

## LEARNING TO WALK IN THE DARK *Before You Give Up...*

Psalm 139:1-18

March 30, 2025

*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."*

Perhaps you recognize the opening lines of Margaret Wise Brown's children's book *The Runaway Bunny*. Spoiler alert: they also preview the entire plot. A little bunny tells his mother that he plans to run away. We don't know why, but he wants to escape. He has many ways to evade his mother, but it turns out that she can go to equally extraordinary lengths to find him. If he becomes a fish swimming in a stream, she will become a fisher and catch him. If he becomes a bird, she will become a tree in which he can land. If he becomes a little boy, she will be the maternal presence he comes home to. Ultimately, escape proves impossible. The bunny's mother's love is simply too strong.

The writer of Psalm 139 sounds a similar note: *Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? To the heights of heaven? To the depths of hell? The farthest sea? The darkest night? Where can I go to escape you?*

But why ask at all? Why would anyone want to run from God? What could make faith so difficult or life so demanding that we consider giving it up? Why run from God?

I've collected a few answers over the years. By no means a comprehensive list, but think of it as a sample set.

Some give up, run away, because faith does not—immediately or ever—make life easy. If our expectation is that religious conviction is like a magic wand over the struggles of our lives, we will often find ourselves disappointed. In fact, faith can have the opposite effect. It will ask something of us. Make demands. Require reevaluation of our deeply held priorities and a change in

our carefully arranged plans. Some would rather do what they please, and the boundaries of faith can be stifling. Why follow a God who demands of us compassion and sacrifice when you can live simply for yourself and justify any means that lead to success? Discipleship is hard work because it is important work.

And if that's not enough to make you run away, there is the decidedly mixed and not always pretty record of religious institutions when it comes to meeting the demands faith makes of us. I have heard it with increasing frequency in recent years.

An erosion of trust in faith communities, contributing to a growing doubt in the truths we claim. Hypocrisy among the faithful—speaking one way and living another—harms our witness and damages our credibility. Following the Spirit, whose call explicitly extends to all nations, some make exclusive nationalist claims. Some disciples of Jesus choose judgment over grace. Some cast aspersions against others. We all read the same text. We all read the prophets' call to justice for the oppressed and care for the poor, and then look the other way when justice is denied, and the poor are forgotten. The witness of the church proves time and time again that we are broken people living in a broken world. We break our promises. And so, some flee from faith and point to these failures. They run away.

But institutional failure and the demands of faith are not the only causes for spiritual apathy. Some resist for a deeper reason—surrender feels unimaginable. We have all been shaped by hyper-individualism, which insists that the self is the highest authority. Humility gives way to hubris. Communal accountability succumbs to mantras like "to thine own self be true" or its modern cousin "you do you." To submit to a greater power or a deeper truth feels like defeat—and defeat is the one thing we must never allow.

When faith is hard, when institutions fail, when we are asked to yield, we flee. We give up. We run away. But here is the twist taught by that runaway bunny. It will never work. The Psalmist tried it. So have we. God's love is simply too strong. One of the reasons I love this particular Psalm is because it portrays a note of menace from the divine. Something like this: *Go ahead; try to escape. See how far you get.*

Yes, we have tried. And the one conclusion that seems unanimous among us is this: the results of our retreat have been dismal. It is not a new revelation. Long after the psalmist and long before us, St. Augustine spent years trying to flee from God. He chased every other path he could find until he finally came to believe that the only way out was *back* to God.

Friends, we are surrounded. *Where can I go from your Spirit?* Answer: *I come to the end, I am still with you.* This is the picture of a pursuing God. The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber captured this truth in poetic form. *Where I wander – You! Where I ponder – You! Only You, You again, always You! Sky is You, Earth is You! You above! You below! In every trend, at every end—only You, You again, always You!*

In my favorite story of scripture, at a time when God seemed to have stopped speaking and visions were rare, the voice of the holy comes to a young boy named Samuel in the middle of the night as he sleeps in the temple. Sam assumes the voice belongs to the elderly priest Eli, who has taken Samuel in as an apprentice. The voice speaks his name, "Samuel!" a name which means "God has heard." The boy gets up from his bed and goes to Eli. Three times this sequence repeats itself until the old priest realizes the voice might belong to God, and he is right. It is God's mysterious, persistent, relentless call that initiates the encounter. God will stay at it as long as it takes. Sam is not in pursuit of an elusive and evasive God. No, he is surrounded by the God who will not quit on him.

The mystic, activist, theologian, preacher, and pastor Howard Thurman describes it this way: "There is something in every one of you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. It is the only true guide you will ever have. And if you cannot hear it, all your life you will spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls."

That sound—the sound of the genuine—was what Samuel heard in the Temple. It's what stopped his running in circles and set his life in forward motion. Not toward ease, not toward perfection, not even toward power. But toward purpose. From that night on, Sam knew what he was living for. So, what about you?

It seems to me, this is one of the great struggles of our time. All of us are running, but not all of us have a destination in mind. Many of us are running from, but not running to. Others settle for the fleeting goal of material success or personal gain. We put faith in that which will never meet our deepest needs or fulfill the longing of our soul.

St. Augustine, after years of wandering, could finally throw up his hands and say, "Oh God, You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." Friends, our hearts will never be at rest so long as we insist on living against the grain of our created purpose. You cannot serve God and mammon. You cannot find life's meaning while pursuing meaningless ends. Might as well surrender.

Now, surrender is not defeat but trust in the One who knows how to hold us better than we know how to hold ourselves. This is why Psalm 139 can make the turn from running to resting. Surrender reshapes our identity.

My favorite story of surrender belongs to Anne Lamott. In her memoir, she describes how in her early thirties she was battling addiction and living all alone on a houseboat in San Francisco. On Sundays, she could be found wandering the flea market, drawn by gospel music from a small, run-down Presbyterian church. She began lingering in the doorway, Sunday after Sunday, listening to the music, always leaving before the sermon. No one pressured her to stay, but the warmth of the congregation and the genuineness of their singing pulled her back week after week.

One Sunday, she was too sick, too hungover, to stand for the hymns or leave before the sermon. The music overwhelmed her, Lamott writes, "as if the people were singing between the notes. The last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape it...I felt like their voices were holding me, like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling—and it washed over me." She fled home, but as she walked down

the dock, she sensed a presence following her. Finally, in her own doorway, she whispered, "Okay. I quit." And then, out loud, "All right. You can come in."

In my own life, God's pursuit has been marked by a patient persistence. I try to hold it all together on my own. I micromanage and organize and reach for control and cling to the calendar. And God does not give me up. Nor does God leave me to my illusions of power. When I finally give in, it is not defeat. It is relief.

When will you stop running and let God find you? What if today is the day you let God in?

*"Shucks" said the bunny, "I might just as well stay where I am and be your little bunny." And so he did.*

*"Have a carrot," said the mother bunny.*

The world demands our ceaseless striving. False gods exhaust us with endless demands. In the chaos and the noise, the voice of God calls, "Stop running. Surrender—not in defeat, but in trust. Rest your heart in the One who has been pursuing you all along.

So before you give up—on faith, on hope, on the possibility that God is near—give in. Give in to the relentless love of God. Have a carrot. You belong to God.