

God Knows and Goes  
Psalm 139  
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Peace Presbyterian Church  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany  
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As much as I love this congregation and treasure the opportunity to be in ministry with you, I love to escape this place. My favorite escape, as many of you know, is the mountains of N. Carolina, to Montreat, that Presbyterian mecca, where we Deiberts went with the college students a week ago.

Truth is, it is increasingly in today's world to escape anything. The workshop I led at the college conference was on being secure, feeling like you can find home in a social media world that is always showing you what other people are doing and saying. With social media, you can see the highlights of other people's lives and think that perhaps you are missing out. Especially if you are in your teens, or early adulthood, if you consume too much social media, you might develop the disease of FoMo, the fear of missing out. Then again, sometimes we would like to miss out on some of the things that get said – and thanks to social media, we hear about all of them, and we argue them out, ad nauseum.

The other side of social media is that not only can we follow others, but social media follows us. Cell phones are in our pockets, vibrating with newsfeeds and Facebook posts and Instagrams and so we are truly never very distant from anyone, which I suppose helps us understand this psalm, which teaches us that God is with us everywhere – that God is intimately involved in our lives. No matter where we go, God knows. Of course, Google and Facebook know a heckuva lot about you too. They know what websites you visit. Amazon knows what items you like. But God --- God knows your thoughts. God knows what you will say before you say it. God doesn't just know you but God loves you, so God will even make a bed in Sheol with you. Sheol is understood by the psalmist to be the place of the dead, of torment, in some places in the Bible it seems like the place of separation from God, but the psalmist says God goes with us there! Hear these beautiful words affirming the constancy of God's presence and abiding love.

O LORD, you have searched me and known me. <sup>2</sup> You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. <sup>3</sup> You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. <sup>4</sup> Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. <sup>5</sup> You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

<sup>6</sup> Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. <sup>7</sup> Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? <sup>8</sup> If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. <sup>9</sup> If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, <sup>10</sup> even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. <sup>11</sup> If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," <sup>12</sup> even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you. <sup>13</sup> For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. <sup>14</sup> I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. <sup>15</sup> My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. <sup>16</sup> Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. <sup>17</sup> How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! <sup>18</sup> I try to count them-- they are more than the sand; I come to the end-- I am still with you. <sup>19</sup> O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me-- <sup>20</sup> those who speak of you maliciously, and lift themselves up against you for evil! <sup>21</sup> Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? <sup>22</sup> I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies. <sup>23</sup> Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. <sup>24</sup> See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. (NRS)

Beautiful words, wonderful words of life these are, but I bet you were surprised to hear verses 19-22. Oftentimes, people don't read that portion of the psalm, and I was planning to trim that out, but on second thought I decided that since the psalmist often curses those who threaten life and wishes God to do harm to those who are evil, we should struggle with it. Now we would not pray to God to kill the wicked, but we like the psalmist do find ourselves loathing other people and wishing no good for them, other than a total transformation of character.

We learn through these harsh words of the psalmist that we can tell God how we really feel. If someone is oppressing or abusing you, mistreating you in some way, it is certainly fine to pray for God to stop them however God sees fit. If someone is working against God and God's ways, then it is appropriate to take a stand for what is right, and to hate the evil ways of those you would consider enemies of God.

This is loyalty to truth and goodness. But take note, with the curse comes the prayer to God to examine and test US for our own faults and to lead us in the right ways. Sometimes we do need to voice our disgust with evil. But there's a big difference between voicing it in a safe way with God or another trusted friend, and acting on it. This is not an invitation to act on the feelings of disgust, to do damage to them ourselves. Jesus taught the non-violent way of loving the enemy, and we are compelled to follow him. Just as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that." God is love, and God can drive out darkness and hate. And we need to be in constant prayer with God about that the evil which so often rears its ugly head in our time and place. Especially today, on this MLK week-end, we will be mindful of the racism and xenophobia that are gaining ground in our country. But instead of just condemning what we perceive as evil, we also are called to pray for God's examine of us.

God knows our hearts. God knows when we have undignified thoughts, when we are anyway dismissive of the value of another human being, made in God's image. God knows when we have been silent and we could have spoken the truth in love. We cannot continue to be silent when people of color, or women, or persons in the LGBTQ community, or immigrants from impoverished countries or majority Muslim countries are maligned or insulted. In our faith statement at Peace we say that we believe that

- All people are created in the image of God.
- God loves all people and expects us to love one another.
- God is compassionately involved in the world.
- God expects us to work for peace and justice for all.

Is not the child from Haiti fearfully and wonderfully made? Our own John and Cora Hardesty were born in Haiti and they are beautiful, beloved children of God. Our own Anderson, Mary, Marilyn, and Blessing born in Cameroon – they belong to God and to us in love. No one should speak as if their country of origin is less valuable than ours.

But the truth is – many of us of white and European background in this country still have a superiority complex. We have benefitted from our privilege in society, and now, though it is unpleasant, we are being forced as a country to examine ourselves through those who voice this ugly racism with no subtlety. It is they who force the conversations that we'd really rather not have.

God sees us and knows us. God knows us and goes with us everywhere we go. And what God wants is for us to love one another, as completely as God loves us. And if our brothers in Haiti or El Salvador or Sarasota, if our sisters in Cameroon, Norway, or Bradenton, find themselves in Sheol or another place that starts with Sh, we know God is there, and we are called to be there with them, caring about them, loving them, being the hands and feet and the heart of Jesus Christ with them.

Oh, we can run. We can hide. We can erect barriers that separate us from God and from one another, but God will keep knowing us and going with us, all of us, wherever we go, working to transform us, hoping to lead us into the light of truth and compassion.