***“Acquainted With All My Ways”***

*a sermon delivered by the Reverend Scott Dalgarno on June 2, 2024*

*based on Psalm 139:1-12; 23-24*

The Biblical interpreter, Sam Wells, argues that the upshot of today’s Psalm amounts to a 5 word text message to us from God: “There’s no escaping my love.” Wells asks us to think about what it might mean to be a child, hearing those words from your mom.

*It could be suffocating and oppressive – not to mention embarrassing and unsettling – to be on the receiving end of more love than you had any idea how to deal with? Or would it rather be glorious and releasing, freeing and empowering, to know that however much you might feel a fool, a failure, a freak or a fraud, this woman with the forgiving eyes and the warm embrace would always adore you? Or could it be somewhere in-between?”*

The author of Psalm 139 finds him or herself poised between a suffocating embrace and empowering affection. A very mixed bag. I mean, think about it.

I would bet at some time in your life, you’ve had a dream, maybe a recurring dream, where you’re running away from some mysterious pursuer and, at the point when you’re about to be caught, you suddenly wake in a sweat, trying to recall what it was that was chasing you and why you were so desperate to get away.

Psalm 139 is as intense and sweaty as that dream. It turns out that what was chasing you – what was searching you out – was God. And why were you so desperate to run away... well, that’s what the psalm leaves you asking.

Has anyone ever had the temerity to say to you, “I know you.” Maybe a sister or a brother. Maybe in the raised voice at the end of an argument, or maybe in a reassuring answer to a confession you’ve made in a moment of vulnerability when you doubted yourself.

You may hear words of reproach and bitterness as someone names a history of deception and broken promises or manipulation that says, “I know you, and I’m never going to trust you again.”

Or they may be words of gentleness and joy, of feeling understood and appreciated and comprehended and loved, for all one’s clumsiness and blunders and follies – words that are spoken with tender eyes, “I know you.”

I once watched a documentary on the life of Johnny Cash. He said the single most important event in his life was the untimely death of his teenage older brother, Jack.

Johnny Cash said that at every turn in his life afterward, Jack was there to counsel him and smile on him. And when he’d do that, when he’d visit Johnny from the beyond, he’d say to Johnny, “I know you.”

Whether Johnny’s life was in an upward trajectory or a downward spiral, his brother’s words were the same. “I know you.” And they mattered.

That’s what God, in Psalm 139 says to each one of us: “I know you, and I know you in four dimensions.”

First, depth. “O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.”

God knows me so well that God anticipates when I’m going to sit down, when I’m going to wake up, whether I will have oatmeal or a blueberry smoothie for breakfast, and which route I’m going to take to the beach.

We all want people to think we’re beautiful, clever, wonderful. But how about being studied so minutely? “We may be enormously touched – or we may be a kind of creeped-out at the same time.

The psalm says, “You hem me in, behind and before; you lay your hand upon me.” It’s affirming and intimidating at the same time.

Then there’s the dimension of height. “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me.”

One of our most instinctive reactions when we’re scared of what people know about us is simply to run away.

I think of Ghislaine (“Gil-laine”) Maxwell, the associate of Jeffrey Epstein who befriended and groomed very young girls for Epstein’s lucrative under-age sex ring. She got a 20 year sentence for that, eventually. But, you know, when he was arrested, she fled. She had three passports, moved all over the place, switched her primary phone number; switched her email address, drew money out of fifteen different bank accounts, ordered packages for delivery under multiple names, and, I love this one, wrapped her smart phone in tin foil in an effort to avoid being located. Running from the feds is darn hard work, I guess.

Okay, now imagine the energy necessary to live the life of our former president. Put yourself in his spendy shoes. You have to go to the trouble of making up lies every day to justify (or deny) your appalling behavior; you have to use people to cover up those lies by shelling out money in the dark to protect your secret sex life.

Then you have to spread more lies when your minions inevitably turn on you because they go to prison for it, not you. Then you have to double down again on those lies when your lies and shady dealings become a matter of public record in a court of law. How exhausting.

Well, in most of our lives there comes some period of time, usually when we are young, when we court the darkness. It’s a time when we may hide our failures or indiscretions, become desperate to hold everything together and do our best to paint a picture of ourselves to others that we are on top of things. In the midst of that, we habitually forget one thing: the truth at the murky bottom of Psalm 139 – that God already *knows* the truth of who we are.

Now, a third dimension of God’s knowing takes this even further. “If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there, as well.” God’s presence isn’t limited to this life, this earth, this existence.

If we die, as the psalmist says, if we go into perpetual darkness, if we go into dazzling light, if we are buried in the earth – wherever we are, in whatever form we come to be, there God is, as well.

