

Peace From Within

Menno Mennonite Church

July 7, 2024

Purpose: To explore our sense of peace beginning with our sense of God with us within all of life.

Message: Our sense of peace must begin with acknowledging God's presence within us, and within all God's creation.

Scripture: Psalm 139 (I will read); 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Synopsis: Peace seems a big deal. It is always looming on our spiritual to do lists. Time and again we receive formulas and prescriptions that are meant to accomplish peace, often through our effort and practice. Yet all these practices come down to one foundational principle: finding a place where we can rest along side others in our sense of what is right and good. This foundation needs to start always with our sense of who and what God is, and how God thinks of us and who we are. The practices serve to remind us of this essential truth. Here the Psalmist puts it best: We are at peace with God because God is first in love with us.

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 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.

When we think of peace, we do not spend a lot of time thinking about God. Sure God desires peace—profoundly so. We declare with faith and expectation that this is God’s intent and promise within the kingdom that is coming. We know this. But the work of Peace? Of really making it work out in the day-to-day practicalities of a world with more problems tends to be far more of something that we do with a huge “to do” on our spiritual task list. It is our responsibility to bring the kingdom into being, our failure when we see the way that the world comes into disrepair so very often. Sure, we might shake our head or our fist at the YHWH God in charge, wondering why this has to be so, but the fundamental responsibility for making it happen lies squarely on us. The scratchy records that I grew up listening too that told me loud-and-clear that I can make peace; little was said about the divine. God is someone with whom we needed to find our way toward, reconcile our behavior with, and seek to find along the way. Seldom do we hear the seeking nature of God coming to know us, all of us, and to hold us with love and respect along the way. It turns out that God is in the seeking peace business, and it begins with us.

We love this Psalm on many levels. It might be inscribed in a bookmark you keep in your bible, or speak to you in new and wonderful ways. We love it because it is an expression of the personal—the appeal to God to be God and to hold us in grace. It speaks a lot of good, important, valuable things. It speaks to the nearness of God, a God that knows us from our very first to the very last, even in the physical shells that we would so readily leave behind if given the choice, if it didn’t involve the fear of dying along the way. It is YHWH God who stitches us together in our Mother’s womb and God who will find us even in the depths of Sheol should we be led to lay down. From low to high and back again we are held, known, and loved. And this is good to know when we are. 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? A little bit intimidating, truth be told. 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 sung by a singer who knows their desperation and need for rescue. The one praying this is hemmed in by real enemies, real injustice, real “terrorists”; or at least this is his

claim. He appeals to God who will not and cannot let this stand. This is God is my refuge and Strength stuff, and he is crying out to YHWH God to speak into the desperation of his condition. The demand that God evaluate his own wickedness is an appeal that the God who knows him so well put that knowledge to good use and act on his behalf. As much as this is the poetry of creation and connectedness to God, it is also the pleas of desperation to God from one in need of action. So much so he is willing to be examined by the God who knows him well to prove his worth.

This, of course, is the piece that we most frequently leave out when we are reading this text. It is just too discordant, too chest pounding to make for comfortable reading, especially when we are looking for a meditation on the nearness of God to our very selves. But I think we do ourselves a disfavor in doing so. Sure, the singer here is demonstrating his alignment with God. But the purpose here is not spite, at least not primarily so. We all seek to align ourselves with the will of God to the best our ability. Most of the time that takes the shape of supposing our beliefs, whatever they happen to be, onto the almighty. We do this all the time: I hate what God hates, and God hates; often 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 that is completely and utterly human. We should recognize the danger of self-righteousness that would have us cut that out, as if we were not susceptible to such behavior.

We live within a moment where the strength of our conviction and our willingness to slam the other is rewarded far beyond the reason of our argument or the compassion that we have for those with whom we disagree. We—none of us—are above deputizing God into our petty battles of opinion. We do well, though, to remember that God's thoughts are not our thoughts, nor God's ways our own, and take time to listen before we speak on behalf of the Almighty, and only then if we are absolutely sure. I strongly suspect, though, that when we speak, the message is one that will speak far louder of the belovedness of everyone, perhaps even in ways we ourselves may find uncomfortable, at least if we were solely up to us.

In order for us to seek peace, we need to also seek peace within ourselves and with God. But this is the good news part of the story. The God who we seek so long and so well, is also the God that comes to us and meets us right where we are, from the littlest on up. Our purpose on this world is not to seek out a God who will not be found, but to reconcile ourselves with the YHWH God who was with us all along, knowing us from those very beginnings, to root our

peace in that presence and then build peace out of that peace to a wanting world. God seeks peace with us, assuring us of our status as beloved, even when that same righteous, just God also knows ALL of us at the same time, even that which we would just as soon show no one whatsoever, let alone God. God knows us and holds us for what we are and that is good.

There are certain benefits to dwelling with a story for millennia on end. It gives time for creativity to develop. In the Judaic tradition there is a commitment to the text, but there is also a study of and commentary around the story beyond the text; the stuff that isn't part of "as it was written" but has developed alongside the tradition all the same. It is called the Midrash; literally the exposition. It is the commentary on the Torah interpreting the text and what it is about. It allows for some commentary to accompany the text, sometimes expanding on it in imaginative ways. 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 often like to think of this text with a little bit of midrashic insight. Applying imagination. I imagine YHWH hearing these words, nodding deeply at the profound truth. Perhaps there are smiles in the recollection of knowing you from the inmost being all the way to what you are today. I am confident there would be an embrace of the safety of speaking and knowing God in these intimate ways that offer such a grounding in safety. But also 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's a human thing--- you assume I have to take sides. But, oh, don't you see: that is never how it worked?"

Just as we are invited into peace with God we are also invited to extend that peace to its natural logical extent. this God is not MY God, is not YOUR God. I did not choose this God; I can never contain this God. The God who sent Jesus in the world to model how the world really works, to usher in the Kingdom of God: this God 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. 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 that embraces us.

These words can never be an either or proposition. We don't get to choose between the warm intimacy of the personal God and the embrace 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. This is how God seeks peace: by knowing us fully and loving all the same. 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.