

Searched out and known

Menno Mennonite Church
July 5, 2020

Purpose: to connect to the promises and insights of the God who knit us together in our mother's womb

Message: As we are known by God, we are led best to know ourselves,.

Scripture: Psalm 139 (please read)

Synopsis: We quest for self is always with us. Our culture leads us to continuously ask and re-ask the most basic questions: who am I? And we are offered various answers at various times: professional, personal, son, spouse, husband/wife. We are always defining ourselves by what we do and where we are. But God defines us from the inside out, valuing what is most essential, most critical, knowing that in life and living our core will shine through. The more we seek to connect to the core, to God at the center, the more we will find who we ultimately are.

(Psa 139:1 NRS) ^{NRS} **Psalm 139:1** <To the leader. Of David. A Psalm.> 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.

⁷ Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

⁹ If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,"

¹² even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

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 end¹ -- I am still with you.

¹⁹ O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me --

²⁰ those who speak of you maliciously, and lift themselves up against you for evil! ¹

²¹ Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?

²² I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.

²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.

²⁴ See if there is any wicked¹ way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.²

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.

7 Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?

8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

9 If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

10 even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"

12 even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

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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.

19 O that you would kill the wicked, O God,
and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me --
20 those who speak of you maliciously,
and lift themselves up against you for evil!

21 Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?
22 I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.

23 Search me, O God,
and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.

24 See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

At the end of the day, we all want to be special. We all want—need-- to know that we are loved, built and shaped to be just the way we are. Among the more wounding things we can say to those we love is to declare that “I don’t know who you are any more” or “You never knew me at all”. To be known is individual obsession, as we find new and inventive ways of making ourselves known to a wider and wider spheres. I heard a story on the radio talking about how to maintain your personal brand in the world of social media, finding ways of representing ourselves so we can be known in the best possible light. It left me wondering whether I needed to tattoo the Bryce Miller logo on my head; brand is after everything. We like this verse because of how it makes me feel--safe, secure, loved, and known by the God of the Universe, from the inside out. That’s why we keep coming here as one of our comfort Psalms. Lop off those 4 verses in the middle where the author has a bit of snit about the wicked (as we often do), and you have a perfectly lovely, loving, and personally affirming Psalm, already written in the first person so we can easily insert ourselves into the poem of devotion to God.

We most often turn to this expression of God because of what it says about us. It says a lot of good, important, and valuable things. It declares our bodies, those containers which were formed in the greatest mystery in the womb as part of God’s good creation, a direct element of God’s intimate and beloved creation. It declares in a time before any notion of a life beyond the here and now the presence of God in all places and all circumstances. *“If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. 9 If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, 10 even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.”* This is no generic deity to which one pays passing honor when you want something to go your way. It places God firmly within our personal universe. This YHWH God is a God who knows where you live, knows what you are about, knows about you. I don’t know about you, but this may or may not be good news. If God knows your home address, can you ever really be safe? This poem is a powerful hymn to the loving, encompassing embrace of God for God’s person- me, who regardless of circumstance, can find my help in God. All of this is good and right and proper.

A brief word to the vindictive bit here, verses 19-22. We don’t often read these words. They are distasteful to us. They don’t fit on our decor. They ruin a perfectly good Psalm,

so we leave them out. But it is worth noting here that these words are not words of spite, but of zeal for God, aligning the speaker with the perceived will of God. As such, they are nothing if not human. We do this all the time--I hate what God hates, and God hates, more often than not, what and who I hate without a whole lot of thought. Sound familiar? It does to me. A cozy little piece of logic we got going there. We should recognize the danger of self righteousness that would have us cut that out, as if we were not susceptible to such vanity. But I know that I am, even though I know full well it is not true. Perhaps there is a reason that these words begin and end with a call for examination by the loving God.¹

We are so used to reading ourselves in a poem like this that seldom do we ever take the time to look at this from a different angle. The Jewish tradition is really good at looking at the biblical text in all sorts of ways. In addition to the Torah, the psalms, and all the other parts of the Hebrew bible, they have what's called the Midrash which is constituted by centuries of stories and interpretations that often go well beyond the text itself. It's a broad commentary about the stories themselves—the footnotes if you will. A perfect example is the story that is often told of God observing the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites, and the closing of the sea on the pursuing Egyptians. The angels, celebrating God's victorious action begin cheering, only to have God tell them to stop, saying “those who were just destroyed; they were my children too.” As is the way with the Midrash, there is a story beyond the story, a psalm beyond the psalm, and sometimes that different perspective makes all the difference. It doesn't have to be thought to be fact to open up a whole new aspect of the story.