It’s precisely what people often say who have near-death experiences. They find themselves suddenly awash in a bath of pure love; they get a sense of being held in everlasting arms, and it makes everything, even dying, all-right.

But that’s not all. There’s yet a fourth dimension, not about space, but about time. And these are perhaps the most precious and mysterious words of all. “For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

God knew me before there was a “me” to know. God knew the number of days of my life long ago, as if they were words and sentences in a book.

God made me as delicately as a plastic surgeon makes stitches. Again, we have this poignant mixture of fear and wonder: I am “fearfully and wonderfully made” the Psalmist says. God cares about all the tiny particulars of my existence; God knows me better than I know myself.

Listen again to the fear and wonder in these words: “There’s no escaping my love.” We were with God, all along. And God will be with us to the end of all things and beyond.

Who knows you? Who *really* knows who you are? Have you ever let another human being see into your soul?

One summer about 90 years ago in a small Alabama town, a scrappy tomboy named Nelle met her new neighbor, Tru, a bookish, dapper dresser with a high-pitched voice and a mischievous streak. Thus began the friendship of two of the greatest writers the American South ever produced. What a coincidence that Nelle Harper Lee and Truman Capote were neighbors and childhood best friends. Capote spent summers at his aunt’s house on the same street as Nell’s father’s house.

They made an unlikely pair. As I said, she was a Tom Boy. He was very effeminate. And they made a bond. Neither of them fit-in especially well in a small Southern community. Nelle was too rough for the girls, and Truman was scared of the boys, so he just tagged on to her and she was his protector.

They shared “a common anguish,” said Nelle. They both had distant mothers; mothers who never said, or thought to say to them, “There’s no escaping my love.”

To entertain themselves, they started writing their own stories on Nelle’s father’s Underwood typewriter, taking turns as one of them narrated while the other typed.

Nelle drew on their friendship when she created the characters Scout and Dill in “To Kill a Mockingbird.” Capote based the brash, sharp-tongued tomboy, Idabel Thompkins, in his debut novel, “Other Voices, Other Rooms,” on Nelle. As adults, they worked together on Capote’s true crime book, “In Cold Blood,” then drifted apart after Capote failed to credit her properly.

He wanted desperately to be a celebrity and that book gave it to him in spades. Nelle’s immense success, winning the Pulitzer Prize, scared her terribly and drove her eventually back to tiny Monroeville, Alabama and a reclusive life she was more comfortable with.

Truman’s drive to forget his Alabama beginnings and instead be a Manhattan socialite cut him off from the one person who knew him at his core; who loved him for who he really was. There was an essential loneliness about Truman Capote that stayed with him until he died at 59. How incredibly sad.

The psalm started with the words, “You have searched me and known me.”

That is echoed at the end when the psalmist goes off the rails for a few verses, spewing self-righteous anger, but then he catches himself and, humbled, collapses in complete contrition: “Search me ... and know my heart O God and see if there be any wicked way in me,” the psalmist says.

I wonder if that sounds quaint to you. Let me note that we are no longer living in a time when our leaders catch themselves, or humble themselves anymore. Nor find that the least bit necessary, the moral bar being so low.

On Friday Journalist, Jonathan Capehart and David Brooks met as they do most weeks on Public Broadcasting Service’s evening “News Hour.”

They discussed the week’s news. The New York verdict was, of course, the top story. I was especially struck by something David Brooks said: “In the before times … “ (he was speaking of the times before Donald Trump when moral rectitude was required to be president).

He said that in that former time, “*I worked for the National Review, The Wall Street Journal Editorial page, The Weekly Standard*, a lot of conservative places, and there were pillars of conservatism [we all operated under]. The first is moral character, [the belief] that character is destiny; that if private virtue falls apart, the public order collapses.

“We shouldn’t forget,” he said, “that this case was about a former president paying hush money to a porn star.”

“Search me and know me, O God, and see if there be any wicked way in me.” Maybe that’s quaint, but has there been a time in any of our lives when we have fallen further away from that holy benchmark?

I can hardly believe I’m saying this, but, you know, I long for a time when people will embrace a sense of shame again. Let’s bring that back again – at the very least, can’t we agree that lying, especially habitual lying, is just wrong?

Look at the reaction of all of our former president’s minions in government to the verdict rendered by 12 civic-minded human beings in New York who did their duty, looking at the evidence and rendering their verdict, as you or I would. I fear for us. I fear for our country.

“[The first pillar of conservatism] is moral character, [the belief] that character is destiny; that if private virtue should fall apart, the public order will inevitably collapse.”

God help us all.

Amen