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Psalm 139 excerpts

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Today, I'm inviting you to a call and response with me. When I say "Where then, can we flee from Your Spirit?" You say: **"O Loving God, You are there."**

When I was a graduate student in Chicago, one of my best friends was a musician named Angela. We sang together. She played the twelve-string guitar and wrote beautiful, haunting songs. One autumn we attended street music festival together. Aromas of delicious foods enticed us into the festival. Traffic was redirected away from the street, for crowds of people, playing all kinds of music. Saxophones wailed. Keyboards rattled. Guitars strummed. People danced, laughed, and sang. The atmosphere was that of a joyous carnival. I remember Angela saying to me, with passion: "I wish life could always be like this! I'm in heaven!"

"If I climb up to heaven, you are there, O God . . . Where then, can we flee from the Spirit?"
"O Loving God, You are there."

Yes, God is in the experiences we have of bliss, contentment and joy. God is there in our moments of achievement and victory, though sometimes it is easy to forget God when all is going well in our lives. When everything is going just fine, we may feel that we have no need of God. We're handling it all very well, thank you very much. In our contentment, we forget God.

But it's also difficult to trust God in life's hurts.

This morning, we have the parable from Matthew where things don't go so well for the farmer planting the seeds. The soil was prepared, all the seeds sown and watered. Then, an in the night, an enemy sows weeds among the good seeds and causes a confusing mess. The story suggests that sometimes, we simply have to wait to see the outcome of things, before we can recognize the kingdom of God with us. When we are in the thick of things, when we are in the throes of loss and chaos, seeing God can elude us. Sometimes we have to simply wait and trust. In time, we can sort things out.

But over a thousand years before that parable of Jesus, we have the Psalmist, who wrote Psalm 139, noting that we are so intimately loved by God that there is no experience, and no place that we can be—where God is not.

Where can we go from God's presence? We can likely think of many, many experiences that obscure our seeing God . . . in the chaos of war, in the furnace of climate change, in the emptiness of separation and divorce. . . in the murkiness of memory loss and trial of waiting for medical test results. . . in the slow drip of changes and loss, moving into old age, in the insanity of bigotry, and in the uncertainty as the world around us changes rapidly. . .

Where then, can we flee from the Spirit?" **"O Loving God, You are there."**

Some of us are challenged in trusting that God really IS with us. Especially if we had an early childhood experience of dysfunctional, abusive, distant or absent parents, it is very difficult

to rest in trust that God cares for us. For some of us, the intellectual challenge of trust in a God who cares intimately for us—is a big leap of faith. We may be able to reconcile a Creative Divine force the Big Bang and evolution, but the mystery of God loving each person is a step too far. . . Psalm 139 may be tough to resonate with .

But, consider this part of the psalm: “Where can I flee from your presence. . .if I make the grave my bed, you are there also.. .

The word that’s translated “grave” in our reading today, in the Hebrew is *Sheol*. It’s not a fiery afterlife. Sheol is a the place of nothingness. A place where every mortal creature, all animals, and all of us being dust, would end in dust. It’s a place of nothingness.

Author Ursula Le Guin (from *The Earth Sea Trilogy, the Farthest Shore*) wrote of a land of the dead that illustrates the nothingness of Sheol:

“. . . there was no passing of time there. No wind blew and the stars did not move. . . The houses had windows that were never lit, and in certain doorways were standing, with quiet faces and empty hands, the dead. . . the dead . . . stood still, or moved slowly and with no purpose. . . there was in their shadowed eyes no hope. . . .”

At times, mental and spiritual weariness may feel like Sheol.

Where then, can we flee from the Spirit?”
“O Loving God, You are there.”

What can we do to cultivate deeper trust in God’s presence with us?

We have a God whose love is stronger than death. It’s unshakeable. That love keeps calling us back to the right path, and gives us strength to change. One way to deepen our trust in that is to cultivate a regular, spiritual discipline. Just as we dedicate ourselves to physical exercise or a healthy diet, so a healthy spiritual life requires practice. Daily prayer , or meditation. Reading the Bible, or other spiritual books. Tai chi , chi gong, or walking meditation. Some of you went to walk the labyrinth yesterday—that’s a helpful practice. So is writing in a journal. Praying daily, with a friend or family member. All of these and many other practices can help us cultivate our deeper trust in God.

Another important aspect is having the support and accountability of a community of faith. The word “liturgy” means literally, the work of the people. Our work together is more than worship in this Sanctuary or the Sanctuary of the Firs. It is our service on the Council, in the nursery, in providing support for Lutheran World Relief , our visiting the sick, bringing communion, teaching English to immigrants, providing space and readying our space for the children of the Head Start program this fall. Our service together, and the friendships formed is our liturgy, and can deepen our faith and trust in God, when we seek to follow.

Regular, spiritual discipline, and a community of faith can deepen our trust in God. But there is also, a necessary letting go. When I was in seminary, I had a workshop with the Episcopal priest and writer, Morton Kelsey. He noted that we live in two worlds. The outer, physical, world that has the people, matter and things. But, there is also an inner world. The inner world is the world of images, dreams, and imagination. The inner world is where we can

be met and be touched and changed by God. It's interesting, that I've found over the years, that even many ministers don't talk much about his inner world. It's not measurable. It's not scientific. It isn't proven. But, as Carl Jung said, "No one can logically prove the existence of an elephant. You just have to go and experience one." So it is with our inner world and with God.

The Psalmist knew of this inner world. For many of us today, the inner world becomes more significant when we are around those who are dying, or we are nearing death ourselves. I want to close by sharing a story of mine from thirty years ago. It is one of the experiences I've had that opened my heart to the inner, spiritual world.

Thirty years ago, this month, I was preparing for conducting my first memorial service. Clarence, the man who died, wasn't a member of my congregation. But his two adult daughters came to the church to tell me about his life, and to plan the service. I was anxious about getting it all right. I didn't want to say something in the memorial service that wasn't true about him. It's an incredible honor to be with people in the transition from life to death. I wanted the service to have integrity.

The daughters shared that Clarence had a life-long love of trains. He collected model trains and spent years setting up new tracks and sets. He had dreamed of living in a caboose and traveling the world. As they shared about their father, I felt good about hearing these details of his life.

The night before the service, I had a very vivid dream. Have you ever had a dream where the colors were brighter than usual, and the feeling of the dream is real? I dreamed that I was in a red caboose, and it was stationed in among some lush, green, rolling hills. In this caboose was a little boy in denim overalls. He was freckled, and had a wide and enthusiastic grin. His energy was vibrant. He radiated good-natured mischief.

When I awoke, I had the uplifting and odd feeling that I had met Clarence, and that doing his eulogy was now going to imbued with our dream "meeting."

Where then, can we flee from the Spirit?"
"O Loving God, You are there."

On this Quilt Sunday, our Nifty Knotters provided the High School graduates with a wonderful symbol of God's presence by making their quilts. Let's all imagine God's love like a handmade quilt, wrapping us around when we are feeling in need, when we are feeling wonderful, and when we are in the land of Sheol.

May we all know, with all our hearts, that God is with us, every minute of every hour. May we remember Jesus' unshakeable love.

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"O Loving God, You are there."