



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

July 20 2008

Proper 11A by The Rev. Donna Barr

In our service today we have read four different scriptures.....The Old Testament from the book of GenesisThe New Testament from Paul's letter to the Romans.....The Gospel from Matthew and Psalm 139. On Sunday's it is common to hear sermons from the Gospel but other times the preacher might use the text from the Old or New Testament. So today..... I'm veering off to look at our Psalm.

I have a particular love for this beautiful book of songs and poetry and especially the 139th psalm we read today. This is the Psalm I picked to read at my beloved mother's funeral. The Psalms are a constant companion to me as I visit those who are sick, lonely, and discouraged; those dear friends of mine who find themselves shut away from the world in their homes, nursing facilities and hospitals.

It is a familiar request by my friends that we read the Psalms together. Peter Gomes, minister at Harvard's Memorial Church was interviewed on public television, as to why people need the Psalms. He said that when people come to him for advice on how to begin reading the Scriptures, he recommends starting with the Psalms. Just open the Psalms to any page and begin reading. Sooner or later you will find something that speaks to your situation that seems to be speaking directly to you.

This emotional connection, this ability to address people in all conditions of life, is what has made the Psalms the core of daily worship for both Jews and Christians for thousands of years. The Psalms have also become known as literature to people of many faiths and cultures. Because they reflect on the human condition in such an uncompromising fashion they are also treasured by people who are not particularly religious or at ease with conventional prayer.

Kathleen Norris, in her commentary on the Psalms, writes, "The God one encounters in the Psalms is God as human beings have experienced him - as both awake and asleep, gloriously present and disappointingly absent and above all, various. Psalmist pictures of warriors who stands up for us, a mother who holds us to her breast, an eagle sheltering us under her wing, and a creator who brings forth lightning, wind, and rain from the storehouses of heaven." As the British Benedictine Sebastian Moore has said, "God behaves in the Psalms in ways he is not allowed to behave in systematic theology," and this liberates us from any narrowness of spirit.

The Psalms, then, work in the way all great poetry works, allowing us to enter no matter whom we are or what we believe, or don't believe; addressing us at the deepest level. And as C.S. Lewis has noted in his, "Reflections on the Psalms," "No historical readjustment is required of the Psalms. We are in the world we know."

And so these are indeed good examples of the why the Psalms. For a moment though, let us look to the Psalm appointed for this day. Psalm 139 is a psalm of hope and good news. I don't know about you but this psalm moves me deeply. It illustrates so well a faith that understands that God knows and cares for us intimately.

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Established in 1847

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Listen again,

O, Lord you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern even my thoughts. You are acquainted with all my ways. You lay your hand upon me and there is no place and nowhere can I go that you are not with me.

As many of you know, our son Andy was married a few weeks ago. Like with so many significant passages of our lives, these events tend to draw us into remembering other times, and other loved ones in our lives. For me, this has been a bittersweet time of remembering my mother. During the weeks before and during and even after this beautiful marriage, I have found myself, thinking of and wishing my mother could have been with us. She was such a fun loving, energetic, and warm person. She loved her family with a passion. She would have embraced my sister's homecoming as she always did, with such joy and excitement. She would have been so proud of Emily as she gave the moving homily for her brother and new bride. And she would have welcomed Carol into our family with great love. **Everywhere** I looked around these last few weeks I have seen my mother. Perhaps, because she died quite unexpectedly, I have always been saddened by the fact that I didn't get the opportunity to have that last conversation of meaning.....a chance to once again say thank you and I love you. I tell you all of this because as lovely and as wonderful and as kind and as generous and as loved as my mother was.....she never knew it for herself. She would never have believed that literally hundreds of people came to the visitation at the funeral home just to tell us, her children and grandchildren, how much she meant to them. Because of the devastating loss of her marriage and such pain and hurt in her life, she really never could see herself as beloved.

The message of the psalmist in Psalm 139 is that my mother and every one of us is fully and completely known and loved by God. The message of being known by God and of belonging inseparately to God is a wonderful gift of hope. And it challenges us to open our lives to God's searching and knowing. **Because** God created us to live in relationship with one another that will mean more often than not, us opening our lives up to each other in ways that feel vulnerable and risky.

Our world, our community and the church, needs desperately for us to work more diligently at risking relationships where we know – truly know one another. A knowing that shares another person's hopes and dreams, fears and joys, disappointments and longings; struggles and passions. Our relationship with others are but a reflection of our relationship to the divine.

The Rev. Nancy Petty writes, "What really matters about God to the psalmist is that the divine "you" knows "me". What may matter just as much for us today is that the divine in "me" knows the divine in "you." After all, it is what Jesus represents at this table. We are all children of God. At this table all are welcomed, loved and accepted. All are deserving of the abundant life the bread symbolizes and the unconditional love that the cup offers. The challenge of this table is to accept God's knowing of you, delight in that knowing and then risk knowing others as you are known. Remember the Psalms remind us that God uses everything and everybody

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that he has created so that we may know his love, his goodness and his mercy.

Come, then, joining with others, at our Lord's table, for you are God's beloved; called by name, known and accepted. Such knowledge is too wonderful!

Amen

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