

July 17, 2016      “In The Footsteps of God”      Psalm 139

Even on the hottest, most humid days of the past week, the ritual would unfold. Barbara's first line in the unfolding ritual is “Well, if we are going to have supper, I have got to get up and go into the kitchen and start things.” I remain seated as she makes her way to the kitchen, the fridge, works up the tossed salad, lays out the vegies (which means she gets them ready to steam, or slices them if they are to be eaten raw and dipped, or she gets them ready...a number of different ways by the way, if I am to do them on the BBQ along with the meat of the day.

The second stanza in this poetic routine goes like this. “It's time to start the BBQ. And at sometime that will be followed (one day it will be immediately, on another it could come 15 minutes later as I do my thing over the propane heated grills) “Give me two minutes warning so I can take the broccoli, or the beans, or the asparagus, or whatever off the stove.” When the BBQ is chugging along full throttle, and the timing has been figured out, I sit. I face the machine about 8 feet away from it. If I have been good on this day I might even have a glass of wine in my hand. As the food cooks we watch what is happening at the bird feeder, or beyond the fence if we are at the farmhouse, or the clouds that sail by with the background of a beautifully blue sky.

Periodically I rise and check what is happening under the hood of what I call the machine. When the temperatures are right...meaning the meat is done....and hopefully the vegies on the grill have co-operated, or I guessed right, and they are ready as well. I make the magic announcement. “Two minutes.” There is a little scurrying here where we almost lose track of one another's movements. And then supper is on the table. We seat ourselves. We

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ask, and then we demand that the dogs go and lay down. We say grace, a prayer....and the meal begins. When it is done we rise to our feet. There are divided responsibilities. Barbara puts food away. I clear the debris, and the used dishes (I would never call them dirty). And then I feed George. George is an old dish washer. When he has everything he can hold, I wheel it across the kitchen floor, attach him to the faucet...this is at the farmhouse of course. The wash routine begins, the dogs get fed and then once again we sit.

What in heaven's name does all this have to do with sermon time, Psalm 139, and the theme of prayer? Precisely this: Psalm 139 verses 1 & 2... "O Lord, YOU have known me and searched me and YOU know me. YOU know when I sit, and when I rise; YOU know my thoughts from afar." So often we think of the way of faith, of discipleship, as a searching for God. And we need to grasp this truth as we consider prayer and praying. HE's not lost. We often are. But HE is not lost. And HE knows us. HE knows everything about us, and everything we have done. The woman at the well ran to tell her friends and neighbours about Jesus. Remember what she said? Come and meet a man who knew everything I had done! We are not tracking or searching for God. We are walking with HIM or rather HE is with us. He knows us. The only ones who think we have kept secrets from HIM is us. HE is right here...all the time and everywhere.

"HE knows when we sit, and when we rise." It is not just that HE, the Lord, our Redeemer knows what we are doing. It is far more profound and personal than that. When we sit, when we rise. In other words there are no moments or activities in our day's routine, or our breaking of the routine when things are so inconsequential that the Lord Almighty does not know us. HE has all the facts. HE

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knows all the details. “He perceives my thoughts. HE discerns my going out and my lying down....Before a word is on my tongue, (HE) knows it completely.” HE is Lord.

Hear me now, because this is really important. This is not said by me or the writer of Psalm 139 to scare us. The very opposite is true. What the Psalm writer is telling us is that God cares. Cares about you. This morning. This evening. All the time. It is meant as a word of encouragement to those who pursue faith and faithfulness. It is a word that should be encouragement to us to enter into the relationship as fully as we can, and therefore it is an encouragement to pray. Jesus encouraged HIS disciples to pray. To ask. To talk to the Father as HE did. But there are some real insights here about the prayer relationship.

With our eyes wide open, the Scripture tells us, and we should remember this when we pray...God knows us. So among other things it obviously is not smart to try and convince HIM things are otherwise than they are. We need to be honest. God knows more about our weaknesses than we do. That is a fact. He made us. There is nothing He does not know about our mortal frame or our frame of mind. We need to be honest about who we are and what we are. In other words prayer is not the place or the time to deny the truth, or to try and hide the facts.

