

I don't know about you,  
but I am pretty good at being duplicitous.  
Why sometimes I even excel at it.  
I can be loving and hateful.  
I can be humble and haughty.  
At times I am generous  
and a moment later,  
quite greedy.

And the more I examine myself  
the more I see these Jekyll and Hyde contrasts  
in myself all the time.  
I am quick to offer sainthood to people I like  
and just as quick to vilify the people I don't.

We human creatures are fickle, and complex aren't?

And thinking about it,  
God is described this way too.  
Not so much that I believe God can be  
as double dealing as we can  
but more in the way that God is often contrasting and complex.  
God, at times, can seem contradictory too.  
We claim things about God that affirm,  
the Divine is both transcendent and immanent.  
God is both omnipotent  
and very personal.  
God is said to be the just judge and also gracious merciful.<sup>1</sup>  
Which makes me feel better  
about my own walking contrasts.

But I don't think this morning's psalm,  
Psalm 139 is about making me feel better  
or us feel better about our human contradictions,  
I think its purpose  
is to make us more *honest* about them.

And as faithful people,  
what is it that we will do with that honesty?

---

<sup>1</sup> Timothy Beach-Verhey, Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 1 (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 2008) pg.248

If there was a time  
when we desperately need  
a scriptural reminder  
to be honest before God and each other,  
it is now.

If there was a time  
when we need a scriptural reminder  
that we are complex creatures  
who hold the capacity for many contradictions;  
both love and hate,  
it is now.

If there was ever a time  
to quit pointing out the speck in a neighbor's eye  
and instead recognize the log in our own,  
it is now.

The lectionary would have us only read  
the comforting parts of this psalm,  
not the difficult.  
But it is the entire psalm,  
the difficult and ugly parts  
the beautiful and sublime;  
this psalm as a whole  
offers us the honesty we need.

Friends hear now, a word from the Lord:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.  
<sup>2</sup>You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
you discern my thoughts from far away.  
<sup>3</sup>You search out my path and my lying down,  
and are acquainted with all my ways.  
<sup>4</sup>Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord,  
you know it completely.  
<sup>5</sup>You hem me in,  
behind and before,  
and lay your hand upon me.

<sup>6</sup>Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;  
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

<sup>7</sup>Where can I go from your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?

<sup>8</sup>If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

<sup>9</sup>If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
<sup>10</sup>even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

<sup>11</sup>If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,  
and the light around me become night,"

<sup>12</sup>even the darkness is not dark to you;  
the night is as bright as the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.

<sup>13</sup>For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

<sup>14</sup>I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Wonderful are your works;  
that I know very well.

<sup>15</sup>My frame was not hidden from you,  
when I was being made in secret,  
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

<sup>16</sup>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.

<sup>17</sup>How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!  
How vast is the sum of them!

<sup>18</sup>I try to count them—they are more than the sand;  
I come to the end—I am still with you.

<sup>19</sup>O that you would kill the wicked,  
O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me—

<sup>20</sup>those who speak of you maliciously,  
and lift themselves up against you for evil!

<sup>21</sup>Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?  
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?

<sup>22</sup>I hate them with perfect hatred;  
I count them my enemies.

<sup>23</sup>Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my thoughts.

<sup>24</sup>See if there is any wicked way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.

So many of these verses

are written on our hearts, aren't they?

You have searched me God and have known me.

You knit me together in my mother's womb.

There is such warm intimacy

in being known and claimed by God.

For the Psalmist,

there is nothing the Creator does not know  
when it comes to the creature.

This God is one intimately tied to us,  
knowing when we sit down and do our work  
and we rise up in order to play.

This God is a guide and companion  
—searching out our paths  
and knowing our frame  
even as it is secretly put together.

There is no hiddenness  
when it comes to us and God.

*You hem me in, behind and before,*

this is a God who surrounds us.

In the joy of life and the sorrow.

The struggle and the victory.

This is God, who is big enough

to be the expanding energy of the cosmos  
and the tiny vibrations of a quark inside an atom.

The psalm tells,

God is acquainted with all our ways

—all that we might do.

All that we *might* do.

All. That. We. Do.

Hmm.

If I think about it that way,

the hesitation creeps in.

A God who knows you completely,

who knows your thoughts from far away,

your words before you speak them

—for some of us that knowledge is a contrast;

both a comfort

and a little scary.

We can admit that as God's people

this as much good news as it is,

as pastor, Timothy Beach-Verhey puts is,

“claustrophobic, [even] threatening.”<sup>2</sup>

I don't want to think about

God being acquainted with all my ways

when I'm having a heated argument

with my spouse.

But then again,

I do want to feel God's closeness

when I feel ashamed or overwhelmed

or when my feelings have been hurt.

This push and pull

of what might seem

like two different desires and wants,

this wanting God to be near

and at the same time

being overwhelmed by that nearness

is truthfully expressed in this prayer.

This is a psalm

as one commentator wrote,

is one that “comforts the afflicted

and afflicts the comfortable.”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. pg.250

<sup>3</sup> Dave Bland pg. 249

*<sup>7</sup>Where can I go from your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?*

Francis Thompson coined the phrase,  
the “Hound of Heaven,”  
and that seems to fit  
the tone of the psalm as well.<sup>4</sup>

This constant presence of God,  
something we can flee  
but never escape.

