

“You Are With Me”

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, January 14, 2018

I Samuel 3:1-10

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ and he said, ‘Here I am!’ and ran to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ But he said, ‘I did not call; lie down again.’ So he went and lay down. The Lord called again, ‘Samuel!’ Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ But he said, ‘I did not call, my son; lie down again.’ Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, ‘Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”’ So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ And Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening.’

Psalm 139:1-6

To the leader. Of David. A Psalm.

*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.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.*

*Where can I go from your spirit?
Or 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 settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,*

*and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night',
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.*

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*

*Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.*

*My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.*

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.*

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.

*O that you would kill the wicked, O God,
and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me —*

those who speak of you maliciously,

and lift themselves up against you for evil!

Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?

And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?

I hate them with perfect hatred;

I count them my enemies.

Search me, O God, and know my heart;

test me and know my thoughts.

See if there is any wicked way in me,

and lead me in the way everlasting.

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words that each of us carry within, the words that we offer in song and in prayer, the words that we have heard read from sacred scripture, and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, and transform all of these, and let them become the living word of Jesus Christ. And let that word do its work within us, among us, and through us. Let it guide our actions and our words. Let it comfort our hurts, let it challenge us in our places of comfort, and let it call us into service all in your name, the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, in which we pray. Amen.

The lectionary for today has selected verses from Psalm 139:1-6 and then 13-18. And combined with the reading from Samuel or this call story from Samuel, it forms a story, if you will, or a message about what it means for God to call you into service or into existence. And then how present God is with you. How before you were even formed or known to anyone on earth, God knew you, and God was making you, and

God was knitting you together in your mother's womb, and God knows what's going to happen to you. And God knows your thoughts, and where you sit down, and where you rise up, and where you're going. And knows every word that's on the tip of your tongue. Even before you know it, God knows everything about you. Amen. Hallelujah. Praise be to God. This reading is a message of gratitude, if you will, for a God who pays attention to us as we walk through life and as we live our lives trying to be faithful.

The psalmist may be seen, in fact, as someone who's done a really good job of walking through life and listening to God, someone who's been very faithful, someone who's paid attention to scripture, someone who can say, "You know what, you know every part about me and it's okay." In fact, such knowledge is so wonderful to me that I can barely hold it. But in fact, this passage in this Psalm in 139 was probably written, scholars believe, by King David. And King David was anything but a perfect person of faith. He had faith but he also had severe faults. And I wonder if instead of reading the selected passages out of this Psalm, if we read it in context, read all of it, we might have a deeper understanding of what the psalmist is trying to get us to understand. Instead of maybe just simply a "Thank you, God, for knowing me and for being with me," maybe this Psalm has a different message. Because I wonder about King David sitting at a table possibly early in the morning. I drink coffee in the morning, so I think everything happens early in the morning but I think maybe David is sitting there wrestling with the demons that are within, knowing that in order to take Bathsheba as his wife, he had to have her husband, Uriah, killed. And I wonder if he's sitting there thinking about that. So instead of offering up praise, instead this is almost like a prayer of confession. "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, my lying down. You are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely."

The reason that I think it may be David wrestling with his demons more than David reflecting on a perfect life is because of the parts that are excluded. In verses 7 through 12, it says, "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to Heaven, you are there. And if I make my bed in Hell, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,' even the darkness is not dark to you. The night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you." And then there's that part that I read about being "formed in my inward parts," etc. And then this psalm concludes in the most shocking way. "O that you would kill the wicked, O God. And that the bloodthirsty would depart from me. Those who speak of you maliciously and lift themselves up against you for evil, do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? Do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred. I count them my enemies. Search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me, and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." The psalmist is aware that his conscience is under attack, if you will, because of the deeds that he has done, obviously not those glorious deeds that are worthy of praise, but the deeds of which he is ashamed the most. And I believe that this psalm, if we read it in its wholeness, offers us deep and profound good news, deeper than just "thank you, God." But in a sense, this psalm is a profound plea for "help me, please. Thank you, God, for knowing me, where I go, what I say, what I do. Thank you for forming me. But also, God, help me. Help me because I struggle. Help me because I'm under attack. Help me because at times I find myself in the pit of despair." And so maybe it's not just the, "Yea, thank you," but it's something deeper.

And I was thinking about this, and how to try to explain it when, in a sense, God gave me an image. The first image is of the children at the Christmas Eve service at 4 o'clock. When it's time for Mary and Joseph to make their way over to the manger, they stand over here and solemnly walk across the chancel in order to arrive at a manger and then there they kneel, and they cross their hands and they look reverently in the midst of that manger as if they're gazing upon their child, Jesus. We all sit in awe and in gratitude for how the story is being embodied. There's just pure joy on everyone's faces as Mary and Joseph walk across the stage and fall on their knees. Some of us remember being Mary or Joseph when we were children. But in a

sense, we have that image of the Holy Family gathering at the birth of Christ and being so grateful for that. But yesterday I saw another mother and father kneeling. It was out in the courtyard, just before Andy Hughson's memorial service. His mom and dad were bent down, staring into an empty hole in the courtyard. And they took a container, an urn, holding his remains and, for what seemed like an awfully long time, they passed it back and forth, dumping the ashes into the hole, until at one point, David took the urn and tapped it against the edge of the hole, and all of the remains were now out of the urn. And then they kneeled there, looking in that hole for what seemed like an eternity. Another family kneeling before their child. Not a moment of gratitude or celebration. Not a moment of, "Thank you, God." Not a moment of, "Hallelujah", but a moment of, "Help me. Are you kidding?" And what I want to offer is that if we read this psalm only as the lectionary wants us to, we miss the reality of God's message that embraces both mothers and fathers and children. The family that looks upon the birth of their son, and the family that looks upon the death of their only child. This psalm captures all of that together because it combines the positive, helpful reminders of God's presence with us, God's call on our life, with those moments of "Can you please help me? Can you make my enemies stop? Can you get them to depart? Can you shut them up? Can you wipe them out, God, please help me."

I imagine the governor's wife sitting at a table again early in the morning. It's still dark outside. Her children are sleeping, her husband is well. And two angels bring a Bible, and they lay it down in front of her, and it magically opens to Psalm 139. A woman who is struggling to understand what's happening, who's angry and upset, who wants to protect her children, her marriage, her family, herself. In the midst of everything that's kind of coming at her. "Oh, 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 paths and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways." The psalm fits. "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. And if I make my bed in hell, you are there. If I try to run away, you are there. If I am here, you are there. If it's dark, you are there. If it's light, you are there. You are there, no matter what, you are there." And in humility and in reality, the psalm speaks, and it speaks of promise to her and to us all when we struggle. It speaks of God's awareness of our situation, but it also speaks of our need for help and assistance, not just celebration, but of help and assistance, when we face what we do not want to face. And I imagine as well a man named Martin in a Birmingham jail. Early in the morning, the guard has given him a cup of coffee. He takes his worn Bible. He opens it up, and it falls again to this passage of scripture. "How weighty to me are your thoughts, Oh God, how vast is the sum of them. I try to count them. They are more than the sand. I come to the end, and I am still with you. Oh, that you would kill the wicked, oh God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me. Those who speak of you maliciously and lift themselves up against you for evil." On and on that psalm speaks. It speaks to people who find themselves in the greatest places of joy. And it speaks to people who find themselves in the deepest pits of struggle. And to me, that is the good news of this psalm, that no matter where we are or what we face, God still speaks to each of us. Amen.