

“Don’t Give Up!”—Biblical Offerings of Hope... *for Faith to Face the Unknown*

Second of six Lenten sermons by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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Psalm 139 Common English Bible

¹ LORD, you have examined me.

You know me.

² You know when I sit down and when I stand up.

Even from far away, you comprehend my plans.

³ You study my traveling and resting.

You are thoroughly familiar with all my ways.

⁴ There isn’t a word on my tongue, LORD,
that you don’t already know completely.

⁵ You surround me—front and back.

You put your hand on me.

⁶ That kind of knowledge is too much for me;
it’s so high above me that I can’t reach it.

⁷ Where could I go to get away from your spirit?

Where could I go to escape your presence?

⁸ If I went up to heaven, you would be there.

If I went down to the grave, you would be there too!

⁹ If I could fly on the wings of dawn,

stopping to rest only on the far side of the ocean—

¹⁰ even there your hand would guide me;

even there your strong hand would hold me tight!

¹¹ If I said, “The darkness will definitely hide me;

the light will become night around me,”

¹² even then the darkness isn’t too dark for you!

Nighttime would shine bright as day,

because darkness is the same as light to you!

John 14:1-9b NRSV ¹ “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ² In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴ And you know the way to the place where I am going.”

⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶ Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

⁸ Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” ⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father....

In the church season of Lent leading up to Easter, this year I’m offering this series called “Don’t Give Up! – Biblical Offerings of Hope.” This week’s installment is called “Hope for Faith to Face the Unknown.”

It’s hard to imagine any period in our lives when there were more “unknowns” than what we’re experiencing right now.

In this global pandemic we *might* be beginning to turn the corner as more and more vaccines are being administered. Then again, we don't know how the emergence of variant viral strains will impact us. It's also unknown how the world's health will be impacted by other factors. For instance, what about countries that lack the infrastructure and funding to vaccinate their citizens? Or, what will be the impact of individuals in our midst who are unwilling to receive vaccination or observe public health protocols?

What else is unknown? The contentious election period of last year has resolved... but after elections comes the hard work of governing. It remains to be seen how insightful and constructive and productive various levels of government will be.

And last month's vicious assault on the halls of Congress, and on the democratic processes taking place within, shocked and frightened the nation, indeed, shocked the world. We pray that such a politically motivated violent attack won't happen again... but who can say for certain?

What other unknowns swirl around us? We don't know how the local, national and global economies are going to fare in the months and years to come. We may have concern about our personal finances in the face of this global uncertainty.

We may have questions about mental health: what sort of lasting impact on us might result because of our absence from familiar workplaces, and our isolation from friends and loved ones?

Even without a pandemic, just the natural course of our lives presents so many unknowns: we may ask ourselves, "How will I cope with this illness I'm dealing with?" or "Am I being the kind of parent my kids need me to be?" or "How do I manage after losing my spouse (or child or partner or best friend)?"

But we do know this: each of us faces unknown circumstances, unknown futures.

The good news is that the Bible offers us hope in the face of the unknown: we don't need to have all the knowledge, all the answers. God sees what we cannot.

In the Old Testament we heard from the 139th Psalm. In that psalm the writer reflects on God's power, knowledge, wisdom. The psalmist expresses appreciation, wonder, awe. In the mind of the psalm writer, God's greatness was nearly indescribable.

The psalmist speaks for us all. He acknowledges that God knows our every action. God knows what we're going to say before *we* know what we're going to say. The psalm writer asks the rhetorical questions, "Where could I go to get away from your spirit? Where could I go to escape your presence?"¹ And answering, the psalmist asserts that there's nowhere we can go that God isn't already there – God's presence everywhere precedes our presence anywhere.

I think the psalmist sums up his thoughts in the middle of the psalm where he says about God's inimitable omniscience, "That kind of knowledge is too much for me; it's so high above me that I can't reach it."²

Don't you imagine that the disciples of Jesus must have felt similarly overwhelmed a lot of the time? Despite Jesus being approachable, earnest, unpretentious, his profound spiritual awareness must have caused them to feel at times like he was speaking a different language. They may have said to themselves many times, "That kind of knowledge is too much for me; it's so high above me that I can't reach it."

