

Inescapable
Psalm 139:1-16

Steve Hollaway
Harbor Church
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There comes an age when we begin to keep secrets, when we realize that Mom doesn't really have eyes in the back of her head, cannot actually read our minds. In the movie we watched Friday, *The Tree of Life*, there is a moment when the 11-year-old boy finally does something bad that he cannot confess to his mother and we see how the secret begins to separate them. Most mothers of preschoolers can testify that at some point their little girls got frustrated and blurted blurted out something along the lines of "You don't know everything about me, Mommy! You think you do, but you don't!"

But there is also an age when we want to be known. Erik Erikson said that the chief developmental task of young adulthood was intimacy. We have had enough of independence and long to be connected. We have had enough of hiding behind masks and want to be seen for who we truly are. There is this hope that we will find a soul-mate who will understand everything, but eventually we learn that even when our secrets have been shared and we have told all the truth about ourselves that we can bear, there still remains something that is unknown to the other. There is a wall of flesh and appearance between us, and there is much within myself I do not understand, and so I can never be fully known by you. When Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13 "I am fully known," he can only be speaking about God.

The psalmist in Psalm 139 meditates on being known by God. "Yahweh, you know me," he says. "You know when I sit or stand, when I walk or lie down; you know my thoughts; you know what I am going to say before I say it." It is not clear if the psalmist is comforted by this or troubled by this. Maybe both. But then in verse 4 he says, "You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me." I'm sure it's not the image he has in mind, but I think of trying to catch a hamster in its cage—putting a hand in front of him and behind him and then picking him up. I am not able to escape your knowing power. That kind of knowledge is a wonder to me; that is, it's beyond my comprehension that you have the ability to know me in that way.

Then in verse 7 the poet makes a brilliant poetic move. He takes a break from meditating on God's knowledge—he'll get back to it—and conceives it in terms of God's location in space. He moves from statements about God to asking a question: How can I escape you? On the one hand, the poet speaks for us humans who like Adam and Eve would like to hide from God. On the other hand, the poet is reassuring us that there is nowhere, no matter how dark, where God is not. In an earlier time, the prophet Jeremiah heard Yahweh asking similar questions:

"Am I only a God nearby," declares the Lord,
"and not a God far away?
Who can hide in secret places
so that I cannot see them?" declares the Lord.
"Do I not fill heaven and earth?" (23:23-24)

He was talking about false prophets who cannot hide from God's judgment, and Psalm 139 is also thinking about how God will find us out, how God can see if there is any wicked way in us.

But Psalm 139 is also saying that the truth that God fills heaven and earth is a source of comfort. As Corrie ten Boom put it: "However deep the pit, God's love is deeper still." Or as John Greenleaf Whittier wrote in a "The Eternal Goodness":

I know not where His islands lift
Their fronded palms in air;

I only know I cannot drift
Beyond His love and care.

It is the same theme the apostle Paul picks up when he asks “What can separate us from the love of Christ?” His answer is “Not death! Not demons or angels! Not any power on earth or in heaven! Not the present or the future! No matter how high I go or how low I fall, nothing can separate me from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

And yet—Psalm 139 talks about trying to escape from God. That is the flip side of this comforting truth that God is everywhere and knows all about us. That is just the problem: he knows all about us and there is nowhere we can go that he will not follow. If someone says “I know where you live,” it is normally a threat. The psalmist is not talking about a game of hide and seek here; he is talking about hiding, period, like someone hiding from a thief in the night, to use Jesus’ picture of judgment. Hiding from the Mafia guy who says “I know where you live.” Why would we want to hide from God? For the same reason we hide from our parents when we have been bad. We know what God requires of us. We know, as Adam and Eve did, that we are naked. We know that God is holy and radically different from us and terrifyingly powerful and that his love is a consuming fire. We hide because we have no desire to change.

The theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich spoke about this in a sermon in 1955. He makes the point so well I want to read you one paragraph (which uses the generic “man” for humankind):

"Where could I go from Thy Spirit? O, where could I flee from Thy Face?" The poet who wrote those words to describe the futile attempt of man to escape God certainly believed that man desires to escape God. He is not alone in his conviction. Men of all kinds, prophets and reformers, saints and atheists, believers and unbelievers, have the same experience. It is safe to say that a man who has never tried to flee God has never experienced the God Who is really God. When I speak of God, I do not refer to the many gods of our own making, the gods with whom we can live rather comfortably. For there is no reason to flee a god who is the perfect picture of everything that is good in man. Why try to escape from such a far-removed ideal? And there is no reason to flee from a god who is simply the universe, or the laws of nature, or the course of history. Why try to escape from a reality of which we are a part? There is no reason to flee from a god who is nothing more than a benevolent father, a father who guarantees our immortality and final happiness. Why try to escape from someone who serves us so well? No, those are not pictures of God, but rather of man, trying to make God in his own image and for his own comfort. They are the products of man’s imagination and wishful thinking, justly denied by every honest atheist. A god whom we can easily bear, a god from whom we do not have to hide, a god whom we do not hate in moments, a god whose destruction we never desire, is not God at all, and has no reality ["Escape from God," in *Shaking the Foundations*, Scribners, 1955].

The God of the Bible, the God who made us and has acted in history and revealed himself in power and glory, is a God to be feared as well as adored.

The real God is one we might run from—and of course many do.

You may have heard of Friedrich Nietzsche as the atheist who wrote about “the death of God.” But what he says about the death of God is worth thinking about. In Nietzsche’s story, the prophet Zarathustra says to the 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 through... You took revenge on the witness... You are the murderer of God.” Modern man, he says, had to get rid of the idea of God, because he could not stand the thought of being known completely. He could not tolerate a God who saw the deep parts of a man, who saw his hidden shame and ugliness. He could not let such a Witness live—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*. If we cannot escape from God, if he sees everything we do, we have to kill him for our own peace of mind. And that is what countless souls have done.

The psalmist, though, is not thinking of doing away with God. That is not a possibility. God is the Maker and Knower of everything, and powerful beyond our comprehension—and, beyond that, holy and just and full of loyal love. As the psalmist thinks about God's everywhere-ness, he realizes that he cannot flee God's presence even if he wants to. "If I go up high in the sky"—we might say, "if I go far into outer space"—you are still there. You are not just in the Temple. You are not just in the community of faith. You inhabit the creation. If I make my bed in the depths of the earth—if I am as low as a guy can get—you are still there. The Hebrew could also mean "If I lie down in the place of the dead, you are there." The psalmist goes from the vertical axis to the horizontal: if I go as far east as I can to the place from which the sun rises, or if I go as far west as I can to the unknown lands beyond the Mediterranean, you are still there, and you still guide me. Now the tone of the word "escape" or "flee" has morphed into the reassurance of the words "guide" and "hold." And even if I try to hide in darkness—or even if darkness falls upon me—it will not be dark to you, God. You yourself are light, and you see everything even in the dark.

The single most important word in this psalm is "You." The poet is not describing God the way a philosopher would, or even a preacher. The poet is talking directly to a personal God. There is a big difference between saying "God is everywhere" and saying "God, wherever I go, you are there." These are not objective statements about God. These are prayers. You can say "God is omnipresent," but it is meaningless until it is personal: "God, you are here where I am."

One of the great Hasidic rabbis of the 18th century was Levi Yitzchek of Berditchov. Listen to how direct and contemporary this English version of his Hebrew prayer sounds:

Where I wander—You!
Where I ponder—You!
Only You everywhere, You, always You.
You. You. You.
When I am gladdened—You!
When I am saddened—You!
Only You, everywhere You!
You. You. You.
Sky is You!
Earth is You!
You above! You below!
In every trend, at every end,
Only You, everywhere You!

(English version by Perle Besserman)

Where can we flee from that you? We cannot 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.

You can’t lose him, however you try. And he can’t lose you. When the writer Kathleen Norris came back after years of exile and dabbling in this and that to her family’s farm in South Dakota and to the church, she wrote “I came to understand that God hadn’t lost me, even if I seemed for years to have misplaced God” [*Amazing Grace*, p. 104]. God made you. God knows you. And wherever you are, God is there.