

First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan
Summer in the Psalms: Psalm 139, A Psalm of David
A Psalm of God's Love and Care
Sunday, August 23, 2020
Rev. Emily Campbell

Rev. Emily Campbell – Announcements and Opening Prayer

Welcome to First Presbyterian Church Plymouth! Today is Sunday, August 23rd, 2020. My name is Emily Campbell and I am very glad that—wherever you are today—you are joining us in this time of worship. We have a great service planned for today, and I am very grateful to Mark Hovermale who is here serving as our liturgist today. In addition, I would like to thank Susan Underhill for using her video skills in bringing this service all together.

But friends, my thanks today also extends to our very generous congregation and friends of this congregation. Within this past week, we have had two separate mission opportunities for you, and both of these mission opportunities were responded to with great generosity and support. Thank you to everyone who gave to our backpack drive that supports foster kids living in the Detroit area. I want to specifically thank Peggy Kmieciak for organizing this drive and for making sure those needed supplies go to our students in foster care. Thank you also for your strong support of our Second Mile Center in Detroit. You may remember that a fitness event was held on Saturday of this past week to support raising money to replace the center's parking lot, which also serves as their basketball court, gymnasium and safe gathering space, and that parking lot is literally crumbling to pieces. Thank you for giving to that fund so generously. If you still wish to financially contribute to either of these mission opportunities, you can send checks to our church office. On the memo line, just indicate Second Mile Center parking lot or Foster Care backpacks. Thank you again for your support.

Let us now turn our hearts toward God in praise, as we approach God in prayer. Would you all please pray with me. Gracious God, when we consider the heavens, the sun and the moon and the stars at night, we are reminded of your power, majesty and grace. When we pause and reflect on our natural world, the flowers, the trees, the creatures of every size and habitat, we are reminded of your imagination, creativity, and beauty. You are great beyond all telling, dear God, and we are honored to be your children. We praise you today for your amazing love and faithfulness; we praise you for your holy presence at work in our lives and in this world, even now. We pray your blessing today on our time of worship. May it strengthen us in faith as we lean into your holy presence. Guide us, by the power of your Holy Spirit, closer to you and closer to your will for each of our lives. Holy God we confess before you that we are quick to forget you. You are our light in this time of darkness, our hope in the midst of our despair, but we are frustrated and tired, Lord, by this ongoing pandemic. We long for a quick solution and we forget that you are truly everlasting in your love and care. Forgive us, dear God, our impatience and inconsistency. Focus our hearts and lives on your grace. Enter our hearts and our minds and our lives today. Help us to live in a way that reflects your beauty, sovereignty, and grace. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Rev. Campbell - Introduction to Sermon Theme

As we continue our series of "Summer in the Psalms", we are studying Psalm 139 today, which is a tremendous Psalm about God's love and care. Let's listen closely to Psalm 139 as Mark Hovermale begins by reading for us the first 12 verses of that Psalm.

Rev. Mark Hovermale - Reading of Scripture, Psalm 139

Our first scripture lesson today is from Psalm 139, verses 1 through 12 in the NRSV.

*1 O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.
3 You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.
4 Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely.
5 You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.
6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

7 Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?
8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
9 If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
10 even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.
11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,"
12 even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.*

Rev. Emily Campbell

Friends, for our second scripture lesson today we pick up in Psalm 139 right where Mark left off.

*13 For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.
14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.
15 My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
16 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.
17 How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!
18 I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.

19 O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me—
20 those who speak of you maliciously, and lift themselves up against you for evil!
21 Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?
22 I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.
23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.
24 See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Friends, Psalm 139 is one of those psalms that we should hold tightly to for our entire lives. Anytime you find yourself struggling, feeling that you are alone, turn to this Psalm. Anytime you think God does not know you or care about you or about the events in your life, return again to this Psalm. Anytime you think that the world is falling apart, and God is nowhere to be found, that is the time to cling to this Psalm. Psalm 139 is a gift of prayer given to us by King David. It's actually found within a series of eight psalms near the end of the book of Psalms. Within those psalms we see different themes and within this particular Psalm we are able to see God more clearly. This Psalm helps us to understand how God sees us more clearly.

