

## ***Do We Want to Be Known?***

Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

July 20, 2014

Psalm 139 is a favorite psalm for many people, and it is usually thought of as comforting. God knows me, God is everywhere, and God made me. But what strikes me about the psalm nowadays is the deep ambivalence the psalmist has about being known by God.

I think we are all ambivalent. On the one hand, we long for someone to know us completely. Part of what makes us feel so alone in this world is that no other human being knows us fully; there is always a part of me that is undiscovered and therefore misunderstood. Lorin Stein wrote a column in *The Paris Review* last year (1-7-2013) about Psalm 139 as one of his favorite poems. He noted, “An old boss of mine used to claim that the most seductive words are not ‘I love you’ but ‘I understand you.’” That’s the reason many of us give up so much privacy these days: we put all this information about us out there, good and bad, because we *want* to be known and understood for who we are.

But on the other hand, we are *afraid* of being known. One of the most popular Christian books of the 1970’s—and it continues to be in print—was the Jesuit John Powell’s little book *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?* His answer is this: “I am afraid to tell you who I am, because, if I tell you who I am, you may not like who I am, and it’s all that I have...” If I can tell myself that nobody knows me, I can always tell myself they don’t like me because they don’t know me. (Believe me, I use that defense all the time!) But most of us suspect—or perhaps we *know*—that there is something wrong with us which we would prefer to hide. We all have secrets. Can there be any reason for that but that we are ashamed? That story of the first human interaction with God in the Garden of Eden shows the disobedient pair trying to hide from God—ashamed, and perhaps afraid.

Psalm 139 reflects that ambivalence but resolves it in the end by asking God again to search me, to know my heart and my thoughts, and to lead me in God’s paths. But it takes the psalmist, and us, a little while to get to that resolution. When he starts out saying “O Lord, you have searched me and known me,” it’s not clear whether that’s a good thing or a bad thing. You could read it like a note from Edward Snowden to the NSA: “You know when I sit down and when I stand up; you know what I’m thinking; you know where I am walking and when I lie down.” If the authority who knows all that about you is not benevolent, it’s more than a little creepy. It reminds me of the fear of Santa Claus that was placed inside many of us as children: “You better watch out, you’d better not shout... he knows when you’ve been naughty, he knows when you’ve been good.” Fortunately, what was acted out on Christmas day was a different story. It was all grace, gift upon gift.

But this psalm is not about Santa Claus. It’s about the Almighty, the Creator, the One we can never know fully in our present state. We can’t know him in detail, but he knows all about us. God is so connected with us that even before a thought gets from our brain to our tongue, God knows it. In verse 5, both the NRSV and NIV translate “You hem me in.” That’s not like a warm embrace. It sounds like what a steer says to a cowpoke: You hem me in. In Hebrew the word is used to describe a city under siege, as the Gaza strip is hemmed in. It is God’s knowledge of us that has hemmed us in. Such knowledge is too wonderful for us—not in the sense of being delightful, but in the sense of being a wonder, a miracle, something supernatural

and beyond our understanding. It is something completely different from the kind of knowledge we are capable of.

Friedrich Nietzsche is famous for talking about the death of God in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But do you know, in his own personal mythology, why God had to be killed? In his story, the prophet Zarathustra says to a character called The Ugliest Man that he knows why he had to kill God: “You could not bear him to see you, always to see you through and though... You took revenge on the witness... You are the murderer of God.” Nietzsche says that modern man got rid of the idea of God because they couldn’t stand the thought of being fully known. We had to kill the witness, as Tom Hank’s son had to be killed in *The Road to Perdition* because he had seen too much, as Harrison Ford had to protect the Amish boy in *Witness*.

Rather than be found out, many of us try to run away from God, but of course you can’t escape God. The ending of the familiar 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm can be translated “Your goodness and love will *pursue* me all the days of my life.” There’s a black gospel song called “No Hiding Place” which was first recorded in 1928, and later also recorded as a bluegrass song. [Check out the 1950’s version by The Original Gospel Harmonettes with Dorothy Love Coates. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IsHex9JWswE>] Here’s how the chorus goes:

There’s no hiding place down here,  
There’s no hiding place down here,  
Oh, I ran to the rock to hide my face,  
The rock cried out, “No hiding place.  
There’s no hiding place down here.”

