

God's LinkedIn Profile

Psalm 139:1-14

September 4, 2022

One of the most moving motion pictures I've seen is Mr. Holland's Opus. It tracks thirty years of a man's life as he raises a family and teaches high school music. But he goes beyond instructing his students; he pours his life into them. As the story unfolds, we discover that he took the teaching job because he couldn't make a living writing and performing his own music. So, this dream of composing a symphony was put on the back burner for more pressing matters. But it was always there, vibrating just beneath the surface, waiting, hoping.

Then came the day when the music program at the high school was axed because of financial cutbacks. As he struggles with being put aside by the school board after so many years, Mr. Holland is left questioning whether his life has mattered. He put his dream on hold to take up the daily goal of trying to impact the lives of teenagers through music. Now that too is gone.

Do you ever question whether your life matters? I mean, deep down, when it's quiet and everybody else is in bed. Or when you're driving and you don't have to pay much attention, do you start thinking about where your life is headed, what you've done or haven't done? Do you ever pause and add up what your life amounts to and - well, come up short? Or maybe you just feel like a rat in a cage, turning the big wheel. Life is a treadmill of the same-old, same-old. You're working hard, but it doesn't feel like you're getting anywhere. You feel under-appreciated, overlooked, under-paid, or even unnecessary. There are many versions of what Mr. Holland was going through.

It seems to me that most people who take the time to reflect on their lives struggle with these incomplete

feelings and dead-end thoughts. Some people wrestle with them every day. If you take stock of your life and say, "What difference does my life make? Does anybody really know or care about me?" then you're in the right place at the right time this morning. God has a word for you in Psalm 139. God wants to show you a different picture of your life. God wants to give you a view from the top, to help you see the meaning of your life from God's perspective.

In the opening six verses of Psalm 139, there are eight different Hebrew words that stack up to tell you that God knows your story intimately: "O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I stand up; you understand my thoughts from far away. You observe my travels and my rest; You are aware of all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue, You know all about it, LORD. You have encircled me; You have placed Your hand on me. This behind and before, and lay Your hand upon me. [This] extraordinary knowledge is beyond me. It is lofty; I am unable to [reach] it."

Each of these words conveys a different layer of God's knowledge of us. Combined, they picture God present even in our most mundane activities, actively present with us even when we think we feel alone, abandoned, skipped over, hidden or forgotten.

God knows your heart, your fears, your thoughts, motives, dreams, and frustrations. God knows your past, present and future. God understands, God notices what's going on around you, to you, inside you. God knows and loves us still.

That sounds unnerving, but you can rest assured about this: God knows, but He loves you still.

When David says that God has laid His hand upon him, he's referring to an OT practice of bestowing a blessing on someone. A wise father would place his hands on his children and speak words into their lives about who they are and will be, what their place in the family meant, and what their future will be. This was one of the most important acts that happened in Hebrew families.

In the same way, God who knows you bestows blessing on you, borne out of love, that marks your place in the family of God, nobodies are non-existent.

When the psalmist affirmed God's thorough knowledge of himself, he concluded in v. 6 that this is beyond me. It is lofty; I am unable to [reach] it." What he meant is, "I just can't deal with this. It's too overwhelming. It's out of my reach!"

The psalmist's first instinct is the same as ours - How can I escape? Where can I hide? If He knows all that, He knows I'm a hypocrite, He's heard my lies, God saw what I did last week." In v. 7-12, The Psalmist says: "Where can I go to escape Your Spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence? If I go up to heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, You are there. If I live on the eastern horizon [or] settle at the western limits, even there Your hand will lead me; Your right hand will hold on to me. If I say, 'Surely the darkness will hide me, and the light around me will become night,' even the darkness is not dark to You. The night shines like the day; darkness and light are alike to You."

The psalmist fear of total exposure moved him to ponder if there was some retreat, geographically or spiritually, to which he could secret himself away. But God will not let him run away. "He tracks my path," says the psalmist, "but not to point out what's wrong or exact justice from me. God is determined to give me grace, to be involved in my life."

I think that's what is said in v. 10 when he says, "If I could ride the sun's rays and fly at blinding speeds to some remote place or bury myself under miles of ocean, even there, Your hand will lead me (that's

guidance); Your right hand will hold on to me (that's security).

You know what this means, don't you? You are wanted by God. Over and over in the Bible, we see this affirmed. We are called God's beloved, chosen, dearly loved children. We are told that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. When you feel the crushing weight of loneliness and wonder if you would be missed if you were gone, remember this.

Mary Ann Bird writes that when she was growing up, she knew she was different. "And I hated it," she said. "I was born with a cleft palate, and when I started school, my classmates made it clear to me how I looked to others: a little girl with a misshapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth, and garbled speech.

"When schoolmates asked, 'What happened to your lip?' I'd tell them I'd fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident than to have been born different. I was convinced that no one outside my family could love me.

There was, however, a teacher in the second grade whom we all adored - Mrs. Leonard. Annually we had a hearing test. ... Mrs. Leonard gave the test to everyone in the class, and finally it was my turn. I knew from past years that as we stood against the door and covered one ear, the teacher sitting at her desk would whisper something, and we would have to repeat it back - things like "The sky is blue" or "Do you have new shoes?"

I waited there for those words that God must have put into her mouth, those seven words that changed my life. Mrs. Leonard said, in her whisper, "I wish you were my little girl."² (Mary Ann Bird, *The Whisper Test*, cited at PreachingToday.com) Oh how God loves you and me. And God pledges to us that now that we belong to God because of Christ Jesus, we will never be separated again. God knows you and wants you.

