

Psalm 139

The Inescapable God

To the leader. Of David. A Psalm.

- 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.

¹³For it was you who formed my inward parts;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.
¹⁴I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
 Wonderful are your works;
 that I know very well.

¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
¹⁶ 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.
¹⁷ How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
¹⁸ I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end^[a]—I am still with you.

John 1:43-51 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Jesus Calls Philip and Nathanael

⁴³The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." ⁴⁴Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." ⁴⁶Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." ⁴⁷When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" ⁴⁸Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." ⁴⁹Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" ⁵⁰Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." ⁵¹And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you,^[a] you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

January 14, 2018

Psalm 139:1-18; John 1:43-51

“Known”

Kerra Becker English

Being known. It's one of the greatest feelings there is. We yearn for someone to know who we are, to “get” us, to make us feel like we are not alone in the universe. We want it first from our parental figures, but as we get older, we seek it from our friends and lovers. It's even more than a sense of togetherness. It's like someone can see inside of your soul. It's intimate. It's vulnerable. And as good as it feels, it can also be terrifying. If someone knows us, it also gives them the power to hurt us.

So, we develop ways of hiding who we are. We develop masks, or layers, or defense mechanisms that keep us at arms distance from other people. We only risk being known by people we really, really trust. And to keep the distance from everyone else, we create our own stories about others. I'm not like those other people because... That way, we can feel that there are other people “like us” without having to disclose all that much about ourselves.

The story that I read this morning from the gospel of John is about this sense of being known for who you are. In this narrative about the call of the disciples, Jesus has already called Philip to follow him, and he goes to his friend Nathanael to say how he has felt around this traveling teacher. Philip thinks he has found the one, the one who leads like Moses, who comforts and challenges like the prophets. He's the one, but there's also bad news, he comes from Nazareth. Nazareth is “that kind” of town. It's small and backward – nothing like the notably cultured Greek center near the Sea of Galilee. No resort homes there, no good

restaurants, no theater, no new ideas, and most certainly no Messiah. Nathanael hears this detail and is already skeptical. But Philip tells him to come and see for himself.

Nathanael does just that, and as soon as Jesus starts walking toward him, he gets the message from Jesus that he is already known. Now, to us, the message may simply sound like flattery. Jesus could have complimented Nathanael on his good looks and intellect so it seems, but he chooses to say that this is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit. Jesus calls out Nathanael's honesty, and for that Nathanael feels like he has been recognized at the soul level. We know this because of his reaction. He says, "Where did you get to know me?" Seeing Nathanael under the fig tree doesn't seem like a major revelation – but for whatever reason – he knows that he has been truly seen because he trusts Jesus immediately, honors him with all kinds of titles and praise. With this kind of knowledge, with this kind of openness, Nathanael is ready to see the heavens opened.

That is what being known feels like, and it requires our vulnerability, something we don't always want to give. I'm a fan of Brene Brown's work on vulnerability, and the amazing thing she discovered about studying it was that whole-hearted people are the ones who are good at it, or at least who try to practice it. The spiritually open, the ones willing to be both broken by and healed by the world and the fragile people in it, those are the ones who risk being known.

And it is a risk. It is a risk to allow a wandering rabbi from the back-woods holler of Galilee to offer you a glimpse of God's unconditional and compassionate-beyond-belief kind of love. It is still a risk today to follow Jesus, even though in our culture saying that we are a Christian may feel like one of the least risky things that we do. So, let me explain, to truly be known and loved by Jesus is to be known by the one true God, and the only guarantee that gives us is that we will be changed by the experience. Look at how both Philip and Nathanael reacted

to being truly seen by Jesus. It isn't an "I'm part of the club now kind of feeling." Rather, it's more like the joy that precedes the vulnerability hangover that Brene Brown describes in her work. When one has bared his or her soul to the world, it's a kind of nakedness, a kind of openness that inspires those exclamations of praise and delight, but also makes you wonder the next day, "What did I just do?" and "How can I take it all back?"

It's why I've always been drawn to and somewhat frightened by today's Psalm of the day, Psalm 139. There is no hiding from God. God knows who we are – even if we have honed every hiding skill known to humanity. In one of the biblical headings that show up in some versions of scripture, mine calls this the psalm to the "Inescapable God." Wow, just wow. God is inescapable. Where can I go to get out of God's sight? The answer is nowhere, absolutely, positively nowhere. Um. Yeah. There are things I'd rather God not know about me, right? But God sees and knows them all, and also knows that I am more than just what I do; God sees me from the inside out. I am wonderfully known, scarily known, soul-level KNOWN, by the Creator of the Universe.

One of the earlier things I did this week was reflect on this Psalm and try to go deeper into its words. You have that reflection in your bulletin as today's call to worship, but I want to read it again so you can simply listen. It isn't the exact words of the Psalm – but I hope it captures the intent for those who would be moved by it in our own time and place.

Lord, you know me.

You know where I am at all times.

You know what I'm thinking.

You know what I'm feeling.

You know where I wander.

And You know where I call home.

You know what I'm going to do before I even do it.

You know the words I say, the words I wish I said, and the words I wish I kept to myself.

You put your hand on my life, and I tremble.

I know this, and yet it's more than I can comprehend.

Where could I possibly hide from your spirit?

To what lengths could I go that you wouldn't find me?

In my best and brightest moments, you are there.

In my darkest night, you are there.

When I've gone so far out to sea that I don't even recognize who I've become, You lead me back to myself.

When I am overwhelmed by darkness, the world's and my own, You enter into the darkness with me and become my light.

Much to my surprise, I am the joy of your creation, wonderfully made from the very beginning.

You knew me before I knew myself.

You knew who I would become before I existed in the world.

You, Lord, wrote the book on my life. I only have to live it.