Now today, by focusing on the main points found within this Psalm that all begin interestingly enough with the letter C, I hope that we are better able to see and remember God's love and care for us today.

Psalm 139 is first and foremost a Psalm of confidence. We can be confident that God knows us and is familiar with all our ways. We can also be confident of God's love and faithful care and that care is described for us so well in verses 5 and 6 of Psalm 139. There, these words are found: "You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me: it is so high I cannot attain it." Today we can be confident of the fact that we matter to God. It is He that made us and we are his.

Verse 14 says it is by God's design "that we are fearfully and wonderfully made." God cares to know about all of our days and these days were written in God's book before even one of them came into being. In verse 18, we are reminded that God thinks about us all the time. His thoughts about us "are more than the grains of sand" and at no point in our lives do we stop mattering to God. Truly, this is a Psalm of confidence regarding God's love and care for his children.

But friends, this Psalm is also a Psalm of deep comfort. In verse seven and eight of this Psalm, we are reminded that God is everywhere; there is nowhere we can go in this world where God is not with us. Years ago, I had the opportunity as a student at age 20 to travel to the far ends of the earth as part of a mission opportunity which came through my own church. I found myself living in Hong Kong for three months in the summer of 1990. And in that time I was able to go beyond Hong Kong, into mainland China, and spent also a weekend on an island of Hong Kong entitled Chung Chao Island. On that island, there are no cars or vehicles of any kind. It is completely quiet and peaceful. It is surrounded by cliff beaches on every side, and I had the opportunity there to engage in a silent retreat with God that lasted over three days. In those days, I recognized that I had never been farther from home in my life as I stared out at this vast ocean surrounding me on every side, so far away from my home in Pennsylvania. Yet I never felt closer to God!

Psalm 139 reminds us of this truth, that there is nowhere in the world we can go where God is not present. This comfort is amazing to us; it moves us. In the words of the psalmist. It says, "If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand will lead me, and your right hand will hold me fast." This comfort extends not only to our experiences of travel throughout the world but, perhaps more importantly, this comfort also extends into our every experience of darkness. Even in our darkest days the psalmist reminds us the dark "is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you."

Friends, there's no question today that we are living in a time of intense darkness. I was reminded of this fact this week through Facebook. Just this week, I received two Facebook messages. One from a friend and member of our congregation said that they were suffering from disappointment fatigue as yet another event in their lives was canceled. I think many of us can relate to that as we continue to walk through this pandemic, that we have Covid disappointment fatigue. On the other hand, the other message I received on Facebook took a more humorous approach to this time of darkness. This post actually came from one of my siblings who said, "If 2020 were a drink, what type of drink would it be?" And the answer is that it would be a colonoscopy prep drink because this time is a time of suffering for us. It's a time where we are at a loss of control. Friends, within this time of darkness we recognize that, at this time, we struggle to see the light and as we move closer into the fall months we recognize the physical darkness grows around us as seasons begin to change. We recognize the threat of illness grows around us as we enter into flu season and we recognize that divisions continue to grow around us as we inch closer to a political election. In all of this darkness, we need God.

Psalm 139 comes to us at just the right time, as it reminds us that God is our light that shines in our every experience of darkness. We will get through this present darkness because of the light found in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the light foretold throughout scripture that shines in the darkness. The light that the darkness has never overcome in the face of death; he is our resurrection hope in the middle of the storm. He is our peace and, in the middle of our distress, He is the hope that we cling to. Christ is that hope of light and peace, and we cling to that hope now.

But this Psalm of comfort is also a Psalm of concern. If you, or someone you know, are hoping to outrun God, this Psalm reminds us that that is never going to happen. There's no place you can go in this world where God is not with you. There is no experience you can go through where God is not present and thank God for that truth as we walk through this time of darkness.

