage to follow Jesus in the inward journey of the heart and the soul; a personal life laid bare before God.

I. A Brief Exposition of the Psalm:

Although the psalmist’s prayer comes from personal experience, certainly not apart from the covenant and worshiping community, the prayer has universal application. Let us explore it briefly so that we might become more familiar and enter in our own personal amen. Perhaps it would be well to follow along in the pew Bible.

Verses 1-6 expresses the all-knowing nature of God, or what theologians often term the omniscience of God. “You know!” The psalmist recognizes himself as one who has been examined by God and knows him thoroughly. God knows when he is at rest and when he is at work. God knows what he is going to say even before he says it. His personal presence surrounds the psalmist at all times. Such infinite knowledge is beyond human comprehension.

The God of the Bible that the psalmist knows is not one who would the creation up and then lets it go and run its course. Rather the God of the Bible remains connected to the creation to the point of caring for the life and existence of this individual praying before God. As Christians who live after the coming of Christ, we would say even more fully that the God we personally know is the one who has come in the person of Jesus Christ so that the infinite God also has the power and the ability to become finite, and yes even taking up residence through the spirit in the heart and soul of every believer.

Verses 7-12 express the all-powerfulness of God; what theologians have termed the omnipresence of God. “You are there!” Maybe at some earlier time the psalmist had tried to flee from God, as we shall see next week Jonah did in the call of God fleeing to Tarshish, the opposite direction from Ninevah. Or perhaps the psalmist is simply imagining if he fled to the farthest limits of the sea or went down into the deep of the underworld, even in the darkest places are not without the presence of God and therefore there is light.

And then in verses 7-13, the psalmist reflects on the creative power of God, or what theologians refer to as the omnipotence of God. But rather than directing God’s creative power to the great stars or the greater light that rules the day and the lesser stars that rule the night, it is as though the psalmist has a modern sonogram to know that he is fearfully and wonderfully made. Incidentally, I have often read these verses in the hospital at the time of the birth of a new born child, and I think I read these verses both when Elsa and Vivian were born a few months ago.

I am reminded of the words of Luther’s Shorter Catechism that does not begin with God as the creator of the world out there as much as God the creator of each

individual: “I believe that God has created me and all that exists: that he has given me and still sustains my body and my soul.” If we know that God is my creator, and your creator, then the problems of evolution or dinosaurs, is not such a problem. We begin to understand the Word of God is not meant to answer these questions, but to help us know that we are ultimately related to a loving creator.

The psalmist takes time to ponder all of that and then exclaims: “How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them.” We have a foreshadow of the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 11 after he marvels of the ways of God’s salvation history for both Jews and Greeks: “Who has known the mind of the Lord and who has been his counselor? For from him and through and to him are all things.”

The psalmist has been so overcome by the goodness and loving creative power of God that has brought him into being and shaped all the days of his life, even before the days of his life, and that God will be there after the days of his life, that we then stumble in verses 19-22: “O that you would kill the wicked, O God...Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?” Those who put the lectionary together, of course cut out these verses because it sounds offensive to modern ears. I told Pastor Kama to read the entire psalm; don’t edit it. When one reads not only this psalm, but many of the psalms one is surprised by the prayers about the wicked and deliverance from enemies. Even our beloved psalm, the 23rd Psalm, has these words, “You prepare a table before in the presence of my enemies.” The presence of the light of God and the warmth of the Lord’s presence casts light on all the darkness of the world and those who oppose God. This mature and wise believer in God lives so close to God that the thought of those who defy God and shed blood is unbearable.

Have you ever had such feelings of righteous anger at those who would corrupt innocent children or who would exploit the poor and the needy, or maybe even a little road rage when someone drives up the shoulder on the freeway when we are all waiting patiently in line? I think you have. I think it is a wonderful thing that the prayers of the psalms which certainly express deep reverence for God also deal quite soberly and honestly about the real things of life without putting on some false holy air. In this prayer, we are always rooted in the real problems of life and not escaping into some churchy realm.

But then the Spirit of God begins to turn that outward anger back into a deep and searching spiritual inventory of his own heart and attitudes. “Search me, O God, and know my heart, test me and know my thought and see if there be any wicked or hurtful way in me.” We are not far here from the teachings and practices of Jesus. “Lord forgive us our sins as we forgive the sins of those who have sinned against us.” Or Jesus on the cross, “Father, forgive them they know not what they do.” Perhaps it is only one who in the presence of a gracious and intimate knowledge of God who can dare to conduct such a searching examination of the soul and to forgive the sins of others.

II. Life is not a Monologue but rather a Dialogue:

Once we have gone through a bit of an exposition of the psalm, we are ready to suggest the meaning of the psalm as a whole. I would suggest that the psalm is declaring that life is not a monologue but a dialogue. Fundamentally to be a Christian is to be a

person who knows that he or she is not alone but rather is one who is always in the presence and is addressed by God. This is the most basic thing that separates the Christian follower of Jesus Christ from the secular person. We believe that reality is not a monologue; not a matter of our own god doing our own thing; we are a people who are in a dialogue being addressed by a personal God.

