

The Church of the Pilgrimage
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Psalm 139:1-7; 13-18

You have searched me, LORD, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely. You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand—when I awake, I am still with you.

Identity Question

Psalm 139 – this portrayal of God who is near at hand, as near to us as the blood which courses through our veins as one who knows us better than we know ourselves may seem like an odd choice of scripture on a weekend, for a worship service that is at least in part about honoring the life work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Psalm 139 does not speak of social justice. It does not use the word “race” or move to the prophets plea for a more just society. What it does, however, is lift up a principle of faith in the Reformed Tradition: namely the conviction that “every human being has at every moment to do with the living God.” (Dr. John Leith, Introduction to the Reformed Tradition, p. 67)

In other words there is no human being and nothing about human life that is out of the realm of God's concern -- nothing that goes on here on earth that God does not care about. More than that, in this psalm God is not some far off reality, sitting up on a cloud but rather the encompassing reality in whom all that is “lives and moves and has its being” You heard it didn't you, in the psalm Kim just read. The psalmist insists that whether we choose to be aware of God or not, we are known completely by the God to whom, as the Book of Common Prayer puts it “all desires are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid.” (Book of Common Prayer, p. 323)

Now to some that may sound intrusive, but the God who comes through here is an intensely personal God, one who doesn't just yearn to be close but *is* close, a God who doesn't generically care for people, but who sees and knows the value of each and every one. “God's eye is on the sparrow, and I know God watches me” the

spiritual sings, a song that might have come straight from this psalm and it is meant to be comforting that idea, not a scary intrusion.

The psalm raises identity questions about God (far off or near) but also about us here on earth. The question of who we are and who we are becoming (because identity truly is not completely fixed in any one of us) these questions are with us much of our life. Early in our schooling, we figure out something of who we are and who we might strive to be. Information comes to us about what we are good at, what we are not so good at, who is it we want to befriend, what really and truly interests us, what we are passionate about...these are all things we take stock of as we figure out who we are.

Questions about identity are not then just the prerogative of teenagers. They come to the parent whose children are away from home for the first time, to the retiree who wakes up and no longer must rush out the door each morning, the caregiver whose spouse dies after a long illness, to anyone struggling with the loss of a relationship, or to anyone struggling with issues of sexual orientation. One way or another, and at one time or another we all face the question: Who are we? What makes our life valuable, and meaningful? (*adapted from questions in Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 1, Allen McSween Jr, p. 252*) Someone who is facing death might ask these questions too: Who am I and how do I want to leave this world and what will my legacy be?

This week, in pondering this text, I came across a gem, a poem written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the well known German pastor, theologian, and Nazi resister. Jailed and eventually executed for taking part in a plot to assassinate Hitler, Bonhoeffer wrote from his jail cell a poem entitled "Who Am I?" in which he contrasted what others said about him with what he know of himself.

Who Am I?

Who Am I? They often tell me
I stepped from my cell's confinement
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
like a Squire from his country house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I used to speak freely to my warders
Freely and friendly and clearly,
as though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I bore the days of misfortune
Equally, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I know of myself?
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
struggling for breath, as through hands were compressing my throat,
yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,
tossing in expectation of great events,
powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army,
fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who Am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine!

This poem seems so in keeping with the psalm for today. We, like Bonhoeffer, may struggle with who we are, particularly in times of distress, in times demanding courage. But there is that ending: his ending like the psalm's ending the trust that however we struggle, however we see ourselves God knows us entirely and loves us still. God knows us entirely and claims us still.

In bible study this week we reflected upon great figures – like Bonhoeffer, like Martin Luther King, Jr., like Winston Churchill. They were human, they had their frailties. But they tried to do the right thing keeping their eyes on that more than on what others were saying about them. I encourage you: Go and see *The Darkest Hour*, it is so worthwhile, and be reminded of the mixture of frailty and strength, arrogance and insight that was Winston Churchill. “God can use a crooked stick to draw a straight line” someone said in bible study this week --a saying I had never heard before. And where would we be if Churchill had not done what he did because he was flawed? Where would we be if Martin Luther King Jr. had not done what he did because he was flawed?

This week one morning I read a reflection by Richard Rohr. And there was at the end this encouragement to find one word, one word in the reflection to take with you for the rest of the day. I chose “sacramental”. A churchy word, yes, and we all know that we have two sacraments in our tradition, baptism and communion. But *sacramental*...well carrying around that word that day made the day different. I was, somehow, more aware of the holiness of all of life when I got up in the morning and had that first cup of coffee, when I walked alone outdoors, when I shared a meal with a parishioner, when I greeted my spouse at the end of the day,

when I had a simple exchange with the women at the cash register at Stop and Shop. There is no where we can go that God is not present the psalm insists, and that little exercise, carrying the word *sacramental* with me for a day, it helped me see how true that is -- which is to say I was, for that day, more able to glimpse the truth of holiness everywhere. Carrying that word with me that day also helped me see others I encountered not merely as people but as children of God, others whom God holds close -- others who a loving God searches, knows, and loves.

Dr. Paul Farmer, founder and head of Partners in Health, a man who has spent quite a bit of time at work in Haiti, says this: "The idea that some lives matter less is the root of all that's wrong with the world." I think we might expand on that. The idea that some lives matter less is antithetical to the gospel. The idea that some lives matter less runs counter to the best and highest founding principles of our nation. I think of those men in the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike marching with Dr. King with their signs: I am a Man. And how still, today, there are forces in our country who want to deny personhood, who want to deny value to people of color, or people of particular sexual orientation, or people from particular countries or religions.

*O God, you have searched me and known me
You know when I sit down and when I rise up
You discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
And are acquainted with all my ways.*

This God who knows us so intimately, Reverend Dr. King would say, is looking for our awakening, our awakening to truth. This is an ongoing thing....never are we perfectly or permanently in tune with Truth, or in tune with God's ways – I heard an author on NPR this morning say this work of racial justice is like an old house renovation...no sooner do you get one thing done than there's something else needing attention.

There is an identity question being asked of our country right now. Who are we? Who are we striving to be? What voices will we listen to, what voices will we heed? Will we keep our eyes open to what is going on, or will we just stop reading the newspapers, stop listening to the news cocoon like there's no tomorrow, and no reason to do otherwise.

If we hear others being denigrated, how will we respond? If we are disappointed, shocked and dismayed, how will we make those feelings known?

Will we let God use our human imperfect selves to stand up for justice, stand up for human decency in our time?

Amen.