A couple of weeks ago we were trying to rescue a couple of eastern European students who had been treated very badly by their employer, and on the morning that they gave notice that they were quitting the boss came over to their apartment and barged in while they were still wrapped in towels. He screamed at them, “I worked for the government for 40 years, and there is no place on the face of the earth where I cannot track you down!” The police told me that didn’t constitute a threat, but it would be pretty scary if someone said that to *me*. And there’s something of that in this psalm; there is no place where God cannot track you down.

There’s something in human nature that likes to play hide and seek. You don’t have to teach a kid to hide. I remember when our son Nathan was 1 year old, Becca went out for a while and left him in the care of his 6-year-old sister and me. Maybe half an hour later we realized that we had no idea where Nathan was. The two of us ran all over the house, looking under beds and in the toilet and anywhere we could think of. Our hearts were racing faster than our feet. Where was he? About that time Becca walked in the front door. “We lost Nathan!” I said. “You lost Nathan?” she asked, and immediately stood at the bottom of the stairs and shouted out, “Nathan, come here right this minute... 1... 2... 3.” Nathan came out from behind a bedroom door where he had been hiding and stood at the top of the stairs, laughing. He said, “They ran back and forth, back and forth!” You can hide from Dad, but you can’t really hide from God.

The psalmist knows that there is no place you can go where God is not, and that is a source of comfort if you know that God is *for* you. One of the most beautiful passages in the whole King James Bible is this one, which Lorin Stein called “an advertisement for the English language”:

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, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.

You see how the verbs have changed from getting away from God and fleeing his Spirit into God leading me and holding me.

We cannot get away from God and we need not flee. Francis Thompson was a young man in Victorian England. He went to college thinking he would train to become a priest, but it was a bad fit, so he dropped out. His father, a doctor, convinced him to go to medical school, but it was a bad fit because he really wanted to be a poet, so he dropped out. On his own now, he went to London where he became an opium addict and lived as a homeless man on the street. Once he wrote a poem on a brown grocery bag and sent it to a newspaper. The publisher and his wife were so moved by his condition that they took him into their home. When Francis Thompson came back to God, he realized that God had been pursuing him all his life:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;  
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;  
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways  
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears  
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.  
Up vistaed hopes I sped;  
And shot, precipitated,  
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,  
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.

The name of that poem is “The Hound of Heaven.” We used to have a little hound dog, a beagle named Penny. The day we picked her up at the shelter, the worker told us that she was a hunting dog, bred to chase rabbits, so we must always keep her on a leash or she would simply follow her nose. If you ever let go, there was no catching her, because she was onto the scent. Now there are many ways Penny did not remind me of God, but in this one thing she was godlike. She would track down her prey whatever it took. Listen to me: God has your scent. He is after you. He will find you. He already knows all about you, and he wants a relationship with you.

Does anyone really know you? A spouse might, or a sibling maybe, or a best friend. But I’d say most people go through life feeling that they have never been fully known by anyone. A song a few years ago by the band called The Weepies expressed this:

When I was a child everybody smiled,  
nobody knows me at all.  
Very late at night and in the morning light,  
nobody knows me at all.  
I got lots of friends, yes, but then again,  
nobody knows me at all.  
Kids and a wife, it’s a beautiful life,  
nobody knows me at all.

Your one hope of being *fully* known is God.

You know how people are. Sometimes you are misunderstood. Sometimes you are accused of evil motives. At times your only comfort may be that God knows your heart. God knows your true intentions and whether you were acting out of love or not.

In the end we don’t need to care so much what people think of us who do not know us fully. The apostle Paul was very direct about this in 1 Corinthians (4:3-4 NLT): “It matters very little how I might be evaluated by you or by any human authority. I don’t even trust my *own*

judgment on this point. My conscience is clear, but that doesn't prove I'm right. It is the Lord himself who will examine me and decide."

I don't think I got to this until mid-life, but there is only one person I really want to please, and that is Jesus my Lord who alone will be my judge. I want to hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant" and "I was a stranger and you took me in." I'm going to do everything I can to help you to *get* the gospel and *get* Jesus, but I've long since given up on most of you getting Steve. Oh, it's nice when you feel that people do and love you, but that can't be the source of meaning and identity in your life.

The one you want to know you already knows everything about you, knows you more deeply than you know yourself. Socrates said, "Know thyself." But John Calvin said, "It is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked on God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinizing himself" [*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1:1:2]. May this be our prayer for self-knowledge:

Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my thoughts.  
See if there is any wicked way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.