Verse 11...”Surely the darkness will hide me....even the darkness will not be dark to you.” Verse 15... “When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body.”

No place to hide. No time for secrets. What does that mean for what we should say as we enter into the relationship of prayer? Child of

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God addressing the Almighty? Surely for one thing it means that we need to be open about our doubts. We need to be willing to let our questions come out in the midst of our prayer time. We need to be willing to admit our faith, like our physical strength has limits. And if you think I am saying this to you or about you alone, you are wrong. Dr. Mitchell does not have all the answers and has not figured everything out. Our humanity means we have doubts. We have fears too in all honesty. We may say things about what we believe and subscribe to codes of doctrine...I certainly do and have publicly. But I would be kidding you and myself if I thought I was really committed to faith unlimited. In fact such a position is the essence of heresy. He who says he has faith unlimited, is saying that when it comes to faith, he does not need (the operative words are he does not need)...God. I do. We do. People do. Especially in this area we call "faith."

There is a matter related to this that we need to understand a little bit better than we do. The writer of Psalm 139 says some things that are contradictory. Verse 17... "How precious to me are your thoughts, O God." and then in verse 19 he says, "If only you would slay the wicked O Lord." And in verse 21, he is stating his conviction in the form of a question to which he expects God to say, "Yes". His question is, "Do I not hate those who hate you O Lord, and abhor those who rise up against you?" When I say those statements are contradictory, do not misunderstand. I am not trying to say I am smarter, brighter, or stronger than the Scripture. But the commandments of God call upon us to love those who are classified as enemies. So what is happening here in the Psalm?

Frankly, I think the writer is wrestling with God over things that take him, circumstances that take him very close to the

limits of what he is willing to accept. And did not Jacob wrestle with God? There is a significant Old Testament theme here. And at least in part it is this: Be not afraid in prayer, to wrestle with God. Wrestling (I am not talking about the WWF variety that can be seen on television weekly like a soap opera of sorts. But wrestling is an ancient sport. It is extremely physical in nature. And part of what I see happening in Psalm 139 is that example being set...to be willing to be so honest with God in prayer, that He might even have to show us we are wrong, or wrong headed, or that our hearts are in the wrong place.

Surely the Psalm writer is urging us to remind God of what we understand His promises to be in circumstances that are causing us to feel we are on trial. Yes it is important to confess our weaknesses. To recognize our sinfulness. But there is also a strain of what we find here which invites us to be persistent with God when we pray. To put our case strongly. In a word...to argue with God, to debate. Remember this too. If you are going to enter into a contest with the Lord, to argue, to debate.... you should also be prepared to lose. To be shown the error of your way, your thinking. If it is a matter of debate we need to recognize we may lose it. But, losing the debate is not the same as losing your soul. In fact it may be the essence of spiritual growth, new vision, deeper and more profound faith.

Surely that is the reason this Psalm ends with the words which are verses 23 and 24..."Search me O God, and know my heart. Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way of life everlasting." When the Psalm writer prays he clearly lets it all hang out. And his goal is that in the process of prayer, that he might be brought by the

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Lord's Spirit in the Lord's way, closer to the Lord than he has been. He wants to find the path in this world. He wants it to be God's chosen path for him. He wants to be led in the way everlasting.

Listen to those last 2 verses in the KJV. "Search me O God and know my heart: try me and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." May it be so for all of us. Let us pray....

Heavenly Father;

There are moments when life takes us places such that we lose our cool. We get hurt. We get frustrated. We get angry. We say things we should not say and do things we should not do. Help us even in such experiences to come to you in prayer. Help us to put where we are at, into words. Help us never to be afraid to talk to YOU frankly and honestly. Lord, we know YOU care for us, beyond what we understand or think we know. Sand off the rough spots. Help us to see what we have missed. Make us over in the image of Jesus, that we might serve you and those around us to your glory. Amen

