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Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18

### **“The Hound of Heaven”**

On amazon.com, if you type into the search box “searching for God”, you’ll come up with 10,597 results. If you do the same thing on google, you’ll come up with nearly 90 million results.

Apparently, people are searching for God.

Which isn’t all that surprising, especially these days. With lives upended by a pandemic and chaos consuming our culture, we need the steady presence and assurance of God; a spiritual anchor, if you will, to steady us in what can be long, dark, and lonely days. And so it is that more and more people **are** on a quest, a quest to find meaning in their lives, a quest to find balance, a quest to be more spiritual, all of which I think are quests, at their core, to find God.

But it might come as a shock to some of those people . . . it may come as a shock to some of you . . . that you can stop searching now. Because despite what we may think, we don’t need to search for God, because God searches for us, and there is nowhere we can go, either accidentally or purposely, that will take us out of the range of God’s presence and mercy and care. As Psalm 139, which you heard Carrie read earlier, states so eloquently:

“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.  
You search out my path and my lying down,  
And are acquainted with all my ways.”

Psalm 139 affirms that God actually pursues us; not vice versa. And that is a very different way of thinking about God. We have traditionally framed the spiritual search, our faith journey, as our quest to find God. We go on retreats to grow closer to God; we take part in mission activities as a way to connect with others and help others -- yes -- but also as a way to connect with God. We read books, take part in Bible studies, pray, even attend worship, to know God better and for

God to know us better. We do all of these things as a way of searching out and connecting with what is holy and sacred.

But then, we come across Psalm 139 and hear that we've got it all backwards. That all along, God has been the One searching for us. And not only that, but sometimes we flee from God, or we keep God at arm's distance, because at arm's distance God is safe and predictable. We might even make God out to be static and aloof and impersonal, and envision God sitting on a throne somewhere, somewhere very far away. Theologians use fancy words for God like omnipotent and transcendent and sovereign, which make God sound even more distant and static and far removed from our cares and affairs.

But then along comes the psalmist, who tells us no. You've got it wrong. That before a word even forms on our tongues, God knows us completely. And there is no where we can go to get away from God. There's no keeping our addresses safe from God; no unlisted numbers; no no-call lists; no getting off the grid (with God). Because God is the grid and relentlessly pursues us.

About 25 years ago, back when I was in seminary, I went through a dry – almost – dark time spiritually. I was enrolled in school and in the process to become a minister, but I just wasn't feeling it. I missed my friends, I didn't like my classes, and I was quite certain that at 23 years old, there was something much more exciting in the world for me than seminary. On top of that, I began to doubt all of the preparation I'd put into my chosen vocation -- the odd jobs I'd taken in the summers during college at various churches and agencies didn't seem to matter much to anyone, my young age worked against me – I sensed from some people that somehow I didn't know what I was doing. And then, to make matters worse, I got laid off from my seminary field education job because my supervisor quit. So there I was, faced with a decision. Do I cut bait and run, or keep going?

I'd reached the point in my preparation process where things were getting personal. I now had to put something of myself in the game. I could no longer stand back at arm's length. What was once an intellectual pursuit or a summer pursuit now became a full-time pursuit, and faith was becoming a matter of the heart, too. It was a lot for my 23 year old self to cope with, and I wasn't sure I was ready.

But I did, obviously, keep going, because here I am. But I can't really pinpoint for you the exact reason why I kept going – other than the sense of call that would not let me go. There wasn't a conversation with a mentor or professor that made me say, "Yes! I am on the right track!" Nor was there an epiphany in the middle of night. There was just simply and yet so very not simply, the sense that this was the path God had laid out for me, and it was time to stop fighting it or doubting it or worrying about it and release myself to it and give it to God. And the amazing thing was when I did that, I felt much better.

The writer Anne Lamott, who for years fought the idea that God was searching for her, writes of the day she finally gave in. Standing outside a little Presbyterian church, looking in, listening to the singing, she stepped through the door and said simply, "I quit," finally acknowledging that God had been pushing, nudging, and prodding her all along. She writes, "I took a long breath and said out loud, 'All right, you can come in now.'" (*Traveling Mercies, Some Thoughts on Faith*, p.50)

Sometimes we think religious faith is our search for God, for meaning, for truth to live by. And in a sense, that is true. It is a noble and admirable quest. But an even more profound truth is that the initiative in this search is God's, not ours. God comes to us. God searches for us.

