

Divinely Known
Psalm 139
June 10, 2007

A small-town prosecuting attorney called his first witness to the stand in a trial – a grandmotherly, elderly woman. He approached her and asked, “Mrs. Jones, do you know me?”

She responded, “Why, yes, I do know you, Mr. Williams. I’ve known you since you were a young boy. And frankly, you’ve been a big disappointment to me. You lie, you cheat on your wife, you manipulate people and talk about them behind their backs. You think you’re a rising big shot when you haven’t the brains to realize you never will amount to anything more than a two-bit paper pusher. Yes, I know you.”

The lawyer was stunned. Not knowing what else to do he pointed across the room and asked, “Mrs. Williams, do you know the defense attorney?”

She again replied, “Why, yes I do. I’ve known Mr. Bradley since he was a youngster, too. I used to baby-sit for his parents. And he, too, has been a real disappointment to me. He’s lazy, bigoted, he has a drinking problem. The man can’t build a normal relationship with anyone and his law practice is one of the shoddiest in the entire state. Yes, I know him.”

At this point, the judge rapped the courtroom to silence and called both counselors to the bench. In a very quiet voice, he said with menace, “If either of you asks her if she knows me, you’ll be jailed for contempt!”¹

These men were intimately known, more so than they desired. The beautiful Psalm 139 tells us, in a far less harsh way, that we, too, are intimately known by God. God is familiar with our thoughts, words, and actions. Nothing is hidden, not even the deepest depths of our minds or imaginations. Our full being is totally transparent before God. This intimacy with God is wondrous and glorious, yet at the same time it is unnerving and almost unbearable. There is no where we can go to escape this all-knowing divine presence. Even if we were banished to the underworld, God would still find us and know us. The idea of God knowing everyone and everything in the universe can be overwhelming.

God is pictured as a weaver, a potter, knitting and shaping each individual in the depths of the earth. God is an active participant in the ongoing formation of our lives. We are intimately known by God. The depth of this transparency is, as it was for the psalmist, oftentimes overpowering. It is a blessing to be known, understood, and loved by someone so deeply. However, it means that we cannot hide from God, we cannot lie about our faults and weaknesses. And yet, God continues to love us in spite of ourselves. God is also willing to reshape our fractured selves, to smooth out our rough edges, and to mend our cracks if we allow God to do so. God’s creative work in us is not finished, unless we put a stop to it. It is healing to expose our weaknesses before God, for there is always a safety net of grace underneath us. We may turn away from God, but God will never abandon us.

This assurance of God’s abiding presence with us is the message of the psalm. Although we may stray, God is always willing to welcome us back into the fold. God desires to be known by us. This of course, is the message of Jesus. God took up residence in the life and ministry, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ because God

yearns to be intimately involved in our lives. God became one of us so that we might be one with God.

One of the most beautiful expressions of God's presence with us is the Breastplate Prayer of St. Patrick. A portion of the prayer reads like this:

Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me,
Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.²

St. Patrick's prayer echoes the promises of scripture. Jesus says, "Lo, I am *with* you always" (Matt. 28:20). He says "The kingdom of heaven is *within* you" (Luke 17:21). God goes *before* the Israelites; the Spirit descends from *above*; we are rooted and grounded *in* Christ.

This morning my son is on a 20 mile hike with the Scouts preparing for their fifty mile backpack this summer. The hike is led by a trek leader, like Christ who goes before us. The tens of scouts walk beside one another, offering companionship for the journey, as does Christ for us. There is a trained medic on the hike to comfort those who have medical issues. At the end of the group there is a team called "the sweep." They are to pick up the rear and encourage any hikers who fall behind. It's a humbler task than the leader, but an important role to ensure the safety of the slower hikers and to make them feel included in the group. The leader, the sweep, and the hikers in between walk beside one another and all are encompassed in the activity.

This is the way it is with God as well. God fully embraces us. We are held, followed, guided, accompanied, and supervised by Christ. We can never stray from the presence of God. We can take comfort in the fact that wherever we are, we are held in the embrace of God. Whatever circumstances in which we find ourselves, God is never far away. Thanks be to God.

¹ *Homiletics*, Vol. 18, No. 1, p. 34.

² *The Hymnal 1982* of the Episcopal Church (New York: The Church Pension Fund, 1985). Quoted by Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, "The Encompassing Embrace," *Weavings*, March/April 2007, p. 8.

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