The words of Psalm 139 are among the most beautiful in the Scriptures: “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?” The meaning is profound. But I have long thought there is also a playful quality in the images: “If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I go to the farthest limits of the sea, even there your right hand shall hold me fast.” The pictures are vivid: up to the heavens, down to the underworld, to the farthest limits of the sea. Where can I go? Where can I flee? Nowhere. “You are there, and there, and even there....”

One of my all-time favorite Childrens books was read by Madison this morning *The Runaway Bunny* by Margaret Wise Brown. Written in 1942, the book has been in print for seventy years and is one of the best-selling children’s books of all time. The book has always reminded me of Psalm 139.

Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away. So he said to his mother, “I am running away.” “If you run away,” said his mother, “I will run after you. For you are my little bunny.” “If you run after me,” said the little bunny, “I will become a fish in a trout stream and I will swim away from you.” “If you become a fish in a trout stream,” said his mother, “I will become a fisherman and I will fish for you.”

We know that the story continues in the same vein with the bunny wanting to run away by various means and his mother saying she would do whatever necessary to find him. At the end the mother speaks of catching him in her arms to hold him fast and hug him.

What is it that makes that story so compelling? Is it the profound love that healthy parents have for their children? Love is powerful in all kinds of relationships. For me this story is a powerful metaphor for God’s love for us?

“I am running away,” the little bunny says. “I will run after you, for you are my little bunny,” the mother says. The story is as old as humankind. It’s the story at the center of the Bible. It’s our story.

Biblical faith boldly proclaims the inescapable presence of God. The witness of Psalm 139 is that God is truly “linked in” to us -- spatially, temporally and in every other way. It’s not that we have successfully aspired to such a relationship, but that the Almighty first linked up with us. “We love because God first loved us,” says John, and God’s specific avenue of approach is Jesus Christ. God needs no database to do this: only a yearning for relationship so powerful, God could fulfill it only by coming to us in Jesus. No computer code ever written could link us to the eternal. Only one word can do that: and that word is “Jesus.”

There is nowhere that one can hide or escape from the presence of God. God is ever present and everywhere present. Even though we may “flee” God out of fear, guilt, or doubt, God is still there. That may sound scary, but it is good news. God is there to “lead us” and to “hold us fast.” There is great peace and comfort in that. The spirit of this psalm is not fear but trust—the trust that nothing can separate us from the loving presence of God. Wherever we go, whatever happens to us, God is there.

Theologian Paul Tillich said it is the reality of our human condition to run from God, to be on our own, to live in the world as if God were not here. But Tillich wrote, “To flee into darkness in order to forget God is not to escape God. For a time we may be able to hurl God out of our consciousness, to reject God, to refute God, to argue convincingly for God’s nonexistence, [or] to live comfortably without God.”

Ultimately, Tillich argued, it is not God whom we reject and forget, but rather some distorted picture of God. The God who is really God is inescapable. There is finally “no place to which we can run or flee from God which is outside of God” (Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948, pp. 40-41).

Not only is God present, but God also knows us: “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”.

O God? Where can I flee from your presence? “Nowhere,” says the psalmist. That is the powerful good news of the gospel in Psalm 139. God’s presence can inspire fear or holy awe, but ultimately it is God’s gift to us.

Exhausted by his mother’s relentless promise to run after him and find him, the little bunny says, “Shucks, I might just as well stay where I am and be your little bunny.” God’s inescapable presence is a gift to us. We call it grace—the love of God made known to us in Jesus Christ. This is good news.

To know that God is present in our daily work, our careers, family life, and relationships, is a source of strength and comfort, especially during difficult times. God’s presence can transform the way we view our work and live our lives. God is in our work and our relationships. We can always look to God for wisdom and guidance.

To know that God is LinkedIn to our daily work, our community, our world, can also challenge us, inspire us, and guide our feet into the struggles of this world. This weekend when we mark Labor Day we are given the opportunity to remember the struggle for the 40-hour week, for health and safety regulations, for the right to organize for collective bargaining, for Social Security old-age pensions, for workers’ compensation for injury on the job, for unemployment compensation, for a minimum wage. The end of sweat shops and child labor. This struggle cost blood! Yes, there was violence, almost all of it aimed against unarmed workers. Men, women and children were burned to death, men were shot, some were lynched, dragged through the streets and hanged.

Deputy sheriffs near Hazelton, Pennsylvania, in 1897 shot down 19 unarmed Slavic, Hungarian and Sicilian miners because they went out on strike. That stimulated the building of the United Mine Workers Union. Organizers were imprisoned unjustly for as long as 20 years, all for trying to form a union.

Why talk about this sort of thing in church? Church is where we come to get closer to God, to hear

the Word and to come together in communion with Jesus our God and with one another and all God’s children. There you have it! ALL GOD’S CHILDREN. God went down into Sheol to be present with all of God’s Children in the abode of the Dead where there is no sound or thought. God went down into Sheol of dark unsafe mines smelling of death. God went down into Sheol of sweat shops where little girls as young as 8 worked 16 hours a day in textile shops their only value was that they had small hands and bodies that could load the bobbin of thread. Many died because they fell asleep and fell into the machinery. The God we worship is a God who goes down into Sheol and shines the light of justice. Being intimately known by our sovereign God means we are not hidden. We are not abandon or forgotten. If this is true we to as the body of Christ are compelled to go down into sheol and shine the light of God’s Justice, Grace, and love.

Because God is LinkedIn to us through Jesus Christ we continue to be LinkedIn to the oppressed forgotten and the abandoned. To lift up the psalmist’s affirmation of the worth of life in God in the face of the countless devaluations of human life all around us. Labor Day reminds us that we are not some cog in a wheel we are below. We are called to go forward, trusting the God who has searched us and known us, the God we praise, for our God knows that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. Amen.