Michael Lindvall writes, "People speculate about the search for God, as if the Transcendent One were a set of misplaced car keys. The awkward truth is that it is we who have misplaced ourselves. The journey of faith," Michael says, "is not so much to 'find God' as it is a struggle to follow a God who finds us" (p. 10).

Anne Lamott and Michael Lindvall put into words what Psalm 139 suggests, that God has pursued us across the years.

"You hem me in, behind and before,  
And lay your hand upon me," the psalmist writes.  
For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
**You knit me together** in my mother's womb."

Imagine that, a God who knits! Now that's an interesting concept. Because as a knitter I can assure that out of the 1000s of stitches I knit in a garment, I know every single one – evens the nubs and flubs and mistakes – perhaps especially the

nubs and flubs and mistakes -- there's no hiding them from the one who knit it -- but I still cherish that garment – because I made it. It is mine.

And that, I believe, is how God feels about us. There's no hiding or fleeing from God. God knows our every move. And there can be both discomfort in that, and comfort. Discomfort with the idea that God knows the darkest recesses of our hearts, but also comfort in that God pursues us in spite of them.

But, on the outside chance that you may be fleeing from God, living your life in what seems to be a normal, ordinary way, but is actually a way of holding God at arm's length, consider these words:

“Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?”

And if your life is so full; full of a job and family and complicated relationships, professional demands and tight schedules, your bosses' expectations which regularly exceed the number of hours in the day, consider these words:

“You know when I sit down and when I rise up,  
You discern my thoughts from afar.”

And the next time you find yourself believing that everything would be okay if only you could be a little better, work a little harder, earn a little more, you might find comfort in the words:

“If I ascend to heaven, you are there.  
If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
even there your hand shall hold me fast.”

And tonight, or tomorrow night, when you fall exhausted into bed, you might be intrigued by:

“You search out my path and my lying down.”

And if your life can only be described as hellish: if the world and pandemic are eating away at you and there is no light on the horizon—hear these words:

“If I make my bed in Sheol,” which is another word for hell, “You are there.”

And if you find yourself thinking a lot about your own finiteness, if the recent death of a loved one, a close call, a dreaded lab report, the worst diagnosis you could imagine, hear these words which I think should be the very last words any of us is privileged to hear:

“If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me  
and the light around me become night,  
even the darkness is not dark to you;  
the night is as bright as the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.’”

I want to close with a story about my beloved late dog Baby, even though I hesitate to tell a dog story because they’re often the only thing people remember about the sermon. But my dog Baby (Tommy named her), my trusty black lab, followed me where ever I went. Everyone in the family knew that Baby was my dog. In the morning she waited to get up with me, she followed me around the house, and I often joked that Baby heard me preach more sermons than any other living creature because she got up with me in the wee hours of Sunday morning and heard me going through my sermon. And if I may say, she never tired of them!

She followed me wherever I went.

In thinking about Baby, I’m reminded of Francis Thompson’s poem, “The Hound of Heaven”, in which Thompson realizes that all his life he’s been running from God, the hound of heaven.

“I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;  
(Thompson writes)  
I fled Him down the arches of the years;  
I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind;  
and in the midst of tears  
I hid from Him, and under running laughter,

Up vistaed hopes I sped and shot, precipitated,  
Adown Titanic glooms of chasamed fears  
From those strong feet that followed, followed after.”

Friends, God is the hound of heaven, the One who sniffs us out, knows every move, and follows us wherever we go. God is the hound of heaven, who relentlessly pursues us even if we don't much care for dogs, *perhaps especially if we don't much care for dogs*, for have you ever noticed the dog always gravitates towards the one who doesn't much care for dogs? God is the hound of heaven, who greets us at the door after a long day and is always happy to see us, no matter who we are, or what we have done, or what we have not done.

“Were can I go from your Spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?  
“You know when I sit down and when I rise up,  
You discern my thoughts from afar.”

Amen.

Sources:

“God's Search for Us”, Nancy Petty, July 17, 2011

Feasting on the Word, Commentary for Psalm 139, Year B, Volume 1