

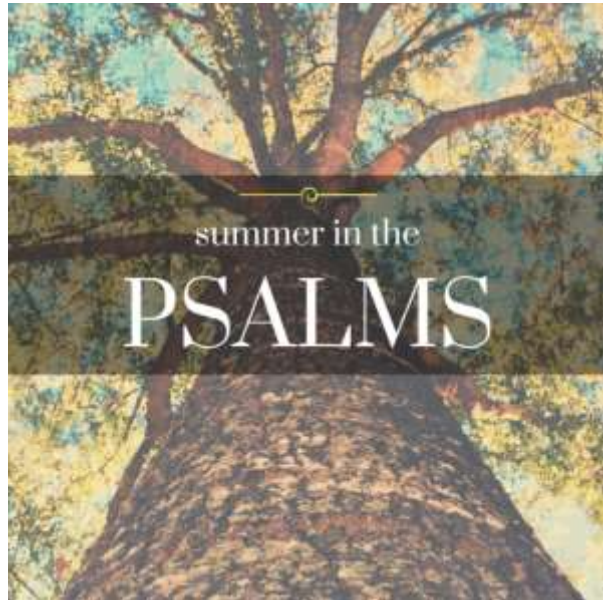
Second Sunday after Pentacost
June 3, 2018

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Psalm 139:1-18, 23-24

Summer in the Psalms

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. -- Psalm 139:23-24



This summer, as we conclude our year-long emphasis called Deeply Rooted, Pastor Nancy and I are going to be considering the songs that lie at the core of our faith, the Psalms.

John Calvin, the father of the Presbyterians, said that “there is nowhere that God’s providence and care... are more perfectly celebrated, and with such splendor”ⁱ than in the psalms.

These are the prayers Jesus prayed. The psalms are “both prayers to God and God’s own Word,” wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer, precisely because here we encounter the praying Christ... “those who pray the psalms are joining in the prayers of Jesus [therefore] our prayers reach the ears of God.”ⁱⁱ

I fell in love with the psalms in the summer. The summer before my junior year in college I worked as a counselor at our Presbytery camp. The children served in that ministry were poor and mostly from the inner city. Few had ever been past the city limits. The night sounds of the woods terrified them. Some of them wet the bed because they were afraid to get up during the night to use the latrine. They fought constantly. Nobody knew how to swim, which is THE only way to escape the heat and humidity of Georgia summers.

It took a long time to get everybody to sleep at night, but ultimately they would all pass out from exhaustion. That was when I was free to read the psalms. Folded in the sounds of the crickets and the songs of the tree frogs, I would sit beside the lake reading the psalms by moonlight. Early in the mornings too, before those precious little monsters were all awake, I’d read:

*Oh, Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!ⁱⁱⁱ
God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.^{iv}*

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.

This summer we will be exploring the psalms using different mediums. Sometimes we will pray the psalms. Very often we will sing them. David Merrill, Sarah Kent, Pastor Nancy and I will

make sure that a psalm is highlighted every week. We will study the psalms in Bible Study, and I'll provide small group materials for those who want them. The psalms are not all we are going to talk about this summer, not even close, but they will be our cornerstone, our foundation.

So let's get started. Today, the lectionary takes us to one of the most beloved of all the psalms, Psalm 139. Traditionally called a Psalm of King David, its language and placement in the book of Psalms suggests that it was probably written down in its present form sometime after the Hebrew people returned from exile, around 500 BC. In other words, this song is timeless.

A group called Igniter Media created a video rendering of the 139th psalm that I'm going to show for our scripture reading today. Watch www.youtube.com/watch?v=4uOVjeIel68

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

God, you have searched us and known us. You have called us by name and made us your own. When we work and when we rest, you are there beside us. You know us altogether. You created every cell of our bodies; you knit us together, piece by piece.

I wonder why it is so hard for us to remain in you. Why do we try to control and exploit everything and everyone around us? Our world would be so different, our fear and anxiety would be nothing at all, if we could just find a way to rest safe in you. You are our all-knowing, all-loving God. Speak to us today, we pray. Surprise and transform us with your amazing grace. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Robert Wells, the wonderful children's author and illustrator of all kinds of award-winning science books, wrote one I particularly love called, *Is the Blue Whale the Biggest Thing There Is?*

The largest creature on earth, says Wells, is, in fact, the blue whale, weighing in at about 200 tons, a female blue whale is the size of a 10-story building. But a blue whale isn't nearly as big as a mountain. If you put one hundred blue whales inside a huge jar – Robert Wells tells the children – it would have to be a tremendous jar, but if you did that, you could fit millions of those huge jars in a hollowed out Mt. Everest.

Now, Mt. Everest is big, for sure, but it isn't nearly as big as the earth. If you were to stack one hundred Everests one on top of the other, it would just be a whisker on the face of the earth. The earth isn't anywhere near as big as the sun. You can fit one million earths inside the sun.

But the sun is not anywhere close to as big as the red supergiant Antares. You could fit fifty million of our suns inside Antares, but Antares isn't nearly as big as the Milky Way, our galaxy. Billions of stars, including superstars like Antares, make up the Milky Way.

But the Milky Way isn't anywhere near as large as the universe. There are billions of other galaxies in the universe.^v The universe is expanding, of course, but today, the observable universe measures about 91 billion light years.

And yet – the One who created all of this, spoke all of it into being, knows you and me. God knows our thoughts, knows when we sit down and when we rise, knows our prayers before we speak them.

In the Hebrew language, the verb, “to know,” *ya-dah*, is a very intimate word. Genesis 4:1 says, *Adam knew Eve, his wife, and she conceived*. The psalmist uses *ya-dah* six times in these verses.

We glibly refer to God as All-Knowing, but what exactly is that? The theological term for it is omniscience. There is nothing that God does not know, nothing that God does not see. 1 John 3:20 says, *God is greater than our heart, and knows everything*.

God is more than all-knowing; God is also omnipresent, ubiquitous, as Luther liked to say, that means, everywhere all at the same time. The psalmist put it this way,

*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 the place of the dead, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.*

Yogi Berra used to say, “I have noticed that everywhere I go, there I am.” Really, everywhere you go, there God is -- around every corner, at the end of every hallway, behind every door, God is there. In Bible study on Wednesday, I asked the group, “Do you find the fact that God is all-seeing, all-present and all-knowing comforting or intimidating?” “Yes”, they said. “Both.” In the end, it depends on what you believe about God.

Paul Tillich, one of the greatest theologians of the last century, preached a famous sermon on the 139th Psalm.^{vi} He said that when human beings realize that we cannot escape from God, then we will try to kill God, to attack, deny or pass laws that outlaw God. People will write books denying the existence of God, or create religious doctrines and structures to restrict or constrict God into tight little boxes. And, of course, none of that works, ever.

Why did our Savior end up on a Roman cross anyway? Was it because he came too close?

Jesus’ only purpose was love, healing, help. He came in utter, self-emptying love. He came to show just how far God will go—to love the world.

There is a lot we cannot understand about God, but one thing is clear: God is large. God’s knowledge, God’s presence, and God’s power and love are massive. This psalm celebrates that truth in poetry that has endured. Across thousands of years and many translations it still stirs the human soul.

I used to think of the 139th psalm as a prayer, and it is the prayer of a human who is fearfully and wonderfully made. As I studied the psalm this week, I also came to realize that it's an affirmation of faith, an oath of loyalty to the God who created and sustains everything in this amazing, interwoven universe that Robert Wells describes in his child's books. The psalm is comforting, and it is also challenging.

Barbara Brown Taylor in her memoir, *An Altar in the Word*, talks about her father, as staff psychologist at the Veterans Administration, and the small, wooden deck on their house, outside her parents' second floor bedroom where they would lie on their backs on August nights and watch falling stars.

She didn't know then that what she was watching was a meteor shower, the Persaids (per-SEE-ids). She only knew that her father could be trusted when he said that there was something that she needed to see.

On the night of the stars, he told her to pull the pale blue blanket off the bed and bring it to the deck. The air was sweet and cool. Her father folded the blanket in half and laid down on it with his hands folded behind his head. Her sister, Katy and Barbara laid down beside him, one under each elbow, where they could smell the chapstick, tobacco, strong coffee smell of their father. He never explained what they were looking for; instead, they just laid there beside him looking into a sky.

Here's what she wrote:

“When I breathed in, I seemed huge to myself. It felt as much a part of the sky as a feather on a bird's belly. When I breathed out, I became so small that I feared I might vanish. What was a 7-year-old girl under the weight of all those stars? When the first one fell, we all gasped and clutched at one another. *Did you see that? I did! Where did it go? To the far side of the moon.*

“More and more stars fell as the night deepened. Some of them made clear arcs across the sky, while others disappeared before they had gone halfway. Watching them, I gained the understanding that the planet I was lying on looked like a star from somewhere else in the universe. It, too, might fall at any moment, taking me along with it. This understanding made my stomach flip even as it increased by investment in what was going on above my head. When my father woke me later, I could not believe I had fallen asleep.”^{vii}

When was the last time you felt that safe? When was the last time you felt that small? The 139th psalm declares that we are literally held in the crook of God's elbow.

Elaine Wilder is a United Methodist minister. She thinks that this psalm is about courage, that what we hear in this psalm about our all-knowing, all-present, ever-powerful love of God ought to give us the courage to face the challenges and difficulties that confront us every day.

“True courage begins when we realize that we can believe in ourselves because God first believed in us. True courage is the strength to declare, ‘God is God, and I am not.’”^{viii} And rest, safe in the knowledge that God is with us. We are never alone.

The last two verses of this psalm are the most important. They are a prayer by the psalmist, a prayer of submission to the vast presence and power of God. They are the prayer of a believer who is lost in wonder, love and praise.

Let’s pray them together now.

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. Amen.

ⁱ Daniel Doerksen, *Picturing Religious Experience*, University of Delaware Press, 2011, 66

ⁱⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Harper & Row, 1954, 46

ⁱⁱⁱ Psalm 8:1

^{iv} Psalm 46:1

^v Robert Wells, *Is a Blue Whale the Biggest Thing There Is?* Albert Whitman & Co., 1993

^{vi} Paul Tillich, “Escape from God” *Shaking the Foundations* Charles Scribner's Sons 1955

^{vii} Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, HarperOne, 2010, 17-19

^{viii} Elaine Wilder, “The Whisper of Courage” *Day1* radio broadcast, first aired September 8, 2013