Karl Barth said that all human history begins in being addressed, “Adam where are you?” That was the first question that God addressed to us. Later, God would ask, “Who told you to eat the forbidden fruit?” Then, “Where is your brother?” Finally, “What have you done?” We modern people on the other hands like to think that we are the ones who question God. “Do you exist?” “Where are you?” “Why do you allow suffering in the world?”

This psalm and the Bible as a whole suggest other wise. God is the one who knew us before we knew ourselves. God is the one who addresses us before we ever get around to addressing God. We are not autonomous and free accountable only to ourselves. No wonder there is so much loneliness in the modern world. But we are always being addressed by God, and it is in God that we will find our identity and rest for the restlessness of the human soul.

Of course the God who enters into dialogue with us and addresses us can at times be a great threat to us. We long for stability of personality, yet to be addressed by God is to be unsettled, our assumptions called into question, our lifestyle examined, our world questioned and found to be on sinking sand rather than a solid rock. Thus we have complex defenses, strategies for finding off the other, ways to silence the address. Sometimes we try to make our bed in Sheol, as the psalmist puts it or say we live in a world in which God is now dead. Still this God keeps pushing against us, keeps troubling us, and still keeps asking, “Where are you?”

We thought we were the ones asking questions about the reality of God, but it is God who is in search of us and long before we asked questions was already making us his own. To reach back into last week’s emphasis on the baptism of Jesus, to be baptized is to be willing to risk a conversation and address by the eternal, Almighty God. To be addressed by God is to be given an identity, a name, a purpose; to be unaddressed is to be no one. Thus my identity; your identity depends upon an unsettling “Thou.” Or Calvin put it, “Without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self, and without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God.”

But if unsettling and threatening, the address of the searching and knowing God may result also in a wonderful surprising joy. I like the words of Leslie Weatherhead in a sermon on Psalm 139: “They will find it hard to believe that such joy can ever be associated with a religious experience. Finally, the sense of incompleteness and frustration, of purposelessness and monotonous wandering, will give way to a sense of completion, harmony, and home. The streams finds the ocean at last....the sailor is home from the sea.” (Leslie Weatherhead, *Steady in an Unsteady World*, pp. 103-105)

III. The Called Life in Jesus Requires the Inner Life:

And then one other important application of this psalm as we look to the meaning of the psalm as a whole: This deeply personal and interior psalm is read on a Sunday

when we also read of Jesus calling the first disciples. The called life in Jesus requires the inner life!

Wallace Fletcher, a psychotherapist comments on his work with people in leadership roles. Here the resistance to searching and knowing, the internal forces that make for good and bad leadership is particularly worrisome. A leader's emotional and spiritual intelligence far more than her technical know-how are of vital importance for the people and organizations that depend on them.

Or as Parker Palmer puts it: "The problem is that people rise to leadership in our society by a tendency towards extroversion, which means a tendency to ignore what is going on inside themselves.....I have met many leaders whose confidence in the external world is so high that they regard the inner life as illusory, as a waste of time, as a magical fantasy trip into a region that doesn't even exist. But the link between leadership and spirituality calls us to reexamine that denial of the inner life."

There are at times for leaders, for all of us, emotional hijackings; powerful unconscious feelings and impulses which override and disrupt our better judgment—sometimes with awful consequences. Our psalmist appears to have almost had an emotional hijacking right in the middle of the psalm he is praying, "Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?" Sometimes we want to blame all of our problems and difficulties on the world out there, when we must ultimately look at the inner reality of our own heart and open our lives to the transforming power and inner healing of Jesus Christ. We must go in and down, and ultimately it is only the Spirit of God that can break down our resistances.

Fortunately for the psalmist his emotional hijacking did not last very long: "Search me O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead in the way everlasting." The psalmist can allow the searching inner work of God, because he knows what great care and love that God has created him and nothing deep within is alien to God.

(This section is adapted from Lectionary Homiletics, January 2012, Wallace N. Fletcher, p. 50)

Conclusion:

This is a deeply inner and personal psalm, and sometimes personal sharing of our walk with God is a very difficult thing for us to do. Let me try: The past few years have brought deep personal changes for me in regard to security and what can ultimately bring security. God has been at work smashing some of my idols.

One idol, in a way: My daughter a week ago walked up the airport ramp to security to go to England to student teach for her last semester of college, a precursor to when our last child will leave home. She gave us a hug good-by.... and didn't look back; she went right up that ramp with purpose, determination, and confidence. Maybe it was a good thing because my wife had tears; my tears were on the inside. For me tears of loss, but also tears of joy that she walked into the future secure and purposeful, certainly more secure than I was at her age.

Search me O God and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there be any wicked way in me and lead me in the way everlasting. Amen.