One of those times might have been the scene we heard today from John Chapter 14. In the verses immediately preceding today's selection from the gospel Jesus had told his disciples that they couldn't follow where he was going. He meant that he would be taken from them and

¹ Psalm 139:7 NRSV

² Psalm 139:6 NRSV

killed because of his complete obedience to God's will; *he* would be taken but they wouldn't. Twice he said that they could not follow where he was going. Then in Chapter 14 he told them, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also."³

And Jesus then adds, "And you know the way to the place where I am going."⁴

"Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?'"⁵ What Jesus seemed so sure of felt like a complete "unknown" to Thomas. In effect, Thomas was echoing the words of Psalm 139 that confessed, "That kind of knowledge is too much for me; it's so high above me that I can't reach it."⁶

Jesus responded to Thomas and the others with words that are very familiar to most of us—if not a little mysterious. Jesus said, "'I am the way, and the truth, and the life....'"⁷

So Thomas wanted specific instructions, and Jesus responded, "You need to trust me." Two different ways of facing the unknown. Maybe an experience I had a few years ago might illuminate the difference.

A few summers ago my wife Mary and I decided that our vacation would be a self-guided tour of several sites in the Deep South that figured in our nation's Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. We started in Little Rock, Arkansas, then to Memphis, Birmingham, Montgomery, Atlanta.

Though the institution of slavery had been abolished more than a hundred years earlier, in the 1950s and '60s the descendants of the enslaved were still restrained from living a free and full life because of blatant policies and practices promoting racist segregation. So thousands of ordinary people put their very lives on the line simply by insisting that society to treat all people with respect and fairness. They organized, they marched, they worshiped and prayed, knowing their goal but *not* knowing how much they would have to endure in order to assert their rights and how long they would have to endure it.

We both found that vacation to be such a stirring, sobering, heartening and instructive experience; I would commend several specific destinations if you're interested. There is so much about America's mistreatment of its own citizens and their push for civil rights that people like me—members of the white majority population living in the north—there's so much that we don't realize and need to learn.

But there was another aspect of that vacation that was new and different for us.

Before we set off on that adventure, we did some research about specific sites we wanted to visit. What we *didn't* do was plot our actual driving route. For me ten or twenty years ago the idea of setting off on a road trip without specific driving instructions would have been unimaginable.

It used to be that before we'd think of setting out on a road trip I would have pulled out the atlas and studied various route options. I would have acquired specific route recommendations from AAA, usually obtaining a set of those personalized maps they used to make.

But for our trip through the Deep South, on the morning that we left home we just programmed our first hotel destination into our car's navigation system, pressed the button

³ John 14:2-3 NRSV

⁴ John 14:4 NRSV

⁵ John 14:5 NRSV

⁶ Psalm 139:6 NRSV

⁷ John 14:6a NRSV

labeled “Begin Route Guidance,” and drove off, following the instructions. About eight hours later we ended up in the parking lot of the Nashville motel where we had reservations for the night. We had faith that our new navigation system would easily and safely guide us where we wanted to go, and our faith was rewarded – in fact, rewarded repeatedly over our nine-day trip through seven states.

I started thinking about the difference between how we *used* to plan our travel compared to this trip when we simply trusted that our GPS would get us where we wanted to go. The old, familiar system of using maps highlighted with preplanned routes really relied mostly on *us*. Our success depended on us having the right map with the correct route and being able to decipher it at crucial time in order to make the right decision about which direction to head. In contrast, as far as using the GPS guidance, in a way that was an act of faith: we had faith that the software would speedily and safely get us where we needed to be.

“Roadmap or GPS” could be a metaphor for the trust that Jesus invited his disciples to place in him. When Thomas spoke for the disciples about following where Jesus would lead them, he was worried about how they could possibly figure out their way to an unknown destination, an unknown future. Facing the unknown, he wanted the map, with step-by-step, turn-by-turn instructions that he could see before his very eyes.

But Jesus assured Thomas that all that was needed was simply to trust in him. Though the disciples were facing an unknown future, God in Jesus Christ knew where they were headed; indeed, God was already in their future. What was unknown to them was a *fait accompli* in God’s eternal existence. God lives their future; God lives our future.

Rather than try to manage and map our way through all the unknowns in our lives, Jesus invites us to put our faith in him. Jesus knows the way; he *is* the way to the future that is unknown to us but fully known to God. If you’ve heard the expression “a leap of faith,” this is what it means. Going into the future faithfully trusting God to guide us where God’s wants us to be. Walking in faith even when we aren’t sure of the way, aren’t sure what we’ll find. It takes courage. Trust. Hope with expectation.

Your first step is to accept Jesus as God’s savior and the master of your life. Then for Jesus truly to be your master, you need to surrender your willfulness: your thirst for control, your hunger for answers... give it all to God. The unknowns of life won’t magically evaporate, but they won’t have the power over you that they once had because they no longer depend solely on you: you are facing life’s unknowns with God at your side, in your mind, in your heart, in your present and in your future. Jesus invites us to see that putting our trust in God gives us faith so we can face the unknown. To God – whose knowledge is too wonderful for me, says the psalmist – to God be the glory!