Finally, friends, there is one last “C” from this Psalm I want to share with you. It's an important “C,” because it may not seem it at first, but if you read this Psalm all the way through to its end, you realize by the end that this Psalm is, at its heart, a prayer of confession. If you need evidence of that truth, I invite you to turn your attention to Psalm 139 beginning at verse 19. This is where I need to make a confession to you. When we read this Psalm to you earlier in the service we skipped over four important verses. The reason why we skipped over these verses is it seems that they do not fit with the themes of the rest of the Psalm. They are distressing to us after hearing all these words of God's confident love and care and of God's comfort. We are left with these words found beginning at verse 19. There, it says:

*“O that you would kill the wicked, O God and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me— those who speak of you maliciously and lift themselves up against you for evil!
Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.”*

Then as I read to you, I skipped to verse 23. The end of the Psalm says:

*“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.”*

Friends, I confess to you my skipping of these words now. But this Psalm, as a whole, is a prayer of confession and the confession is this: at times, even when we're focused on God and even when we're focused on God's attributes of love and care and comfort, it's easy for us when we recognize that God cares for us and God is powerful, we quickly turn the tables and we ask God to do our bidding. Get rid of my problems, O God! Take care of my enemies! Wipe them out so I will not have to deal with this problem again. We are quick to tell God what we would like God to do instead of patiently listening and waiting and trusting that God is at work. And in God's time and in God's way, God will speak to us about what God would like us to do. Our focus is very often on *our* solution rather than God's solution, and in this Psalm, David has reached his end with his enemies. He is fed up. He wants God simply to deal with the situation and, even though the enemies are not clearly defined, what we do see is David thanks this cause is God's cause. He says, “Do I not hate those who hate you? Do I not loathe those who rise up against you?” David suggests that his problems are God's problems, so God should intervene.

God, as we heard clearly in the beginning of this Psalm, knows every day of our lives. God knows our problems. God has a solution. We simply need to trust God, trust God's timing, trust God's faithfulness, trust God's care and comfort, as we walk through this present time of darkness, assured that God will never let us go. Friends, when we find ourselves telling God what to do, let us turn to this Psalm of Confession, and let us pray with the psalmist:

*“Search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked or harmful way in me.
And lead me today and forever in the way that is everlasting”*

Amen, and thanks be to God for the gift of this Psalm.

Rev. Mark Hovermale - Prayers of the People and Benediction and Blessing

Let us pray. Lord, as we come before you today, we are indeed in awe, grateful for the fact that there is nowhere we can go where you will not find us. You are indeed all-knowing and all-powerful. You know us intimately and we cannot hide from your presence. With humility and gratefulness, we bring you these prayer requests this morning.

We pray for all those who are hurting today. We think of those who've lost family members and friends during this pandemic and, well, they're not able to grieve in the way they would normally. We pray a special blessing of comfort on them today. We pray for our frontline workers, in the medical fields, as well as the other fields, who are serving our communities so well. We pray a special blessing on them as well as their families. We lift up those who have lost jobs and security

during these troubling times. We pray for help and peace to come their way through you, Lord. We think of all the ministry centers and the mission organizations that are serving you during these times. We pray for our Thrift Shop, for ministries like Second Mile Center and the Hope Clinic, along with our national and international partnerships. We pray for them all to be strengthened and to serve their local communities well and share the hope of Jesus Christ.

Lord, we know our country is as divided as it has ever been since the Civil War. Anger, politics, and harsh words are thrown around as if they are not damaging and hurtful. We see the injustice in our world, and racism and classism. We see how angry everyone seems to be. Compromise and listening seems to be a lost art in our country today. We must admit we feel overwhelmed and almost hopeless, wondering what we can do.

Yet, as we learned today you have searched us, you know us. You are all-knowing. We pray for your peace to come across this country in a way that we never have seen before. We pray that change in all these things will begin and begin in us. Give us the wisdom to be that change in light for You in this darkened world.

We pray this all in the name of your son Jesus Christ who taught us to pray, saying:

Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

May we go forward from this place knowing that, Lord, you know us, and you love us.

May the blessing of God, the Father, and his son Jesus Christ, be with you and yours, today and forever more. Amen.