

Sermon – “Whither Shall I Go?”

Scripture Readings: Psalm 139:1-18, John 1:43-51

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Psalm 139 is one of the most well-known and beloved of the psalms. In some of the best poetry ever written the psalmist celebrates a God whose presence knows no limits and who is present with us in the intimacy of our thoughts and feelings. Hear now God’s Holy word.

*O LORD, you have searched me and known me.<sup>2</sup> You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.<sup>3</sup> You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.<sup>4</sup> Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely.<sup>5</sup> You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.<sup>6</sup> Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.<sup>7</sup> Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?<sup>8</sup> If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.<sup>9</sup> If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,<sup>10</sup> even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.<sup>11</sup> If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,”<sup>12</sup> even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.<sup>13</sup> For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.<sup>14</sup> I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.<sup>15</sup> My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!<sup>18</sup> I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end<sup>[a]</sup>—I am still with you. Amen.*

In our second scripture reading, John 1:43-51, the call to the disciples connects the prologue’s description of the cosmic Word becoming flesh with the very human story of Jesus from Nazareth. Nathanael’s belief that Jesus is the Son of God because of his insight and knowledge of him before they meet makes sense in light of Psalm 139. Only God could have such knowledge. Hear now the word of the Lord.

*The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.”<sup>44</sup> Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.<sup>45</sup> Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.”<sup>46</sup> Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.”<sup>47</sup> When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”<sup>48</sup> Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.”<sup>49</sup> Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”<sup>50</sup> Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.”<sup>51</sup> And Jesus said to him, “Very truly, I tell you,<sup>[a]</sup> you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” Amen.*

The title of the meditation: “Whither Shall I Go?”

*Text: Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? Psalm 139:7*

Let us pray. Loving God, we thank you for your steadfast companionship. You are present in whatever place, situation, or position we find ourselves. You sustain us during the heights and the depths and in the light and the darkness of our human experience. You joined us in our humanity inviting us to follow you. Give us the confidence and compassion of those who are upheld by your right hand and well-loved, and give us the capacity to uphold one another in your name and to love well. Amen.

During my first year at Hope College I had a crush on one of the theology professors, Dr. Allan Verhey. He was young, good looking and very smart. I can remember with great clarity an encounter in the Pine Grove, which was a gathering place located in the center of this small liberal arts campus in Holland, Michigan. It was a chilly autumn day and my memory of our conversation was more about how I felt than what was said. I was cold and so nervous my legs were literally shaking underneath my coat. Dr. Verhey was a fair and kind professor and his teaching helped me grow as a person, enhancing my understanding of the omnipotence of God beyond my personal faith.

Through the years our paths crossed from time to time and it was always a thrill for me. I remember running into him and meeting his son Timothy and family on the streets of Chicago during a weekend retreat with my youth group in the 1980’s... and reading articles in the Christian Century about books he had written on medical ethics in the 1990’s. When my nephews Joel and J. Barrett Wernlund took religion classes from him at Hope College in the 2000’s, they relayed my greetings to him. I celebrated his appointment at Duke Divinity School in 2004 and I mourned his untimely death in February of 2014.

This week when I read a reflection on Psalm 139 in the Feasting on the Word Commentary written by his son, now the Reverend Dr. Timothy Beach-Verhey, I could hear his father’s voice in the thoughtful words and I paused to give thanks for wisdom passed from one generation to the next and for the God whose hand holds us fast wherever we go, the God to whom we belong in life and in death.

Dr. Timothy Beach-Verhey reminds us in Feasting on the Word that theologians tend to get tied up in knots of contradiction when speaking about God. God is transcendent (beyond our experience) yet also immanent (present within us). God is just (objective and impartial) yet also gracious (kind and forgiving). God is omnipotent (all powerful) yet also personal (belonging to a particular person). The wonder and beauty of Psalm 139 is that it knits these complex threads of God’s nature together into a single garment of God’s providence and character. The psalmist affirms the God who is intimately involved—profoundly concerned and transcendent (beyond our experience, our knowing or our understanding).

In fact, according to the ancient Hebrew who wrote this psalm, intimacy with God is a function of God’s ultimacy. Only because God is universally present, ultimately powerful, and all-knowing does the psalmist have such a profound sense of an immediate and personal relationship with God. Because God is at the farthest reaches of the universe and in the most secret depths of the human heart, God is the constant cherished companion, who cannot be escaped, fooled, or ignored.

*Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, & dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me....The eternal God is our refuge and strength, underneath are the everlasting arms, they will uphold us.*

When the eternal and infinite God chose to enter into the finiteness of humanity and the Word became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, we are presented with yet another paradox about the God who is beyond our knowing. We are presented with a new understanding of strength and the power of love. In Jesus of Nazareth, the town from which nothing good comes, we learn, with Nathanael, that our prejudices are unfounded and ignorant. In Jesus of Nazareth, we meet the God who is a servant, a teacher, and an advocate for the poor, the sojourner, and the marginalized. In Jesus of Nazareth, we meet the God who treats all people with dignity and respect and who does not judge us by the color of our skin but by the content of our character. In Jesus of Nazareth, we meet the God who speaks truth to power and who absorbed the hostility of the world, conquering death by dying on a cross.

*Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors...Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Whither shall I go?*

As we gather around the communion table on this Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend, we are mindful of the need for an extra measure of God's grace as we confess the sin of racism that is woven into the fabric of our country. In a time of a new brazenness to make blatantly racist comments without apology and to flaunt white privilege and wealth, we ask forgiveness from the God who discerns our thoughts and is acquainted with all our ways.

On the dawning of this new day, may we find strength in the words of Dr. King: *My friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all are created equal." He goes on: I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.*

Whither shall I go? In whatever place, situation, or position we find ourselves, may we live the equity and seek the justice of the One who is before us and behind us...the God of our life throughout all the encircling years. Amen.