



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Wonder of Being Fully Known

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

July 20, 2008

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24

Do you ever find yourself playing a game with God that runs along the lines of trying not to let God know something you don't want—or something you want? It's the old "if I tell God that I never in my life want to be called to move to Siberia, then God will have me on the next plane" routine. If you've ever played that game, then Psalm 139 is the psalm for you.

Whenever I hear or read Psalm 139, I always think of 2 things. The first thing I think about is the wonderful short story by Michael Lindvall. In his story, Lindvall, himself a Presbyterian pastor, tells the tale of a fictitious pastor who inadvertently turned the switch on his wireless microphone in the wrong direction. While he thought he was going through the routine in the privacy of his office, including remarking aloud about his lifeless congregation and breathing a huge sigh before walking out the door, the startled congregation seated out in the sanctuary heard it all. He ended up having to move because he couldn't face a congregation who knew him so well. That's why—as you may have noticed—I always reach through the pocket of my robe about 20 times during the service and immediately after just to be sure my microphone's off before I start talking at the door or singing—or let you hear more than you want to know.

The second thing I think about in connection to Psalm 139 is my best friend in the world. You've heard me mention Chris Joiner so often that you probably think he's on staff here somewhere. He's a pastor in Tennessee, and we've been friends since our college days. (By the way, what I'm about to say about him could be said of Alayne as well, but she's banned me from mentioning her in a sermon until further notice. So I won't mention her at all.)

Anyway, when I think of Chris, I think what a joy it is to be fully known. We've been friends for so long and have had so many conversations over the years that he knows my thoughts almost before I've thought them. He knows my jokes, how my mind works (or doesn't), my fears, my frustrations, my sufferings. He could tell you which celebrities I most hope to see when we're on our study leave in Malibu. He knows me through and through.

I suspect you have friends like that as well, friends who help you to know the joy of being fully known. It is an absolute joy to be fully known by another.

But—and you know it as well as I do—being fully known has another side. And it's a haunting side at times, isn't it? You see, Chris knows (and remembers) things I would love to forget. He knows things about me that I don't always want to talk about. He knows some of the things I've said out loud that I wish I'd never even thought, much less given voice to. It can be a terrible thing to be fully known, can't it?

Do you know what it's like to be fully known?

If so, then you know the tensions of the psalmist. This psalm—one of my favorites—walks the balance between the joy of being fully known by God and the painful feeling of wanting to flee, to escape from, God’s presence. The psalmist knows deep within himself that God’s unyielding presence could be experienced as claustrophobic and threatening. As Jonah could have told him, it is easier to delude oneself than elude God. God’s ultimate, transcendent power over us, God’s immanent, intimate relationship with us, and God’s absolute, accurate judgment of us are inescapably intertwined, and the psalmist knows it.

And yet, the general spirit of this psalm is not fear at all, but trust; not guilt but praise; not judgment but grace. By the end of the psalm, the psalmist has made clear that he trusts that no calamity, whatever it is, can separate him from the loving presence of God. Wherever he goes, whatever becomes of him, God is there. This trust is echoed in Paul’s words to the Christians in Rome (and this is the text for next week’s sermon), when Paul writes, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

In this amazing psalm, the psalmist has captured the fundamental message of the gospel: God is transcendent enough to overcome any earthly power, immanent enough to be present in the midst of whatever happens, and gracious enough to care about the future of each of God’s creatures.

As I thought about this sermon in relation to Maggie’s baptism, and my hope for Maggie as she is nurtured in the faith by Marc and Stephanie and others in the community of faith, I remembered the way John Calvin opens his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with these words: “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern.” God and self, you see, are so intimately related that genuine knowledge of the one requires the other.

The bonds that join God and self together are captured in the answer to the first question in the Heidelberg Catechism, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?”

Here’s the answer, and it’s one that I will pray Maggie comes to know in the depths of her heart: “What is my only comfort in life and in death? That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.”

May the good news of Psalm 139 give you comfort, because in it we rejoice that there is nowhere we can go—and nothing that we can endure—where God does not hold us fast, and the One who fully knows us, is the One who fully loves us. May we come to know the wonder—and the joy—of being known, and loved, so fully.