

Searched by God

Psalm 139

Second Sunday after Pentecost, (June 2) 2024

Kyle Childress

“O LORD, you have searched me and known me,” says the writer of the 139th Psalm. “You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away... Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,’ even the darkness is not dark is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you” (Ps 139:1-2, 7-12).

Howard Thurman wrote of deep-sea divers descending into the ocean depths. First, he said, there is what’s called “the belt of the fishes” – a wide band of light reflected from the surface of the sea. Eventually the diver moves into depths that cannot be penetrated by light from above. It is dark, foreboding, and eerie. Thurman writes that the diver’s immediate reaction is apt to be fear and panic. But if the diver is calm and patient and keeps going, the fear passes, as he or she drops deeper and deeper into the abyss, slowly the diver’s eyes begin to pick up the luminous quality of the darkness. Fear dissipates as the diver sees with peculiar vision (see Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness*, Prologue).

“If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,’ even the darkness is not dark is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.”

This Psalm invites us to descend into both the light and darkness of our lives and discover God is there, and if we will not panic but patiently keep going into that darkness we will discover even the darkness is transformed. As Zora Neale Hurston put it, “They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God.”

This is one of the greatest Psalms. One I’ve read in numerous pastoral calls, standing by you as you are being prepared to go into surgery. In surgery, the Psalmist says God is with you. In the darkness, under anesthesia, the Living God is there. In the light of recovery, in the brightness of the sun shining on you, while you are being wheeled outside for the first time, and being helped into the car to go home, God is there. In the light of day and the darkness of night, God is with you.

But there is so much more. “O Lord, you have searched me and known me.” The word translated as searched me has the sense of digging down into, digging deeply. Nothing superficial. Nothing on the surface. God takes a shovel and digs down into the places of our lives we want buried and forgotten. God searches us – deeply and thoroughly, profoundly.

God knows whatever we are doing. When we sit down, when we get up. God knows all our ways. This is the God whose eye is on the sparrow. This is the God who counts the number of every hair on our head – which some of us make it easier for God to count than others of us.

I have visited several cemeteries around the country and in Europe in which there are graves dedicated to the unknown dead of the Civil War, or World War I, or World War II. No one knows exactly who is buried there. No one knows what birth date or death date to inscribe on the headstones. No one knows the names.

But One knows: the One who holds and beholds the unnoticed sacrifices and sufferings of our world. Across each gravestone are inscribed the words “Known by God.” “Known by God.”

How wonderful it is to be known by God.

But how fearful a thing – how fearful a thing to be searched and known by God.

I’ve been searched several times. Mostly going through airport security when they occasionally randomly pull someone aside and give them a more thorough searching. Several years ago, I was flying out of Tel Aviv. We were all told that it was the most security conscious airport in the world, and we needed to be prepared. Instead of arriving two hours early, we were told to arrive three hours early. While we stood in line, plainclothes security people walked up and down casually looking us over. A young security officer walked up to me, nonchalantly asking to see what I was reading and took the book and flipped through the pages stopping randomly to see what I had underlined. He looked through my backpack pulling every guidebook and anything and everything I had purchased inside Israel and especially anything had been given to me.

All baggage went through both an x-ray examination and a hand examination. My passport was examined in detail several times. After finally getting to our gate, I sat down, relieved to have made it thus far. In a few minutes another security officer came and asked for me by name to accompany him. Now, I was scared. I had done nothing wrong in any possible way, but I was beginning to doubt myself. I was escorted into a bare room where three officers gave me a much

more thorough searching than I had ever had before. Finally, I was escorted back to my gate and someone else's name was called.

I am discombobulated, I am rattled, I am shaken. I have been searched.

How fearful a thing to be searched and known by God.

I remember when I was a Baylor student, wrestling with whether God was calling me into the ministry. I went to Baylor to become a lawyer, and here in my second year, everything came to a screeching halt as I searched God, trying to know God's will. The truth is God was searching me. Every night I would walk the campus, walk across the intramural fields feeling as if God was searching me and knowing me. I prayed, I talked with God, I cried, and I walked. And each night I went back to my room feeling like I later felt in the Tel Aviv airport – shaken, discombobulated, rattled, as if my heart and mind and soul had been stretched out on a table and examined under spotlights and magnifying glass.

When Callie was eleven, she talked with Jane and me about being baptized. I thought she was too young until she described what was going on with her as, "God is all over me."

As a college student, I was struggling because God was all over me, and the Psalmist is describing to us what it is like to have God all over us. It is good and wonderful, exhilarating and it is scary, discombobulating, discomfoting.

The truth is, we do not want to be known through and through – by anybody. We want to maintain strict control over who knows what about us and how much they know and when they know it. Isn't this why marriage is so hard? You get married, and suddenly you can't get away from this person! They know everything

about you. It is often why people resent their parents? Because they know that sometimes their parents really do know them better than they know themselves, because they've watched us since we bounced on their knees, and that's too much knowledge.

We don't want anyone, even God, to know everything about us, no matter how much we say otherwise. That's part of the reason we killed Jesus. We couldn't stand the suffocating intimacy of our salvation.

"Come and see a man," the Samaritan woman said, "who told me everything I have ever done." And not too many other people would take her up on the offer. Jesus would look at a person and would stare into their soul, his eyes digging into them, excavating the deepest recesses of their being, seeing them through and through. And we can only take so much of that.

It is a fearful thing to be known by God. We do not want to be known, but this searching, all-knowing God won't leave us alone. This God will not go away. We tried to kill him, and even that wouldn't work. Jesus just came back and said, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age," and we wonder sometimes with the psalmist whether that is a promise or a threat. "Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?"

The psalmist continues: "If I flew to the top the clouds and mount up into the deepest recesses of space – You are there. You are there. You! If I descend into the lowest, darkest levels of hell – You. If I flew over the farthest ocean – You. If I go to my room and slam the door, You are already there."

O God, You, You, You. You know me and love me and search me, but You know too much, You see too much, You are in my life too much. You won't leave me alone! You are everywhere.

Give me a break. Give me space. God, what do you want? My soul? My life?

The Psalmist ends with, "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" (139:23-24).

That's what the Psalmist is saying. God search me and know me, but I know what you want. You want me. You want me on the path of your salvation. It is not simply that You, God, are with me. You want me to be with you. And you won't leave me alone until you have me.

Writer Anne Lamott was addicted to drugs and alcohol. But she felt that God was pursuing her and would not let go. She said it was as if Jesus was a kitten that she had given milk to and now would not leave her alone, following her everywhere, all the time, under her feet, sitting in the corner every night, all day, all night, every day, every night. She wrote.

When I went back to church, I was so hungover that I couldn't stand up for the songs.... The last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling—and it washed over me.

I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and ... walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God's own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said, "[Forget] it: I quit." I took a long deep breath and said out loud, "All right. You can come in."

"So this was my beautiful moment of conversion."

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.