

...But You Can't Hide

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
June 3, 2018

- Psalm 139:1-18, 23-24 (Good News Bible) ¹ LORD, you have examined me and you know me. ²You know everything I do; from far away you understand all my thoughts. ³You see me, whether I am working or resting; you know all my actions. ⁴Even before I speak, you already know what I will say. ⁵You are all around me on every side; you protect me with your power. ⁶Your knowledge of me is too deep; it is beyond my understanding. ⁷Where could I go to escape from you? Where could I get away from your presence?
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Jesus is the embodiment of God's constant presence with us.

With high school graduations happening in recent weeks or in the days to come, many families will prepare to send their children off to military training or colleges and universities near and far. Maybe they've done it before, or maybe this will be their first child going off to school.

It's been nearly fifteen years since we moved our oldest son Kevin into college for the first time. The whole family piled into two cars and made the trip to The College of Wooster. We all carried and unpacked boxes. His brothers helped set up his computer and connect his landline phone (they still did that back then!). After about a half hour of work, we were done. I said, "Mary, it's time for us to leave." That brought a few tears, some hugs all around, and we walked out the door. Kevin was on his own.

Later this summer many parents will be saying goodbye to their children for a few weeks or months. But not always, I'm told. My brother-in-law is a university president in Indiana. He said he's known of parents staying in a local motel for several days after college orientation is done, staying after their child is safely ensconced in his or her dormitory, staying after classes have begun... just in case their child needs them.

In fact, colleges today have had to craft their move-in and orientation programs in such a way that they explicitly tell families, "It's time for you to say goodbye to your daughter or son, leave the campus and go home." That's because schools are seeing more and more examples of parents who can't let go, and that's not always healthy. We've heard the expression "helicopter parents" to describe moms and dads who try to guide their child's every move and fix their child's every problem. They go beyond what most would say is healthy parental care and oversight; "helicopter parents" end up denying their child the opportunity to learn important skills via "the school of hard knocks" like:

- how to learn from failing or losing;
- how to move on from disappointment;
- how to forge new personal and professional relationships;
- how to problem-solve;
- how to identify a need and pursue it;
- how to manage difficult personalities.

Today's reading from Psalm 139 might cause you to wonder if God could be accused of being a helicopter parent. The psalmist addresses God acknowledging that God always knows what's up with him and that God is always present to protect him. The psalmist can't imagine any place where he could go that would be beyond the presence of his Heavenly Parent. In Psalm 139 we heard the psalmist declare:

²You know everything I do... ⁴Even before I speak, you already know what I will say. ⁵You are all around me on every side; you protect me with your power.... ⁷Where could I go to escape from you?

Unlike a so-called helicopter parent, though, God does grant us great freedom. God expects us to make choices that determine our path in life. Living with that freedom, we know very well that even with our most concerted efforts, sometimes we don't succeed. Sometimes the choices we make are far, far from

ideal or even admirable. And God knows that God will know about all of it – our triumphs and our embarrassments, our successes and our failures!

I think we can relate to the psalm writer here. He's

...amazed at the utter depth and breadth of God's knowledge of him. So the *good news* is that God knows us inside and out, up and down, front to back and in every way conceivable. The *bad news* is that God knows us inside and out, up and down, front to back and in every way conceivable! ...Might we ... feel that having a helicopter God hovering over and around us is not always a positive thing? Might we also prefer that God take a break and not know *everything*, all the time? [This passage can serve to present a helpful challenge,]... then, to re-examine how we go about our daily lives. Do our lives honor God? What honors God? ...Do we honor God in our conversation? Do we honor God in the places we visit? Do we honor God with the thoughts that we think...?¹

That's one way this passage can speak to each of us in our unique life situation today.

On the other hand,

...it's comforting and awesome that God is so personally aware of us. [In these verses the psalmist reminds us that] The great God of the galaxies knows our daily routine (v. 2), knows what we're thinking (v. 2), knows where we're going and where we've been (v. 3), knows everything we've done (v. 3), knows what we say even before we say it (v. 4) and opens and closes doors for us, God's hand being upon us every step of the way (v. 5).²

How can God do that? We can't begin to comprehend – as the psalmist wrote in verse 6, "Your knowledge of me is too deep; it is beyond my understanding," and in verse 14, "all you do is strange and wonderful. I know it with all my heart."

And of course, since God created us, God knows that we cannot comprehend God's majestic creativity, God's undeserved mercy, God's generosity beyond measure; God's being and nature and character are mysteries even to the brilliance of the human mind.

So God embodied God's divine majesty by coming among us in the divine person of Jesus of Nazareth. Through the witness of gospels, through the testimony of apostles and disciples, through insight from the Holy Spirit we behold the full measure of God's wisdom and mercy and generosity and love in the person of Jesus. God incarnate in Jesus we can imagine, we can picture, we can see him with us.

- We can picture Jesus walking with us through an anxiety-filled hospital corridor.
- We can picture him sitting with us in a pressure-filled conference room or classroom.
- We can imagine Jesus urging us forward when we're on the verge of building a new friendship.
- We can sense his arm around us when we feel lost or overlooked or overwhelmed.
- We can feel the strength of his comforting shoulder when the grief of loss breaks our heart and weakens our knees.
- We can see his face filled with delight as we are overcome with joy because of a friend's touching kindness or a puppy's clumsy playfulness or a grandson's heart-melting smile.

In Jesus God is "all around me on every side; [Jesus] protect[s] me with [his] power...."³ is with us "always to the close of the age."⁴ His dependable presence is akin to the loyalty described by lyrics from the musical "Gypsy" which assure, "Wherever we go, whatever we do, we're gonna go through it together."⁵

The psalmist wondered where he could go to get away from God's spirit. But as we accept Jesus as our always-present master and guide, our savior and friend, we know that no matter where we may run, we cannot hide from him, nor should we ever want to.

[Sermons: se20180603; © 2018 Jon M. Fancher]

¹ from "The Other Texts: June 3, 2018 Cycle B" in Homiletics.com May-June 2018

² from "The Other Texts: June 3, 2018 Cycle B" in Homiletics.com May-June 2018

³ Psalm 139:5

⁴ Matthew 28:20

⁵ "Together (Wherever We Go)" from "Gypsy" (1959) with music by Jule Styne and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim