

2nd Sunday after Epiphany Yr B, 17/01/2021

Ps 139:1-6, 13-18

Pastor Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson

“God’s presence and knowledge”

Psalm 139 is identified as an individual prayer for help and creation psalm, which is a hymn of praise in my NRSV *Lutheran Study Bible* (p. 849). The prayer for help portion of the psalm is not included in today’s lectionary. My *Lutheran Study Bible* gives this psalm the following title: “The Inescapable God,” in addition to this title: “To the leader. Of David. A Psalm.” The New American Standard Bible has the following two titles: “God’s Omnipresence and Omniscience,” and “For the choir director. A Psalm of David.” The Good News Bible has the following title: “God’s Complete Knowledge and Care.” So, our portion of the psalm was most likely sung as a hymn—perhaps by an individual first, maybe the individual was David himself, and then later by God’s people in public worship. Even though the psalmist, David, writes in the first person, the psalm has a universal quality about it, every human being can identify with the truth about God and us humans described in this psalm.

According to Hebrew Bible scholar, Dr. Artur Weiser: The key to the understanding of God’s omnipresence and omniscience lies for the poet in the [omnipotence] of the Creator. It is because God has created everything that he knows everything.¹

That reminds me of the Scottish theologian, John Baillie, who taught at Edinburgh University. He made it a practice to open his course on the doctrine of God with these words: “We must remember, in discussing God, that we cannot talk about Him without His hearing every word we say. We may be able to talk about others behind their backs, but God is everywhere, yes, even in this classroom. Therefore, in all our discussions we must be aware of His infinite presence, and talk about Him, as it were, before His face.”

One of the images of God that comes to mind when thinking of God’s presence and knowledge is that of the all-seeing eye. When I look at this image, I think of it as a foreboding presence and knowledge—more as the law that convicts me of sin than as gospel that offers forgiveness and grace. The all-seeing eye image of God, for me

¹ Artur Weiser, *The Psalms* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), p. 805.

is a reminder of all our negative thoughts, emotions and behaviours. Indeed, I don't know about you, but there are some thoughts, words, emotions and behaviours that I'd rather NOT have God—and for that matter, no one else—see and know, since they are too sinful, evil, wicked, embarrassing and shameful.

However, that IS NOT what David the psalmist means in Psalm 139, when he speaks of God's knowledge and presence. When David speaks of God's knowledge and presence in this psalm, it is GOOD NEWS!

No one doubts the importance of knowledge. It's important to know what a red traffic light means and what the poison label on a bottle means. Without such knowledge we cannot survive. It's important to know whatever it is we are supposed to know to do our job. Without such knowledge we shall find ourselves without a livelihood. Everyone understands this. But what almost no one understands is that it is far more important, ultimately, to be known than it is to know. For our deepest-down identity and our innermost security it is far more important to be known than it is to know.

Unquestionably scripture says much about our knowing God. It even says that it is important for us to know God. But scripture says far more about God's knowing us; it's even more important that God knows us. After all, to whatever extent I come to know God my knowledge of God will always be slight compared to God's knowledge of me. And if my identity before God and my security in a turbulent, treacherous world depended on my knowledge of God, then so very much would be hanging by so slender a thread. What matters far more for me than my knowledge of God is God's knowledge of me. The most significant truth concerning any of us is this: *God knows us.*

You see, when the Bible says that God knows us it doesn't mean that God is sniffing out negativities about us; it doesn't mean that the cosmic "snoop" is spying on us. It means something entirely different: God prospers us, God protects us, God blesses us, God renders us useful servants.

What is the psalmist's attitude to this? Wonder. Amazement. Astonishment. "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me" he cries; "it is high, I cannot attain it." He means

that he is grasped by this glorious truth without being able to fathom it fully.² David is so inspired by this divine mystery of God's knowledge that he offers this hymn-psalm to bow in worshipful adoration of God.

That is why David can also praise God in this hymn-psalm for his divine presence. David speaks of God's divine presence in mind-boggling ways. God knows when he is sitting or standing. God knows his thoughts from far away. The LORD is there when he works and rests, walks and lays down. God knows all of his actions and behaviours. Even before David speaks, God knows what he's going to say. God is everywhere—all around him, behind him, beside him, and ahead of him to protect him. The LORD was there with David even before he was born—intricately planning and then creating each part of his body, mind, soul and spirit. God was there creating every single part of him. God even wrote down in his book how long he would live before David was born. In every time, and every place, wherever David was, wherever he went, whatever he was doing, God was always present with him.

That reminds me of the following story: David Livingstone, the African missionary-explorer, was received with silent respect and reverence by the commencement audience at Glasgow University, which conferred a doctorate on him. Gaunt and weary after 16 years in the African sun and 27 attacks of fever, with one arm made useless by the bite of a lion, Livingstone told the audience that he was going back to Africa. His work would be partly to open new trade routes, partly to help suppress the slave trade, and chiefly to seek new opportunities for the preaching of the gospel, he said.

“Shall I tell you what has supported me through all these years of exile among people whose language I did not know and whose attitude toward me was often hostile and always uncertain?” he asked. “It was this: ‘Lo, I am with you always even to the end of the world.’”³ ‘Lo, I am with you always even to the end of the world.’ That is the truth, the gospel, the GOOD NEWS that David is sharing with us in Psalm 139 today. God is always present to bless, love, forgive and ultimately, to save us.

² Victor Shepherd, “Searched and Known,” at: <<http://victorshepherd.ca/searched-and-known/>>.

³ Albert Stauderman, *Let Me Illustrate: Stories and Quotations for Christian Communicators* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983), p. 84.

May we, like King David, and David Livingston, and a host of God's faithful people down through the ages right up til today live confidently, trusting and knowing that God is always present with us through all the ups and downs of life.