And just as soon as we are overwhelmed  
by thinking that there is no inch of creation  
where God is not;  
just as soon as the thoughts become too heavy  
that God is every bit reflected  
in all the goodness of creation;

*<sup>17</sup>How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!*

*How vast is the sum of them!*

*<sup>18</sup>I try to count them—they are more than the sand;*

just when all that is too much,  
the psalm beautifully affirms  
that we don’t have to take all that on alone.  
*I come to the end—I am still with you.*

Psalm 139 provides us  
with what we might call the “ethic of life.”  
This scripture guides us into an understanding  
not about just **our** lives  
but **all** lives.

The grace that is always found  
amid the unfairness of it all,  
is that God claims everyone.  
Even if we don’t ‘know’ God,  
God ‘knows’ us.

---

<sup>4</sup> Allen C. McSween Jr.

*<sup>16</sup>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.*

Can you imagine  
that God knows every person on the planet  
with that kind of intimacy?  
Every person that ever was!  
Every person that ever will be!  
You have searched me and known *me* God;  
you know all there is to know about us God,  
and haven't turned away,  
but draw us even closer  
into Your presence.

This is not a spying God,  
or a God that checks up on our behavior.  
I can't say that God has ever stopped me  
from climbing onto my soap box...

But it is God  
whose presence and proximity to our lives  
tells us something  
about how God views all lives.

In his book *Talking to Strangers*  
Malcom Gladwell points out  
how we complex creatures  
make decisions all day  
that hinge on a myriad of reasons  
that consciously we don't take into account.  
In essence, we don't have to give thought  
to the reasoning behind all our decision making.

The flip side of that is  
we mostly don't afford others  
that same complexity or flexibility  
for having certain reasons for making decisions.  
We know the reasons why  
we like this type of worship  
but don't take any time

to really examine the reasons  
for how and why someone else  
can like another type of worship.

We know the decisions  
that lead us to vote for our candidate  
but can't think of any reasons  
that would lead anyone else  
to vote for the other guy.  
See what I mean?

For all that this psalm confirms,  
for its beautiful poetry  
about how wonderfully and beautifully we are made,  
for all its affirmation  
of God's being with us and for us,  
we come to the end of the psalm  
where our honesty is most apparent and needed.

*O that you would slay the wicked... I hate them with perfect hatred.*

It is jarring, the end of this psalm.  
The words seem so out of place,  
So abrasive after such a beautiful prayer.

You won't find entirety of psalm 139  
on any painted wooden sign  
above a baby's crib;  
*do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord....  
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?  
I count them as my enemies*

If God knows everything about us,  
then God knows that within us  
is the capacity and proclivity  
to be every bit loving and hateful;  
to be generous and to be greedy;  
to want grace for ourselves  
and reserve punishment as appropriate for others.



Part of me wishes  
that this last bit of the psalm wasn't there.  
And the other part of me is relieved.  
Because it points to the reality  
that lives in all of us;  
a reality we were born with.

*Wonderful are your works that I know very well.*

This very human part of our createdness is,  
I think,

what makes us beautiful  
and wonderfully made.  
Those complexities and contradictions,  
those hypocrisies  
are the parts about us  
that we and God know very well.

This psalm teaches us to be honest  
with ourselves, God and others  
about all of areas of our lives;  
our shortcomings, our prejudices,  
our sins of omission and commission.

This psalm allows us to rejoice  
in being near and known by God  
and keeps us honest about ourselves  
so that we are not too self-righteous.

This psalm ends with a prayer,

*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.*

Maybe I would edit that line to,

*see **where** there is wicked in me  
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

This honesty comes as a reminder  
that God claims and knows all parts of us.  
This honesty comes as a reminder  
that God's claims belong to all of us.

Psalm 139 allows us to be fully known  
warts and wonders.  
These last lines of the psalm  
keep us honest before the God who surrounds us  
and therefore, honest with each other  
that we stand equally in places of goodness and sinfulness.  
And we still belong.  
Search our hearts oh God.

The beauty of this psalm is in its entirety,  
it affirms that every life has sanctity  
because it was knit and created by a loving hand.  
This whole psalm is an expression  
of the worth that God affords  
to the works of God's hands.<sup>5</sup>

And if we uphold that truth,  
then we must begin to afford others  
the complexity we reserve for ourselves.  
We must be generous with the grace  
we so desperately want and need.  
We must stop the rhetoric  
that allows us to demonize each other  
and instead fill our mouths with psalms that say,  
*Search my heart O God,  
see if there is any wicked way in me.*

This psalm could be the ethic of life.  
A psalm ethic that points us  
to the loving God of the universe,  
who searches our heart and knows our path?

---

<sup>5</sup> ibid

A psalm and ethic that declares God's intimacy  
is not reserved for a few  
but is poured out,  
spilling over,  
and emptied into all our lives,  
everywhere  
in each and every one of us.

A psalm and ethic  
that recognizes  
the need for honesty  
before God and another.

A psalm and ethic  
that provides  
affliction for the comfortable  
and comfort for the afflicted.

And friends,  
we aren't we both of those?