

7-23-17 Sermon: “Is This Good News?” – Psalm 139

“Oh Lord, you have searched me and you have known me...”

The Psalm that John read for us this morning, Psalm 139, is a beautiful piece of poetry, a beloved song from our Scriptures. Through the ages, people of faith have come to this text for comfort in times of fear and suffering. In times when we have felt far away from God, perhaps found ourselves shaking fists at the sky and crying out, “Where is God?” And Psalm 139 answers, gently, God is everywhere. God is not confined by the walls of the church or the Temple. God is present in our world, in the dawn and in the sea, in the light and in the darkness – God is there.

And what’s more, the psalm tells us, God is ever-present not just in an abstract sense, but also in a way that is personal, that is intimate. The psalmist sings, “O Lord, you have searched *me*, and known *me* through and through. You knit *me* together in my mother’s womb. If ascend to Heaven or go down to Hell, even there God’s hand will guide me and hold me fast.” This God who searches us and knows us is utterly inescapable.

In a world full of fear and insecurity, it’s no wonder that this is such a beloved piece of Scripture, such a comfort to us in times of trouble. In fact, Psalm 139 is such a comforting text that it might be easy for us to miss the fact that the psalmist herself is a little ambivalent about this inescapable God. To be sure, the overwhelming voice is one of gratitude and praise, but our psalmist has some mixed feelings, and they slip in, here and there.

For example, our English text translates verse five, “You hem me in, behind and before,” and yet the Hebrew word *zur* that we translate “hem me in,” can mean that God surrounds the psalmist with protection, or that God besieges and entraps the psalmist, the way an army might surround a city before conquering it. And then, “Where can I flee, where can I *escape*, from your Spirit?”, the psalmist cries. “Is this inescapable God who knows me completely *really* good news?”

I think I can understand her question. Maybe you can too. God’s presence with me, in every single time and place – that can be deeply comforting, but it can also be a little...unnerving. It lays me very bare, exposed: the good parts...and the not-so-good parts. I wonder...does the meditation in today’s bulletin – “Christ above me, Christ below me, Christ beside me, Christ before me” – make you feel comforted or a bit claustrophobic? Perhaps both?

Presbyterian forefather John Calvin writes about this psalm that it is indeed a risk for the psalmist – for *us* – to “dismiss the deceptive coverings under which most [of us] take refuge.” For to be fully known by someone is to be completely vulnerable. Which can be frightening. What if God sees those places in ourselves that we don’t want to see? What if God asks us to do something we don’t want to do?

The psalmist asks, “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?” And those of us who are resting in the comfort of God’s presence may ask, “But why would you even *want* to flee?”

There is a character in the Bible who might be able to tell us a thing or two about running away from God. I imagine most of you have heard of Jonah. Jonah is, of course, most famous for being swallowed by a whale. But before that, God sets the whole story in motion by asking Jonah to go and prophesy to the people of Nineveh. But, Jonah is an Israelite, and the Ninevites are his enemies, and he doesn’t want to prophesy them. So, when God tells him to go to Nineveh, Jonah turns around 180 degrees and heads toward Tarshish – the exact opposite direction.

Perhaps Jonah had not heard Psalm 139, or had missed the part about “even if I settle at the farthest limit of the sea, even there your hand will find me.” And so, through a series of events that involve a storm at sea, Jonah being thrown overboard, and a desperate prayer to God floating up from the belly of a great big fish, Jonah finds himself back on dry land in the place where he started.

And God says again, “Jonah, be my prophet. Go to Nineveh, and tell them that if they don’t clean up their act in 40 days, they will be destroyed.” So Jonah, who seems to have learned his lesson about trying to flee from an inescapable God, goes to Nineveh and tells the people that they have 40 days to repent before the Lord will destroy them. And lo and behold, they listen to him! The people of Nineveh do repent, and they return to God, and they are not destroyed. And they all lived happily ever after. Right?

Well, mostly. Except for Jonah. Jonah’s story ends with him sitting and pouting under a bush on a hill outside the city of Nineveh, angry at God for being merciful to this enemy city.

I think Jonah would have to concede that there is some good news in this inescapable God, or at least that it’s not entirely bad news, seeing as this God rescued him from the belly of the whale. But what seems to have really gotten Jonah’s goat is that the inescapable God who heard and answered his prayer for deliverance also heard the prayers of the Ninevites, of his *enemies*. And that the God who is both just and merciful responded to both of those prayers with deliverance.

3.) What’s This About Enemies?:

Our psalmist has a thing or two to say about enemies, too, does she not? “Oh that you would kill the wicked,” she writes. “Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.”

Well. That’s...quite a prayer request! Next...?

Of course, any time the Bible starts talking about “enemies,” it’s important for us to understand the danger of assuming that the people we might consider to be “enemies” are also God’s enemies. In the timeless wisdom of writer Annie Lamott, “We can safely assume we’ve created God in our own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people we do.”

We modern-day Christians tend to skip over these “enemy sections” when we read the psalms because they are often graphic and violent. And there’s a case to be made that such graphic and violent prayers don’t belong in Christian worship. After all, if God created each of us, if God knit us together in our mother’s wombs, doesn’t that not also mean that God created and loves those who we count as enemies? Can we really pray for God’s wrath to fall on them?

Still, most people who study the psalms remind us not to be so quick to discount this talk of enemies entirely. Old Testament professor Patrick Miller writes that, “It is necessary to guard against the danger of thinking that God has no enemies, no opposition. That is simply not true.” Miller goes on to remind us that there have always been forces and persons who have opposed the will and purpose of God, who have stood in the way of God’s intentions and efforts to establish a world of justice and mercy, of peace and love. God’s enemies, so to speak.

I’ll be honest, that’s not a very comfortable theology for me to sit with. Especially as a Presbyterian who knows from experience that the realities of original sin and total depravity mean that some days, Jonah and I have a whole lot in common. Some days we both refuse to participate in the love and justice of our gracious God. Maybe you’re like us too. Maybe we all have days when we wonder if the God who has searched us and known us through and through might not be raising a skeptical eyebrow in our direction. Maybe that’s why the psalmist feels

ambivalent. Perhaps she knows herself too well to really feel quite as righteous and self-assured as she lets on. Is this inescapable God really *good* news?

Friends, I don't necessarily have an answer to that question, or at least a concrete one. But I will tell you this. This inescapable God that the psalmist describes is the same God that we meet in Jesus Christ. This God is the same Jesus who said to his disciples, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemies,' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies.'" It is the same Lord who taught us to forgive the person who sins against us not seven times, but seventy *times* seven times.

We cannot escape from the persistent plumb-line that is God's justice. The psalmist knows that. Jonah learned that. But neither can we escape from the gentle, guiding hand, the all-encompassing embrace of God's mercy. In Jesus Christ we learn that God's justice and God's mercy are not just two sides of the same coin – they are intertwining threads woven into the very same cloth, knit together into one substance by the God who knits us together in the womb. The God who knows us through and through – the good and the bad, the beautiful and the painful, the praiseworthy and the shameful – and who loves us, and forgives us, and continues to guide us, not in spite of, but *because of* that intimate knowledge of our inmost selves.

And here's the catch: This is true for us, *and* it's true for our enemies. It's part that perhaps the psalmist did not quite understand. The part that Jonah refused to accept. The fact that the one cloth of God's justice and mercy is for us, but it's not *just* for us. It's also for our enemies. Even those Ninevites. Even those people whom we think least deserve it.

"You are loved," read the broken truth. "And so are they."

And whether we can fathom it or not; whether we can ever bring ourselves to like it or not, friends, I think we know, in our hearts, that this is very, *very* good news.