

Sermon based on Psalm 139, selected verses August 29, 2010

The Comforting and Unsettling Presence of God

Carl Thomas

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A number of years ago I heard a taped sermon by the late Dr. Howard Thurman. He was the pastor, and one of the two founders, of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, founded in 1944, in San Francisco. Dr. Thurman was a passionate theologian, an entertaining story teller, and the man could read scripture like no one I've heard before or since. It was magic; it came alive in ways that drew you in to word pictures, smells, touch, sounds, even atmosphere. He made you live, literally in what he was reading to you.

That's also when I fell in love with Psalm 139, just read by Roseanne a moment ago. Dr. Thurman created the psalm for me right before my very ears. And over time I have discovered more and more about why that was the case, why the immediate response from my hearing it excited every piece of my flesh, my brain, my heart - because there is, in this one biblical poem, a great range of emotions (only some of which we'll consider today - when you read the *whole* psalm you'll see the rest, some of which may startle). This range evokes the power, and grandeur and unfathomable nature of God, and, at the same time, the intense intimacy of that same God, intimacy with *you*, the reader/hearer. Amazing, isn't it - that one piece of writing, just one, could convey God as both powerful and gently caring all at once. Now that says to me that the writing could *not* have been fiction. It *had* to be based on the original composer's direct, personal experience. Nothing less would come across as genuine.

Read it. Read it again. Read it again. Read it in different translations. Read it checking alternate possibilities in the footnotes. Read it often enough that it offers to you God in a new way.

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Be warned! There's danger in doing so!

In reading it, you subject yourself to knowing God better. Beware of that. To know God *that* well is to invite change into your life, sometimes delightful, spirit-raising change, but often as not also, disruptive change that affects not only your own life but those around you as well. But read anyway. Change of that nature is eventually better for all concerned, though possibly not appearing to be at first. [I.E. - Risk reading Psalm 139].

When *I* did so it led me to reconsider my ministry while my children were still young. Regrettably, my response was only half-hearted and everyone suffered for it (I won't go into details here, but I can say that had I turned myself over to God completely at that time in my life, then I might have avoided hurting people later (maybe is the operative idea here - I might have hurt them in any event). But I chose, instead, a timid response, I played it safe (or so I convinced myself). I chose to keep an even keel. I chose not to rock the boat for family, for colleagues, for parishioners. I chose wrongly).

A man like Wesley chose God , *completely, unreservedly*, and let the chips fall where they may. You remember the story. A man like Luther did the same. A man like Pope John xxiii did the same. All risked the future to unknown consequences. All did so by trusting God only, a God whom they were coming to know better and better and they were willing to take the risk of going wherever that deeper, better relationship might lead. There is . . . very definitely, danger in reading Psalm 139.

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There's beauty in reading it too.

It's the beauty of seeing life afresh, allowing it to speak its own existence rather the one you want to impose on it. Let me illustrate: [relate the silent retreat experience in Los Gatos]. There's beauty in letting God direct you to

see and hear God's world and the deep blessing that it is. There's beauty in allowing yourself to trust an experience that common sense tells you is bordering on crazy [finish story with mother]. Was my mother actually trying to get in touch with me? - Maybe so, maybe not. But the point of my relating this instance to you, the lesson for me that I want to be clear about is that *God* knew *me*. *God* knew what it would take to get my attention. *God* connected with me through *my* being comforted by the presence of my mother (whether or not that would even be possible - it doesn't matter - God can and does use anything to get through to us sometimes). Beauty - tenderness in beauty.

There's inspiration in reading Psalm 139.

For me it's the inspiration of sensing God's capabilities, just a little bit more than I was able to grasp previously. God's touch is more than a phrase now. God's messages through others are more frequent.

And the inspiration continues; there's new direction to follow, new ideas of scripture to understand, new possibilities for worship with others, new acceptance of what others see in God that are way beyond the tolerance of a "oh, isn't that interesting" response. And now those inspiring moments lead to embracing what before might have been held at a distance. Inspiration *continues*, I'm confident that there will be more of it tomorrow.

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There's also deep comfort in reading Psalm 139.

Why? Why would that be so, more so for me, say, that by reading the 23rd psalm. I don't know. This one just grabs me more, that's all. The comfort that's here is *first* noticed by the report of how the psalmist is coming to know God. He says,

"You know all about me" or . . . "understanding you is too wonderful for me" or . . . "you are inescapable"

You are inescapable - ah yes. That's got two sides, doesn't it? God is always there (the familiar footprints in the sand story). But God is also always there when you *don't want* God around. Isn't that true as well? God pursues relentlessly. Look how the Bible gives testimony to that fact. Again and again God tries and tries to win us, all of us, all of us. Again and again we resist. [examples]. And God keeps at it, never-ending, always pushing, forever and forever. The lesson that the Bible and the history of the Bible's story gives ample testimony to is this one fact (if there be *only* just one): namely, God never gives up. If you allow yourself to witness that, you will. You can ignore it, but it's always there.

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There's promise in reading Psalm 139.

The promise is inherent in each phrase. Your sense of awe at what God does and who God is can only grow, whether you're just starting out, or capping a lifetime of searching. (It's kind of like learning to play bridge; you never get there, but the joy is in the effort).

The promise, more seriously, is the certainty that the change you will experience in your life will be well-worth the discovery, painfully- yes, sometimes, and with comfort, inspiration, beauty and danger all thrown in for good measure.

But . . . let it happen. Let it happen to you (like experiencing ecstasy for the first time; I don't care what source your mind conjures up just now in order to understand that - use it, *it'll* work). Let it happen. Let yourself get to know God better, with all the confusion that may attend the effort.

For me it began with hearing Psalm 139 for the first time. For you the "aha" moment might be *very* different. But let me try to show you how it *can* occur. Let me see if I can give you a clue as to why that happened, merely by sharing

with you once again some verses from Psalm 139. *This* time we'll look at the Jerusalem Bible translation, and we'll use alternate readings from the footnotes, too. The verses are the same.

Lord, you examine me and know me,
You know if I am standing or sitting,
You read my thoughts from far away,
Whether I walk or lie down, you are watching,
You know every detail of my conduct.

The word is not even on my tongue, Lord before you know all about it;
Close behind and close in front you fence me round, shielding me with your
hand.
Such knowledge is beyond my understanding,
A height to which my mind cannot attain.

Where could I go to escape your spirit?
Where could I flee from your presence?
If I climb the heavens, you are there,
There, too, if I lie in Sheol.
If I flew to the point of sunrise, or westward across the sea.
Your hand would still be guiding me,
Your right hand holding me.
If I asked darkness to cover me,

And light to become night around me,
That darkness would not be dark to you,
Night would be as light as day.

It was you who created my inmost self,
And put me together in my mother's womb;
For all these mysteries I thank you:
For the wonder of myself, for the wonder of your works.
You know me through and through
From having watched my bones take shape
When I was being formed in secret, knitted together in the limbo of the womb.
God, how hard it is to grasp your thoughts!
How impossible to count them!
I could no more count them than I could the sand,
And when I awake, I should still be faced with the mystery of God.