I would like to suggest a midrashic interpretation for this Psalm, if you will. There is no way to verify, no means to make sure its absolutely true. But that doesn't mean that there is not value in the exercise. As much as these words say important things about us, I think they say even more important things about God. The God of these verses is not the high-and-mighty-pie-in-the-sky God, though the words are filled with awe and wonder. This is a God which is around us each and every day, knowing our coming and going, our sitting down and rising up, our words and the thoughts behind them. This God here is a God who is not out there to be found, but rather is a God who comes out and finds us, comes to be with us, comes to see us in all of ourselves. The Psalmist, obviously in distress, does not need to flee to God; God is already

there. God has been present from day one to day ten thousand and one, and will be around long after that. These words are a meditation on the awesome God-ness one experiences in the realm of YHWH God.

And here is the midrashic bit: What would God have to say, I wonder, about all the first person pronouns being thrown around here, all the "me" and "I". The Psalm proclaims a relationship with God which is as profoundly personal as it possibly can be. But I imagine God replying here "ah, yes: All of this is true. Profoundly so. I know you better than you yourself can possibly be known. I love you deeply and profoundly, more than you will ever, ever know... But don't stop there. Don't quit when you are just getting started. For just as I know you fully and completely, I also know that person over there, too. And I know you. And you. And you. And all of you all: each and every one. I know all of your inmost beings. I have searched them and know them. For they, too are my children; even the ones you are so busy calling wicked and trying to impress me with your hatred of. I get it: It is a human thing--you assume I have to take sides. But, oh, don't you see: that is never how it worked."

My friends, the God that knows me, cares about me, seeks me out, loves me, and knows me from a small ball of cellular matter to the infinitely complex machines we are today is the God we know each of us on our most basic level. But this God is not MY God, is not YOUR God. I did not choose this God; I can never contain this God; I can never describe that God. This God is YHWH God, the God who has been, who is, and will be, the Alpha and the Omega, the God whose very name is contained within all of history. This God who chooses Israel to be a people select and beloved also chooses me, also chooses each and every one of us. The God who sent Jesus in the world to model how the world really works, to usher in the Kingdom of God: this YHWH is bigger than whatever my personal procession could ever make of God. This God calls me to look inside myself, to see who I am--all of who I am--and to know God's love. This is vitally, critically important for us to do, to know, and to trust. It is all too easy to forget that at our core lies the love of God, and there is nothing we can ever do to change that. One of the most powerful thing we can do is time and again to reacquaint ourselves with that truth. But at the very same time, that God at our core also draws our gaze outward, toward those who are other, to see others who are wrongly accused and ill-treated by those around them, and to know them for

who they are: brothers and sisters, sharing in the same all-encompassing love of God which embraces us all. Sometimes, we need to be reminded that just because God's love embraces me for who and what I am, does not ever mean that we are the only ones who are given that gift.

These words can never be an either or proposition. We don't need to choose between the warm intimacy of the personal God and the vastness of the all-knowing, all embracing God. Because there is never a division between the two. There is never a separation between God's love of me, and God's love of the neighbor. It is we who define those boundaries. It is we who make these words of scarcity instead of words of abundance. And at the end of the day, we need both sides of the story, don't we? We need the God who is ours and who is personal and who is present. But we also need the God who loves us deeply enough to remind us that it is not only we that God loves, but also "them" too, whoever the them might be of the moment. I think these words with both sides of the conversation serve us well, holding us close, even while they turn our eyes beyond ourselves to the whole of the beloved creation.

May we deeply know, down to our very molecules the height, and the breadth, and the depth, and the width of the Love of God which passes all understanding, even as it embraces all of creation time and again.

¹ See Waltner Believer Church Bible Commentary *Psalms* pg 664