

**“Grounding our Being”**  
**Psalm 139**  
**Rev. Andrew Connors**  
**September 4, 2022**  
**Proper 18**

“Reading the morning newspaper is the realist's morning prayer,” the German philosopher Hegel wrote. “One orients one's attitude toward the world either by God or by what the world is. The former [that is, God] gives as much security as the latter, in that one knows how one stands.” Hegel was reflecting on the change that he observed in his time in the early 19th century - that people once awoke to say their prayers but now awakened to read their newspapers. In our time, biblical scholar Jason Byasse, observes, we awaken to check our social media feeds. “We go from awaking with God,” he writes. “To awaking with the dismal litany of the news to awaking reading others’ narcissistic self-obsession and adding our own.”<sup>1</sup>

What if we awakened instead to the message of this psalm? Awakened to the psalmist’s observation that God knows so much more than we can comprehend. And that we know this about God not from Hegel’s dialectic or any other philosophical reflection, but because of my experience of God, or rather, God’s experience of me. The God who has searched me and known me. The God who knows whether I sit or rise. The God who knows what I’m thinking and feeling before I ever speak it.

For some, God’s intimate knowledge of their person is not automatically comforting. I recall a conversation with a gay friend many years ago who shared with me that, as a child, this psalm’s conviction that God knew everything about her - that nothing could be hidden from God, was cause for great fear. Indeed the psalmist seems as concerned as my friend was in her childhood in certain points of this poem where God “hems” in the psalmist which sounds as malevolent as it does compassionate. Just ask Jonah, or anyone else who has tried to run from God. There is nowhere I can go where God is not already there, says the Psalmist. God is even in Sheol - the hell that is defined precisely as the place where God is not. To confess that there is nowhere I can go where God is not already there is only comforting if you’re arrogant enough to believe that you are as innocent as God, or if you know that God is not out to get you.

Toward the end of this psalm it seems as though the speaker is in the earlier, arrogant camp. “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me.” Indeed Deitrich Bonhoeffer the great German martyr, counseled Christians only to read a psalm like this one as if it was being spoken by Jesus himself.<sup>2</sup> But the psalmist’s testing language only shows up

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<sup>1</sup> Jason Byassee, *Psalms 101-150: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press), 2018, 199.

<sup>2</sup> Byasse, 194.

after the poet has already acknowledged that the source of their own comfort is not their own purity, but the knowledge that God knows all the parts of us that are less than perfect - the parts that are yet unformed, still needing to be brought to life.

“My frame was not hidden from you,” the psalmist says, “when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. “Your eyes beheld my unformed substance,” my “golem” in the Hebrew. Golem probably rings a bell to the Lord of the Rings fans among us. In J.R.R. Tolkien’s trilogy, gollum was once a Hobbit whose original self was twisted by the evil of the ring. But in Hebrew mythology, the golem was a creature created by a person - formed of clay - of the earth - and given life through magic.<sup>3</sup> Here the psalmist evokes the golem to make the point that even our less than fully realized self - our unformed self - is fully known by God. God knows us before we’re fully shaped into the people God desires us to become. And rather than abandon or condemn us, God is there to search and know and guide.

If this is true - that we cannot flee from God because there is nowhere where God is not. And we need not fear God because God doesn’t meet misshapen or unformed people with condemnation but rather with grace that can transform us, then it means that the best direction to flee is not away from God but toward her. Our beginning was with God. Our ending will be there as well.

Our ending has been on my mind recently because of so much in the way of loss that we have experienced and continue to experience as a community. It has felt to me that we have experienced more death and illness in the last couple of years than in my last eighteen years here combined, and the world’s macro numbers seem to confirm that. Life expectancy has fallen for everyone in the US largely because of pandemic deaths - we have all experienced more death than we are accustomed to experiencing and this is frightening for many us. Sometimes I think it is at the root of the elevated anxiety that we carry around like weights on our shoulders.

