

The Church of the Pilgrimage  
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo  
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### Psalm 139

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? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. 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. If only you, God, would slay the wicked! Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty! They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name. Do I not hate those who hate you, LORD, and abhor those who are in rebellion against you? I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies. Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.

### **All of It**

Psalm 139 --such a beautiful psalm, so full of praise, so full of confidence in God's presence with us in all things. "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there." And, "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." The psalm contains such gems -- lines that could truly be a whole sermon in themselves.

But then there is the turn. You heard it, how could you not? After eighteen verses of profound reflection on God as the ground of our existence, the psalm abruptly calls for the death of the wicked and vows hatred for all who hate God! "Oh, that you would kill the wicked, O God". "Do I not hate those who hate you?" This turn from praise to vengeance, from love language to hate language—it startles us. So much so that often in worship we leave it off, so that only the first part – the praise part, the lovely part – is read.

This week I discovered, however, that the whole of the psalm has power. Even beauty. It took me a while to get there, and I hope you will too.

But first, a word on the psalms in general. If you've taken time to read the psalms, to venture beyond the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm with its comforting shepherd imagery, you know that they are not always easy "nice and tidy emotion" kind of songs. There are psalms of praise, but also songs of lament. There are psalms that speak to joy – but also to desperation, loneliness, and despair. The psalms contain it all, the whole wide realm of human emotion. And sometimes what begins as a psalm of praise, like this one, takes a turn, and angry seemingly ugly bursts come forth.

So, what shall we say about enemy language like this? First, that it wasn't inconsistent with the psalmists' world view. As Hebrew bible scholar James Mays says "in the psalmists' worldview, the wicked and their dangerous threats to those who base life on God are an important part of the reality in the midst of which faith must live. To speak of them in speaking of one's relation to God was completely consistent...especially where the plea was a kind of turning to God in God's judging discernment of one's life." (Interpretation Commentary, *Psalms*, p. 428) Mays goes on to point out that there is no real discernable danger in this psalm, the psalmist is not standing face to face with a God hater, is not responding to an immediate threat. Knowing that, can we hear this psalm in its tricky parts, speaking more a pledge of loyalty?

God, I want to be on your side. I will not be swayed in a culture that seeks to destroy my faith. I will distance myself from everyone and everything that works against You.

Here's a bit more: The psalmist, James May says, is actually calling on God to be his judge so that God can be his shepherd. In other words, I acknowledge you, God, have standards. Other people need to be held accountable to those standards. But hold *me* to those standards that I may be more fully a person guided in your ways.

Does that make sense? It does to me. And I for one am glad to be wrestling with this psalm, this psalm that makes space for so many feelings. Because lately some of my own feelings have been...well, a bit unruly.

I wasn't ready to tell this little story on myself last week, but I can today.

Preparation for the beginning of the church year in September began with work on Gathering Sunday, which took place last week. If you receive the Herald, our church newsletter, you may have read about it prior to coming to church. Because it would be an all ages service, we'd do our prayers for the day in a slightly different way. There would be a time in the service when people would be invited to come forward to bring prayers – written prayers of joy and gratitude for the summer, for life in general and concerns of all kinds. We'd place these joy prayers – written on sun and moons and stars (for Psalm 8) on the board along with the concerns – written on clouds. A simple thing, something to help make our worship service more

intergenerational. I had written about it in the Herald, by way of inviting people back to worship at summer's end.

So midweek prior, I came over to the sanctuary building from the office building to hunt up the large bulletin board on wheels, the one we have used from time to time in our all ages worship services, the one I referred to in the September newsletter article. I searched Allerton Hall. I searched the nursery. I went back across Town Square and checked all over the John Robinson Center, because we have on occasion used it for services over there. The portable bulletin board was nowhere to be found! So, I went to Shellie, our office administrator, and asked her. "Do you know where the large bulletin board has gotten to?"

Shellie got a funny look on her face. She confessed that she and Brian had been tidying up Allerton Hall one day this summer and that the aforementioned bulletin board had gotten thrown out. And not just thrown out. "It got chopped up and put in the dumpster" she said.

The bulletin board that I had imagined being there for Gathering Sunday. The nice big one, the one on wheels, the only one we have. Chopped up and in the dumpster. Indignant, I said, "It would have been nice if you'd asked me first!" And then (insert ironic and terribly offended look here) "and I *wrote* all about this in the Herald!"

Have you ever felt you'd thought something through well only to find it was all messed up?? I knew my immediate need was to come up with a Plan B – which, with Jenny's help, we eventually did – but for a while I had smoke coming out of my ears. As Alex Cora, manager of the Red Sox, said on the night he vigorously argued with the umpire and was ejected from a game: "I wasn't very polite". I think of Mister Rogers and his song *What do you do with the mad that you feel, when you feel so mad you could bite?*

Now good people I want to make this very clear: on the way out of this worship service, if you come to the door to shake my hand, you don't need to soothe me. You don't need to say "there, there, we've all had days like that." I know you love that I can be "so human" (at least some of you say that) but I am telling this little story on myself today because I was altogether *too* human in that moment, and because I was frankly a little embarrassed about it afterward. So, I had to take some time to think about my reaction, why it was I was so angry and frustrated. I had to pause and think about why it made me feel, this one thing made me feel...so *worked against*, like my co-workers had purposely conspired to make my life difficult. Which I knew was ridiculous, but for one morning in early September that was how I was feeling. So I did take that time for self-reflection...and in the course of that, this week in particular, I could see how our psalm today kind of mirrored my experience -- namely moving from frustration with people or situations out *there* even thinking about them in "enemy terms" to wondering about what was going on with me, about how to be different *in here*.

In a way, the escapade of the missing bulletin board was a kind of gift. I found myself humbled to pray for God to help me see myself and see where I needed some changing. I got some clarity I hadn't had before about what's really going on with me. And in the end-- I want to assure you -- there was good humor. When Shellie and Brian and Jenny hung the blue banner, the one Jenny got at Joanne Fabric, Plan B Shellie and Brian (formerly known as the evildoers, the enemies) posed in front of it, hamming it up for the camera and sending me the picture for a good laugh out loud.

So where am I leading with all this? To the truth that it is actually a bit terrifying to say, "God you have searched and known me, Thou art acquainted with all my ways." Really known me, *all* of me, every part of me? It can be downright *discomforting* to think of God knowing everything about us. And yet this is what our psalm today says. God knows our hopes and dreams, our thoughts, our yearnings. God knows our struggles, our questions, our anger. God knows our tender most vulnerable spots, and the homespun fixes we get ourselves into. God who made the moon and sun and stars, who knit us together in our mother's womb knows all of it. And there's more: The God who knows us and loves us just as we are, will also transform us -- if we open ourselves to that possibility.

Someone in bible study this week said an interesting thing: That they felt God's presence the most when their conscience is pricked, when they are going on about something, and a voice says "Really Lori that is how you feel? That is how you *really* feel?" And they catch themselves, the part of them that is not being honest. Or perhaps kind or patient or compassionate. They feel God as this correcting presence, and they are grateful.

Which leads us to the very best thing about the psalm, that is, when you read the whole thing -- namely, how it ends: with a plea for self-awareness, for greater self-understanding and a greater capacity to walk in God's ways. Because, as they say, *this* (our hearts) is what we can change. *We* are what we can work on, and we do this relying on God's grace.

*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 me in the way everlasting.*

As we seek to be a community, walking in God's ways known and to be made known to us may we grow in self-knowledge and in an openness to self-correction. And may we be ever grateful to God, who is with us in all of it.

Amen.