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Psalm 139:1-18

On the Wings of the Morning
Joy Douglas Strome

Prayer for Illumination: On the Wings of this morning, help us to know you and help us to find comfort in being known. Amen.

Psalm 139---I’m going to break it into parts. You might want to keep it open for reference this morning.

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.
You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

That’s enough to get us started. Beautiful words, beautiful sentiment. So comforting and almost dreamy. And yet there’s also just a bit of creepy in there don’t you think? The idea that God is so close to us, knows us so well, is digging around in our underwear drawer with a familiarity to which we might not have given permission. It’s almost like science fiction, or Magic Schoolbus, God is floating around inside of us, aware of our most intimate parts, that means warts and all, and it could be enough to make some say---uh, not having any of that. I need my distance, my independence. I don’t want God in my thoughts before I’ve even had them.

So right off the bat the Psalm sets up this contrast between God’s ability to know us and our willingness to be known. It is a very human struggle. One that isn’t all that straightforward, but worth thinking about all the same.

Most of the time we have this picture of God---very hands off, sitting on the throne, with angels hovering all around, God is reading or thinking lofty thoughts but pretty inert up there. That’s not at all how the psalmist sees it. This God is on the move, in and out of each of our souls, with us in our deep thoughts….. and our cruel actions, searching us right to the center of core and getting who we
are---that can be intrusive….a little creepy. Especially if we are nervous about what God will
discover when God gets to the very center of our core.

If we find ourselves sweating that detail, it probably means we have missed God’s intent in this
knowing. It’s not to judge us, but to lead us. It’s not to look and find fault with us----that’s what we
humans like to do and we are particularly adept at doing. No, God wants to know us because we
belong to God, we are God’s treasure, and God’s connection to us is so intense that our very
rhythms, like breathing and moving and thinking are in sync with God’s; whether we know that, or are
willing to that that…or not.

Let’s keep reading and see what else is here....

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.

More of the same, but different. if God is going to meet us even in Sheol, whatever happens on this
side of death can’t be too intrusive or judgmental. So we find ourselves in Sheol---if God is there
with us, is it really something to fear? So much of our pop psychology and what I would call pop
culture religion simplifies faith and waters it down to such silly dichotomies. You are clearly either in
heaven or hell, black or white, all wrong or all right. But if God is present from heaven to Sheol, then
why do we spend our lives agonizing over whether Aunt Betty who never was baptized is going to be
in heaven with us. Or why do we spend our lives agonizing over those who would take one look at
us and because we are one thing or another caste judgement. Where could we go from God’s Spirit?
Where could we flee from God’s presence? Well the psalmist believes no where. So the
implications for this are huge. So much angst over something so moot---according to the Psalmist. If
I don’t have to spend my life in pursuit of being in heaven with God…..then what are my human pursuits supposed to be about?  Big question..  Puts the pressure on this life doesn’t it.

So the psalmist claims God is everywhere---literally everywhere.  And that raises another issue for us.  If God is everywhere, then why doesn’t God intervene when we are getting ready to do something really hateful, or hurtful, or even what we call evil?  Or why doesn’t God intervene when the most wonderful person in the world lay dying in the hospital.

This is another of those black and white kind of issues that turn people off.  Well if God is all powerful and knows everything then why do we keep doing stupid stuff?  God’s capacity for power is not really the question.  God’s decision to use power is the bigger question.  How does God choose to use power in the world?  As much as I think we like the idea of God’s intervention at all the crucial moments of conflict in the world, I’m not sure we would like it as much as we think.  What if God were micro-managing everything about our lives.  It wouldn’t take too long to realize we’d end up robotic, manipulated, puppets, just playing out God’s action with no agency of our own.

We helicopter parents know all about this.  We help our children make every move.  We provide everything they need.  We run their schedule.  We pick them up.  We take them here and there.  We make them call us the second they get where they are going.  We have this protective, hovering motion down to a science.  But when our children move out and don’t know how to cook or clean a stove or balance a check book?  They suffer and we’ve missed the point.  This isn’t how God uses power.  God empowers us with many good gifts and skills and expects us to use them for the good of the world.  God teaches.  God supports.  But God expects us to act on our own---full free agency to mess up, get hurt, or fix things, or love well, or live our lives with the foundational material that will support us but not make us puppets on a string.

Even this idea is complex.  There is a bit of a contradiction----God is close as our breath, and yet won’t intervene if we are choking……there’s a reason for that, so we can make our own choices, so we can live out and into our humanity with God’s support, but not God’s constant intervention.