“Most of us do not have any basic anxiety about our prebirth nonbeing,” observes Old Testament scholar Patrick Miller, “but we tend to have that about our postdeath nonbeing. The psalmist, however, calls us to look at both states in the same way.”<sup>4</sup> God knew us before we were fully formed. God will know us after we are no longer alive. None of us is guaranteed any sort of longevity in this world. All of us have been gifted with the blessing of this day.

The real cause for anxiety, then, is not what will happen to me when I die. It’s rather am I living the life that God invites me to live right now. A life of meaning and purpose, filled with love and grace, that I am invited to extend into the neighborhood in order that others might experience the same, the basis for God’s justice for everyone.

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<sup>3</sup> Byasse notes the connection with Lord of the Rings. For more information on the “golem” of later Jewish mythology, see the Jewish Museum of Berlin, <https://www.jmberlin.de/en/topic-golem#:~:text=A%20golem%20is%20a%20creature.of%20an%20imperial%20Jewish%20community>. Or wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golem>

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 1986, 149.

Which means that the real faith question for me is not whether or not God is good, or real, or powerful, or just - all the philosophical questions that have been important to me and others through the years, but rather, am I living right now in the way I'm supposed to live? And by "supposed to live," I don't mean any kind of dour obligation to fulfill God's weighty expectations but rather God's invitation to live an abundant life that offers the fullness of grace, the full experience of love and mercy, and joy and goodness which is the genesis of my very being.

If you're living that life right now, then bravo, good for you. It's been my experience that many people are still waiting to live it. Waiting for some external event or change that in their mind will make it possible for them to finally discover the life they dream of having. I think the psalmist wants you to live that life today.

I've heard that the great Christian mystic Howard Thurman, started each day with this psalm. It was the way that he grounded himself in the reality that the invitation to live in the presence of God is an invitation to live right now - every moment - as if you were communing with God. Thurman seemed to conclude that in order to live like that you needed to start your day with this kind of grounding in awe of the miracle of yourself. The theologian Karl Barth emphasized that preaching, like the spiritual life, in general, was about taking the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other. When I first learned that story years ago I took from it how important it is that faith addresses what's actually going on in the world.

But I've noticed that so many of us - including me - have no trouble keeping up with what's going on in the world. We've followed the tragic shooting and death of the Mervo high school student over the weekend. We've watched our Constitutional crisis continue to unfold. We know about the terrible floods in Pakistan fueled by our love of fossil fuels. Few among us have trouble reading the newspaper. Most of us are keeping up with two or three different ones each day.

The trouble that most of us are having is grounding ourselves in something other than the really bad news that continues to pound away on us each day, chipping away at our sense of hope not just in the future, but in our fellow citizens, forming us into people who are driven too much by fear and not enough by courage and light and possibility - all the ingredients that are needed by peoples who want to take the bad news and transform as much of it as possible into something better.

The psalmist saw evidence of that transformative potential in the mystery of his own life - fearfully and wonderfully made. Shaped by a God whose knowledge of us is astounding and cause for awe and reverence. Reverence for the miracle that it is that we rise each day with a heart that beats every moment while we are alive and awe for the God whose creative generosity is written into our DNA.

Next week is the start of our church year. Like so many of you I hope that everyone who is able to come will come back. But what I'm looking forward to the most is what I look forward to every Sunday - a word that grounds me in the truth that life is

good, that I am a miracle; a table that reminds me that there is enough to go around, that sweet taste of bread and the bitter cup of suffering is meant to be shared not shouldered alone; music and art that reminds me that we are born to create not destroy; and a community to be a visible sign to me that there are others who hope as I do, others who weep over the world as I do, others who want to be there for me just as I want to be there for them. I try to start out my day with these reminders, but fail often. But Sunday I can always count on - the doors will be open, a word of grace will be spoken challenging me to claim my birthright as a child of God, and to return to the psalmist's base observation that life is a gift, an ongoing mystery of grace unfolding in front of us.