



The Westminster Pulpit

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“Who are you?” Sermon on Psalm 139

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Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

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

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,
O LORD, you know it completely.

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

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

¹³ For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

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

Wonderful are your works;
that I know 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 beheld my unformed substance.

In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.

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

¹⁸ I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end—I am still with you.

Beth and I were having dinner at one of our favorite restaurants Thursday evening. It was cool and we were seated outside. A couple came to a table near us, and they looked at the salad that we had ordered. The woman copied our order and told us that she had. It started a conversation about our favorite restaurants. "Well, this is our favorite." "Ours too." And then she moved into, "How long have you lived here?" "Where are you all from?" It was a back-and-forth conversation that was trying to answer the question, "Who are you?"

Sometimes that question is asked in fear. "Who are you!?" "Why are you here?" "What do you want from me?"

But most of the time, I believe it is a joy unwrapping the mystery that is the other. Sometimes it is called falling in love. You remember when you couldn't help finding out more about that other person. "We have so much in common! She likes music and dancing. We're into so many of the same things!" "He likes staying home. I talk, he listens." Who are you? It's fun unwrapping the mystery.

And then, once you get married, that pretty much ends.

I'm joking. The mystery continues. Every day I share with my wife some new ache or pain that she didn't know I had. Never a dull moment when you're married to me.

Who are you? Always changing.

You're getting older! You used to be so tall. You weighed this and now you weigh that. You used to like fiction, but now reality is closing in. Who we are is an unfolding mystery, and we do enjoy it when someone else takes an interest in us.

We had an enjoyable time on Thursday evening. But then I began to recognize that I was having some anxiety that came bubbling up. I recognized it. I wondered what it was about, why it was happening. Then it came in the question, "And what do you do?"

Beth answered the question for me, "He's a pastor, and I work at the church."

And that's the anxiety.

What affect will that information have on the rest of the conversation? "He's a pastor, and I work at the church." That disclosure of information does a number on the brain. I can see their synapses firing. Multitasking.

The mind flashing through a couple hundred images that begins with Adam and Eve and ends with Jimmy and Tammy Faye.

Meanwhile, they are also rewinding the past 20 minutes of conversation wondering if they said anything that might require some time in confession.

Meanwhile, their eyes dart over to me taking a sip from an "old fashioned."

Meanwhile, God has crashed into the conversation.

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there.
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning,
and have a night out with my wife...even there outside of the restaurant,
you will find me.

What's the anxiety about? I know what the anxiety is. The anxiety is that when I mention that I'm a pastor, God enters the space and changes our present behavior. What I know is that God has an effect on people. Do you know what I mean? Let me explain it.

Do you remember when the disciples and Jesus came into a house and everybody was laughing and cutting up, but then Jesus asked them, "What were you talking about on the way? And when Jesus says, "on the way," he's talking about the way to the cross. We are headed to Jerusalem where the Son of Man must undergo great suffering. "What were you talking about on the way?" It changed everything.

And no one said a word. No one answered. "Because they were talking about which one of them was the greatest." This is what happens when God enters the room. Suddenly we grow quiet and straighten up. Well, that's not who we are, is it?

I remember David, who lived across the hall from me in college, saying that his mom had put up in the bathroom a little cross-stitched sign that said, "God is watching you." Now that can either be a comfort or it can make you uncomfortable. He was an only child, and his parents were always informing him that there was no where he could go that God was not watching. And when I say, "Go," I mean it in every sense of the word. He said, "Look, I grew up on a farm. I remember being out behind the barn, having to go so badly, and I wasn't going to make it in time to get back to the house. It was the first time I had to go outside." And then he said, "Unfortunately, I was leaning on an electric fence. Shock of my life. I thought God was punishing me." "Oh, where can I flee from your presence..."

Now, I know some of you will email me and say, "Why are you sharing that in church?" Because it is really who we are, isn't it? When the Lord comes crashing in on us, it changes us. "What do you do?"

Beth said, "He's a pastor and I work at the church."

I saw him look down at his plate. Meanwhile, she said she was a counselor and worked with churches. He confessed to be a lawyer. We talked about life. Talked a bit

about Westminster. He was familiar with our congregation; she wasn't. We talked about the human brain, but we didn't talk so much about God. And yet maybe we did. For where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

God is very much a part of "who we are."

...all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.
How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end—I am still with you.

Isn't that strange that being with God would give me anxiety? Does it give you anxiety?

I guess I'm wondering how you handle it. After all, we believe in the "priesthood of all believers." You can wear a clerical collar just as much as I can. When you're out and about and you get to have one of those wonderful conversations that begins to unravel the mystery of each other, who are you? Who are you? Do you lead with God? Put him somewhere in the middle, or towards the end? Maybe you bury God deep as a bone. When does God enter the conversation for you?

Answer: Truth be known, it's not up to us to invite God to come crashing in on us. God is in everything and in everyone. In every word. God knows the words completely, even before they're on our tongues. Let's not fool ourselves into thinking we can invite God in when God is doing the inviting!

Come now, it's a cool morning, pull up a seat at the table. Look, we've all ordered the same thing. A morsel of grace followed by some love to wash it down. Who are you? "What's your favorite place to go out and eat?" "I guess it is here." For us, too. There's just something about this place. What is it about this place?

What do you do?" "What do I do? I try to do more good than bad. But sometimes I take more than my share. I cut people off. I think too highly of myself at the expense of others. What do you do?" "I do that, too." But there's something about this place, some Spirit that is merciful. What do you suppose it is?"

Who are you? "Well, I'm not as young as I once was. I have these aches and pains." "I have an ache, too. My kids aren't the same since I got divorced. Telling you about it...helps."

It's great being with you - church worker, pastor, counselor, lawyer - and you, too, God. It's great being with you. We praise you for we are fearfully and wonderfully made. God is with us, our cup overflows. We pray that you are in and around and above every word that comes from our lips. And when we come to an end, we are still with you. And that's who we are, and that's who God is.