

Psalms as Living Prayers
“Awe & Wonder: The Mystery of Personhood”
Psalm 139
Message for August 21, 2022
Rev. Trish Eckert

Wow, this Psalm of gratitude, this song that articulates awe and wonder, is, upon a closer look, a multi-layered prayer that the psalmist lifts up to God. We hear of the deep-rooted and constant presence of God. The psalmist names the countless ways that God is within and without, above and below, and not just observing and guiding us from the outside, but truly woven into our interior lives – knowing us before we were even formed, knitting us together and weaving us in the depths of the earth. Certainly, there is much to be grateful for, to be amazed by, and we are awash in comfort, knowing that God is with us always.

And then, there’s sort of a realization for the psalmist as they sing, “...where can I flee from your presence?” We are not only held by God, but hemmed in. As we discussed this week in our Zoom worship groups, some folks began to feel claustrophobic and a bit panicky as they listened to these verses! There is nowhere to go, nowhere to hide – God sees all and knows all.

As the psalmist strives to put all of this into words, you sense the desire to understand, and to name the gift of this connection, of this relationship with the Divine. All that we’ve come to realize that God does for us becomes “too wonderful.” We can’t comprehend it, we cannot fully know it – God has weighty and vast thoughts that are beyond us.

And then, the final section of Psalm 139 – the verses that are never included in the lectionary: “O that you would kill the wicked...do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? ...do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.” The recognition and deep appreciation for this amazing connection, for the love washing over us, is quickly followed by passionate hatred. Essentially they are saying: *Anyone who is an enemy of God is my enemy too.*

What a complex and beautiful Psalm this is – it covers a gamut of emotions: love, wonder, gratitude, anxiety, anger, loyalty and protectiveness. It is no wonder that John Calvin describes the Psalms as “an anatomy of all parts of

the soul.” Through the Psalms we hear the range of human experience and expression. The Psalms tell us all about *us*.

Walter Brueggemann says that “Praying the Psalms depends on two things: what we find when we come to the Psalms that is already there and what we bring to the Psalms out of our own lives.” We hear such powerful and authentic language in these Psalms. I must admit I kind of laughed when I first read Psalm 139’s verses about killing and perfect hatred. Maybe it was nervous laughter? But truly, haven’t each and every one of us at one time or another prayed that an enemy of ours be dashed upon the rocks? Haven’t you wished that lightening would strike or that they were disappeared in some way? This is such a human response – immature, flawed, wrong-headed – but human.

The Psalms model for us a deeply authentic and raw communication with God. We are invited to bring a candid openness to our relationship with the divine, acknowledging the depths of our despair and the sheer gift of life. Brueggemann tells us that, “The work of prayer is to bring these two realities together – the boldness of the Psalm and the extremity of our experience, where they interact and illuminate one another.”

When you think about relationship, when you imagine a deeply rooted and intimate connection with another, what elements of relationship do you witness and experience? I think about the level of intimacy – do I feel safe and supported in being my true self? Saying what’s on my mind and heart? Voicing what I need? Making the effort to work through the tough stuff because I know that it’s worth it? That is what we witness in these prayers, these conversations, these interactions with the Creator.

Psalm 139 is considered a Psalm of gratitude. When I chose it for this week’s text, I experienced it as a comforting Psalm filled with appreciation and awe. Upon exploring it with others in worship this week and spending time with the text, I began to hear beyond the wonder and thanks, noticing that maybe the psalmist is wrestling with their faith. That, too, is a comfort – when we witness others who are wrestling, we are assured that we aren’t the only ones. We also see that God makes space for us and for our doubt, our questions, our worries.

We hear the psalmist noticing that God is *right there* – in every moment, in every place, in every thought – it’s a bit intense! There is a sense that they

are seeking to escape. I think we can all relate to that. Wishing we could hit the pause button so that God (and those around us) can't hear us at our worst, aren't aware of our deepest and most negative thoughts and feelings. What do we do to avoid revealing that to others or even to ourselves? So, it's in the final messy verses that we hear the psalmist reveal all and we see that the speaker is freed up to move along their faith journey: "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."

So yeah, having God in your back pocket might be intense sometimes, but would we really have it any other way? That presence enables each of us to tap into the God within us and to recognize the God in others. It's humbling. The Holy One is so huge, so wise, so vast – and yet God is with us. Amazing.

How does this prayer speak to you? What parts of this song are comforting to you and what causes discomfort? How might these words make sense to us in our time and in this place? How do we articulate our despair and celebrate the gift of life?