

You Are There

Psalm 139; trans. by Stephen Mitchell

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

David Lewicki, preaching

Lord, you have searched me and known me;
you understand everything I do;
you are closer to me than my thoughts.
You see through my selfishness and weakness,
into my inmost self.
There is not one corner of my mind
that you do not know completely.
You are present before me, behind me,
and you hold me in the palm of your hand.
Such knowledge is too awesome to grasp:
so deep that I cannot fathom it.
Where can I go from your spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I take the wings of the morning
and fly to the ends of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me
and your spirit will give me strength.
If I rise to heaven, I meet you;
if I lie down in hell, you are there:
if I plunge through the fear of the terrorist
or pierce through the abuser's rage,
you are there, in your infinite compassion,
and my heart rejoices in your joy.

You fashioned my inward parts;
you knit me in my mother's womb.
My soul was not hidden from you
when I was being formed in secret,
woven in the depths of the world.
How can I keep from praising you?
I am fearfully and wonderfully made,
and all your works are marvelous.
Your eyes saw all my actions;
they were written down in your book;
all my days were created
before even one of them was.
How measureless your mind is, Lord;
it contains inconceivable worlds
and is vaster than space, than time.
If ever I tried to fathom it,
I would be like a child counting
the grains of sand on a beach.
Search me, Lord; test me
to the depths of my inmost heart.
Root out all selfishness from me
and lead me in eternal life.

Psalm 139 has become my favorite Psalm. For me, it captures, more than any text in Scripture, my felt sense of a God who IS.

It is hard for any of us to speak about God. God is not a thing like other things—God is not like a tree or a house, or even another person. God is being. God's being is underneath and in all things. God's being permeates all life.

Even so, when you and I speak about God, we can't help but speak about God as a "person." We are limited to what we know and how we know others is person to person. Inevitably, we end up talking about God as a "who"—as though God were a being like you and me.

Psalm 139 embraces this paradox—it shows exactly what it feels like when a human mind stretches to conceive of God beyond the capacity of our words. The Psalmist refers to God as "You." As in "You have searched me and known me." But the things this "You" is doing are things that no other You do—who could be closer than my own thoughts? Who could be in front of me and behind me. Who is so grand as to "hold me in the palm of their hand?"

This Psalm stretches to imagine a God who is as large as the Universe and is, at the same time, so small as to be in synapses firing in your brain. It imagines a God whose love and care stretches the whole arc of history and over every being that has ever lived—and yet, this God is familiar with every contour of your life since you were being formed in your mother's womb.

That's the great paradox: God is vaster than space and time, and yet this God is with you as if there were no other being in the world.

I want to dwell on for a moment today on the intimacy of God's being with our being. The nearness of God might feel strange or even uncomfortable to some of you. I can hear my daughter call God a "creeper." Like this God is maybe little too close.

There is a season in our lives when we do not want to think that God sees us and knows us. When we need to feel free from expectations, free to explore, free to transgress, free to make mistakes, free to discover ourselves without having some divine Being looking over our shoulders. We all have this season in life. It is called our 20s.

Pressing boundaries is part of being a free being. And telling God to go away can be part of the exercise of freedom. Any time I meet someone in their 20s who is pushing back against God's hyper-moralistic vigilance, I'm like, "you go."

There is, however, a shadow side to wanting to be free of a God who "sees us and knows us." The shadow side is that when we push God away, we are truly alone. Being alone is really, really hard.

I want to make a distinction. Being alone can be delightful. The hard part of being alone is *not being known*. To feel like no one knows you. That's what loneliness is.

I used to live in New York and no place I've lived is lonelier because you see so many people every day and yet you realize that none of them knows you. You come to terms with a basic truth: there always distance between you and everyone else. Even those who are in committed relationships and who spend our lives with another person become aware of chasms that exist between us, that are only partially bridged, even with deep love and understanding.

We walk through the world feeling like no one knows us. Many philosophers believe this is the fundamental reality of human life. We are strangers to each other; and most poignantly, we are often strangers to ourselves.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian, wrote one of my favorite books. It's short, and it's called "Life Together." It's about how he thought we can live in community. One of the points Bonhoeffer makes is that in order for us to ever be together with others in a healthy way, we have to come to terms with and accept our aloneness. We can't just fill our aloneness with relationships, thinking that church or friends will meet our needs—every relationship, he felt, reveals our solitude—that we are never really known by others.

For Bonhoeffer, this is why we need time in prayer—or reading the Psalms. Prayer is a time in which we begin to probe the real nature of our loneliness. To acknowledge the mysteriousness of our own self, the elusiveness of our own being.

Only after you have searched for the ground of your own being, Bonhoeffer said, do you realize that the truth of yourself is not found in yourself. We become open to the possibility that the truth about ourselves may come to us from beyond us.

Rowan Williams is the former Archbishop of Canterbury, head of the Anglican Church. He wrote a beautiful essay that looks lovingly at the role of solitude in life. Williams suggests that it is our irreducible loneliness that draws us to Jesus. Jesus is the true solitary one. In the passion narratives, Jesus goes deeper and deeper into solitude: he is misunderstood, abandoned, and denied by his friends and disciples; as the authorities interrogate him, he is unable to speak or be heard; in Mark's Gospel, Jesus is even wordless on the cross except for an agonizing cry. Williams writes that the "enormous, dreadful, solitude at the heart of the story of our redemption is where we start in reflecting on our own solitude."

Jesus is alone, Williams says, because his life so exactly corresponds with what is true. The more mercy, kindness, forgiveness, the more his love challenges the powers of the world—to the extent that Jesus shows the world what is true, beautiful, and good—Jesus finds himself alone.

We will never, you and I, embody the truth of solitude like Jesus does. But in our solitude, we find a powerful kinship and union with Christ. Christ's humanity becomes your humanity. And with the humanity of Christ, we gain a capacity for relationships in which we know and are truly known.

We are a mystery to ourselves. We are mysteries to one another. Even though this is the source of our loneliness, it is also the starting place from which we enter relationships.

If you acknowledge the mystery of yourself, you can grant the same mystery to others. Then it becomes possible for us to relate—not on our terms, but in and through the God upon whom we both depend. "We meet one another," Rowan Williams says, "in God, in whom your solitude and mine, your truth, and mine, are at last at home." We meet, then, not simply in community, but in Communion.

There is a season in our lives when we do not want to think that God sees us and knows us. That yields to a season in our lives when we are afraid that no one sees us and knows us. That yields, in faith, to a season in our lives when we know that God sees us and knows us—and this seeing and knowing is the source of our relationships and our peace and our joy.

Wherever I go, you are there. I am not alone. I am known. Thanks be to God.