

Jan 14th 2024

Summerland United Church

God is Holding Your Life: Psalm 139 “Where Can I Go?”

This week’s Psalm text brings home this message: we are in an intimate relationship with God. There is nowhere we go that God is not present—no state of our being that results in our being abandoned. God has knit us together, has woven us, knowing us from before our beginning. God, indeed, is holding our lives.

A note about Selah: The word Selah occurs 74 times in the Hebrew Bible. No one is quite sure what it means. Many suggest it is a mark of pause – a moment to stop and listen – either to the sweet Holy space in the silence between speaking or to pause and listen to a few notes of music. While the psalm we’re about to hear doesn’t traditionally have these Selah pauses in it. I’ve added them so we can begin the practice of what I am calling – a holy pause – a moment to notice the Holy.

Psalm Reading

A reading from the Psalmist, Psalm 139 (selections), the English Standard Version. Notice the presence of God.

139 O God, you have searched me and known me!

² You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.

³ You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue,
behold, O God, you know it altogether.

⁵ You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is high; I cannot attain it.

Selah

⁷ Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!

⁹ If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,

¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me.

¹¹ If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light about me be night,”

¹² even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is bright as the day,
for darkness is as light with you.

Selah

¹³ For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it 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 saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.

Selah

¹⁷ How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!

¹⁸ If I would count them, they are more than the sand.
I awake, and I am still with you.

²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!

²⁴ And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting!

Selah

Reader: The word of God for the people of God.

All: Thanks be to God.

Reflection: *Where would I go?*

Note about language – we don't know the writers of the psalms. Many are attributed to King David, however much scholarship suggests not all psalms were written by him, and many may have been written many years, even generations before his rule and generations after his rule as well. And because we don't know the authors of the psalms, I will be using gender-neutral they/them when referring to the writers during this series.

Another comment on language. We use terms such as light and dark as metaphors for good and bad, without really thinking about it. However, centuries of using these terms in this way as contributed to cultural beliefs that people who are light-skinned are good and people with dark skin are bad. And while we know this not to be true, continuing to use these words, might not affect us personally, but can affect those around us. So I am consciously trying to decolonize my own language and use the words shadow, or night, rather than dark in my reflection.

I'm a knitter (and a crocheter) and every knitter knows just how much attention each and every stitch in a knitted garment gets. If you didn't know or haven't realized – let me tell you - every single stitch in a handmade garment has been touched by the maker – every single one.

There is time and intention given to handmade garments – and so when I read the line – *you knitted me together in my mother's womb* – I have this deeper understanding of the care, attention and touch that has gone into making each creation. Me and you!

In the time of the psalmist – everything was handmade, knitting, weaving, writing so when we hear the lines about *knitted in the womb, being intricately woven in the depths of the earth, and my unformed substance in your book was written* – we need to remember that. We need to remember the care, the detail, the time it would take to make all of these precious things.

As the psalmist looks around creation and recognizes, the psalmist is overwhelmed, is awed by the knowledge of God's work. Not only does God know everything in the whole cosmos, but God also knows even the teeniest, tiny part of themselves.

For me, there's a comfort in being so well known, so seen, so understood. But perhaps for some, there is discomfort – do we really want to be that well-known? Have all my secrets known? All my shadows, all the things I don't like about myself? All the things I don't even admit to myself? Do I want to be *that* seen? *That* known?

For the psalmist, the answer is yes. They even ask God to *keep searching them and know their hearts*. They ask God to help them; if God sees something *grievous with them, guide them to life everlasting*.

Even my shadow self is known to God, the psalmist says, *even in you, God, the night is as bright as day*. So God is there as well, in the shadows parts of ourselves. The Psalmist isn't perfect, they are completely human, in the lectionary reading of this Psalm we leave out a section (verses 19 – 22) because it is too human, and a bit of a nasty human at that.

Whether we take these passages as a literal desire of the writer, or as hyperbole of human speech – it's an uncomfortable paragraph – and leaving it out means we don't have to talk about it. I wasn't sure I wanted to talk about it today. But as I was pondering this passage and the theme, I decided it is important to know this part of the psalm as well.

It says, *Oh that you would slay the wicked, Oh God! O men of blood, depart from me! They speak against you with malicious intent: your enemies take your name in vain. Do I not hate those who hate you, O God? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with complete hatred; I count them my enemies.*

Can any of us truly say, we've never been that angry at someone? That frustrated with a situation where we've made comments like that?

As I was thinking about this passage, and this section in particular, what came to mind for me was the question the psalmist asks – *where can I go? Where can I flee from your presence?* And I realized I can go to an angry place, I can go to a furious place – and a

what-is-wrong-with-you place – and guess what? God is there too. And you know what else?

There is no judgement. God is there without judgment. I spent a lot of time with this passage looking for some indicator that God was holding some form of judgement towards the psalmist, that there was going to be some form of punishment for the psalmist thinking these things. I couldn't find any.

The psalmist vents all this nastiness and speaks of hate, loathing, and wickedness – knowing that God knows this already. God knows the difficult parts of this person. The psalmist knows they're more than just these parts of themselves. Yes, they have a temper, and they have bad thoughts, but that's not all of who they are – they have love, they have compassion, they have faith, and they have trust.

They trust that God sees all of their parts knitted together into a whole being. They are confident that even with all the troublesome parts God will lead them to the way everlasting, the way of goodness, of brightness. God holds all of it. God holds us. *Search me, O God and know my heart!* The psalmist cries at the end. Know that I am human, imperfect as I am, I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

May we know this to be true of ourselves every day of our lives.
amen