Let’s hear more of the psalm.
Joy:
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.

So think about where we are---God is as close as our own breath, but won't intervene if we are choking. And if we are choking we are at risk....there are real dangers out there that we must fear. Like a lovely lullaby, these next verses rock us back the other way. These are the lines that feel like my grandma's arms just closing in around me, pulling me up in her lap. In that place? I am always safe. I don't have to worry. I am loved. I'm not fearful of anything. Whether you were ever afraid of the dark or not, this speaks to those kinds of deep seeded fears. What if I'm not enough. What if I'm not doing right by my kids? What if I'm not really making it in the world the way I had planned? What if the world explodes tomorrow? Real dangers, real fears....The psalmist describes what we know we need... a really big God who holds the whole earth in big, wrinkly, warm hands. Big fears need a big God....even the darkness is not dark to you.

Let's continue.

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.

I am fearfully and wonderfully made. I'm lucky to have seen a lot of newborns recently. It never gets old, looking at these perfect little creations, marveling at their tiny hands and feet, wondering who they will grow up to be, thinking about the joy they will bring their parents. The human body is so
mysterious and definitely wonderfully made. I wonder if the psalmist writes this because we take the
miracle of our lives for granted. Sometimes that’s benign, but a lot of the time we are actively
destroying what God has fearfully and wonderfully made. As a human that brings such sorrow. For
God it must be agony. The God who made our lives sacred, fearfully and wonderfully made, does not
take our lives for granted. Of that I am sure.

Let’s continue:

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.

Thinking weighty thoughts for too long, especially on a holiday weekend, could get
overwhelming…..but not thinking about them enough could sell your life short I think. It can be
frightening to consider our place in human history, wonder if we have done our part, made it better or
worse, what if we consider our own potential and don’t really measure up? We can get stuck there,
because most days we are pretty stuck on ourselves….we are the center of our own universes, right?
Even as we are working for others, or helping a family thrive, we usually do a lot of thinking about our
own selves. But when we read something like this, it’s clear that we are participating in something so
much bigger than any one of us. And while it’s a comfort to think we aren’t alone, it’s also frightening
to think of ourselves as a tiny speck, vulnerable. Sort of like Horton hears a who, remember that
story? Horton the elephant was convinced he heard a noise on a tiny speck on a small flower. The
rest of the jungle didn’t believe him. But on the speck on the flower was the whole village of
Whoville. And they were so immersed in their own stuff that they didn’t even know they were in
danger. Horton’s famous line is a person is a person no matter how small. The people in Whoville
had to come together to join their voices to make a noise big enough that the large animals of the
jungle could hear. Horton had to convince them that they weren’t the center of the universe and that
a person was a person no matter how small, and that the world didn’t revolve around their
perceptions of things. The leaders in Whoville had to get everyone on board to make themselves
sound bigger…. I think there’s a connection here….hang in there with me a minute.
We feel small, it's frightening, so we shrink our perspective to make ourselves feel big (the whoville folks), and when we do that, we lose sight of the big picture that is miracle and wonder and the true gift of life...and the larger world out there. And then from the perspective of the jungle animals.... We see ourselves created in the image of God---we are known and God-like.... and we feel huge and its exhilarating because it elevates our position so, but along with this elevation comes responsibility...what if wipe out a whole people with one irrational push of a button?...and then that's frightening again.....so we shrink our perspective until we are the center of it all again and then we can't see the big picture.... so we circle back and forth between those two places...and though no one likes to feel like a sling shot----it is of course a both/and, not an either or. We have to have the big picture and the small picture. The big picture gives us scope and responsibility and confidence. The small picture makes us feel vulnerable, but also helps us know how inter-dependent we are on one another and on this God of ours, and makes us feel safe ...and though that might feel never-ending.....it isn't....back to the psalm.

So we come to the end and God is with us. God knows us intimately and to the extent we will let ourselves find comfort in that, let our lives be known, our lives are sacred expressions of that miracle and we can rest comfortably in the arms of this God who has searched us and known us and is with us still. That's where the truth lies. At the end of our life's struggles, be in the daily variety or the whole life variety.....God is with us...and that miracle is enough for today. Let us pray

God of wonder and presence, God of the universe and God who beats in each of our hearts, we give you thanks for many things, but mostly that no matter our questions, our doubts, our limits, you are with us, you are there. In our beginning, in our end, in our all. Amen.