

Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah

Sermon
July 17, 2011
Psalm 139
"I Am Still With You"
Pastor John Guthrie



Calvin's devious character is known by everyone who knows him: his parents, his babysitter, his teacher, his principal, his friends. His reputation precedes him, and all of these can intuitively discern when he is up to no good. Which is almost all the time.

Psalm 139 is a prayer, a statement of faith, made by the psalmist alone, a statement of the intimacy with which he is known by the one true God. Many of the psalms are corporate in nature, but this particular psalm is the confession of faith of the psalmist, his experience with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In summary, the psalmist claims that there is no place he can go to escape from the LORD, that there is no part of him that God does not know. Indeed, he claims, God is the one who knit him together in his mother's womb. When he sits down, when he rises up, when he lies down, the LORD knows these things. Before he can even speak a word, the LORD knows it.

Based on this passage and others, I claim during our time of corporate prayer each Sunday that the prayers never spoken are still known intimately by God. Typically it is the prayers we cannot bring ourselves to speak that are the closest to our hearts. God knows them, every single one of them.

What is on your heart this morning? Whatever it is, the psalmist claims, God knows it.

In preparing for this sermon, I made a quick survey of the number of separate households that are a part of Community Presbyterian Church, and came up with a rough count of 139. Then I went back through all of those households and counted the number of them that, to my knowledge, are currently experiencing what I would consider to be a serious level of stress at this time. These families are facing grave or long-term illness, grief in many forms, internal strife, alienation, serious financial crisis, and other serious trials. I counted 63 such households. To my knowledge, 63 of 139 families associated with our church are at the present time experiencing what I would call significant stress and turmoil. Nearly one half of our families. And those are only the ones I know about.

If you are among those 63 families, read Psalm 139 again, and take comfort. The LORD knows every trial, every pain, every difficulty you face. And furthermore, the LORD cares: in verse 10 the psalmist states that there is no place he can go where the LORD does not lead him, and where he is not held fast by the hand of God. It is central to our understanding of who God is, that even in the darkest valley, even in the deepest anguish, even in the loneliest passage, even in the most desperate depression, even in the most frightening physical illness, even in the most terrible battle with mental or emotional distress, even when all hope is lost: the LORD is there with you and with me. We are never, ever abandoned, forsaken, or forgotten. Never.

In many World War I cemeteries of Europe, the headstones of unidentified American soldiers bear the inscription, "Here rests in honored glory an American soldier *known only to God.*"

Beginning at verse 7, the psalmist seems to want to escape this careful scrutiny by his God. He asks, Where can I go from your spirit, and where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, the residence of the dead, you are there. If I fly to the other side of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me fast. When he tries to hide under the cover of darkness he finds that the darkness is as bright as day to the LORD his God.

None of these illustrations really are expressions of the desire to escape, however. They are simply statements of the way things are. There is no escape from the scrutiny and providence of God. Not in heaven nor the abode of the dead nor on the other side of the sea nor in the deepest darkness. Even if he wanted to escape, the psalmist declares, he could not. And so it is with us.

That level of intimacy is, of course, both comforting and disturbing: there are times we would rather that the LORD didn't know what we were up to. Psalm 139 is both deeply comforting and deeply disturbing. Aren't there some things you would rather the LORD didn't know about you? Well, there are for me, anyway.

The psalmist claims that the LORD is the one who knit him together in his mother's womb, that his very existence is the work of God. Do we have that understanding? If so, what keeps us from totally dedicating our lives to the One who made us? And if we fail to do that, what does that say about our gratitude to the One who is responsible for us even being here? And what does it look like in your life, to give total dedication to the God who created all things? What does that look like, for you?

Note what the psalmist writes in verse 16: "In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them yet existed." Not an affirmation of complete predetermination of our lives; otherwise, why would the Law of Moses be given to the psalmist's people? No, they, and we are given the freedom to make choices. Will we respond in gratefulness to the One who made us, or not? What form will that appreciation take?

What the psalmist is affirming is that in some wonderful and mysterious way, the LORD knows the choices we will make, even before they are made. And more wonderful and mysterious, the LORD loves us as his children, even so.

Like many other psalms, psalm 139 has a bitter condemnation of those who reject God's instruction, or those who are the enemies of Israel. When such condemnation is the primary purpose of the psalm, it is called a psalm of imprecation, which is the act of invoking evil on one

or more people. You and I are reading along, reveling in the deep care and providence of God, and suddenly we run into “Oh, that you would kill the wicked, O God. 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 a perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.”

My, that’s very nice. Not much like the words we receive from Jesus, who tells us that we are to love and pray for our enemies. But context is everything, and the context of this psalm is, in part, the response that the psalmist expresses for the deep love and care of the LORD. In his mind, that response means avoiding all of those who reject the living God, his commandments, and his covenants. For the psalmist, the proper response to God’s all-pervading knowledge and providence is to reject those who reject God.

He concludes, “See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” His final words are a prayer for cleansing, forgiveness, restoration, and life.”

You and I know that we are deeply loved and treasured by the God who made us. One of the things that scripture does, however, is to remind us of what we already know, but tend to forget or minimize. Psalm 139 does that.

The psalmist writes in verses 17 and 18, ‘How weighty are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them – they are more than the sand; I come to the end – I am still with you.

After all is said and done, after the psalmist has expressed the deep, penetrating knowledge that the LORD has of his every thought and action, and after he has affirmed that there is no place he can go where God is not, and after establishing that his very existence is due to only to the God of his ancestors, he acknowledges that he is unable to grasp or comprehend the vastness of God’s thoughts.

And finally, he acknowledges his inability, falls on his knees before the living God, and simply states: “I am still with you.”

“I am still with you.”