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Psalms and the Life of Faith: We Are Known and Loved

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Psalm 139; John 15:1-5

One of the most joyful rhythms of my work at Westminster is the rhythm of coordinating and preparing for the baptisms of Westminster's young ones. I meet with families preparing for baptism and we talk about what it is that we're doing here at the font. We talk about the water and its significance, the stories that it reminds us of throughout the Bible. We talk about how the water isn't magic and it doesn't save us – the Holy Spirit works through the ordinary water in the font, reminding us that holiness is all around us, even in ordinary places and moments. We talk about the symbolism in the water – that in the water, the old way of living is *drowned* and we're raised to new life in Christ. In the water, we're washed and made new, and it's not just a one time thing – it happens again and again, and we can remember this washing every time we drink a cup of water or wash our

face or walk by a creek or river. If there's an older sibling in the family, we sometimes take a little trip to the baptismal font together, looking at the bowl and maybe pouring some water in it and splashing in the water. Baptism is so wonderfully tactile.

But my favorite part of these baptism conversations – every time – is when I get to say this: in baptism, we remember that God has *always* known and loved your child. That love goes with them, no matter what, until their baptism is made complete in death.

Known and loved, no matter what. This is true about all of us, of course. But it's so easy to believe it about a baby. I visited with church members a few days ago who have a child who is only a few months old. I share about that visit here with their permission. When I held that precious little one, it was so easy to believe that she was made in God's image, precious in God's sight, chosen and beloved from before she even made her entrance into the world. As I fed her a bottle and she grasped her tiny fingers around mine, as her little blue eyes fixated on mine while she fed, it was so easy to see her belovedness – I got in the car and sent a text to a friend, saying, "I got to hold a tiny baby this morning and she was PERFECT!" Of course, the parents and caregivers in the room are thinking right now, "yeah,

bet you might not think that if you stuck around for a few sleepless nights or four million diaper changes or a few rounds of gnarly spit-up.” And you’re right. But try looking into the eyes of an infant and *not* believing in the inherent goodness of humanity! The belovedness of every child of God! The beauty of God’s love for us from before we can even name it for ourselves.

These truths become a little harder to affirm as we grow into our lives in this beautiful and hurting world. We have such capacity for harm, we carry such complex memories and experiences. We become hurt and we hurt others; we receive complicated messages about our worth, and we take those messages to heart, sometimes passing them along to our neighbors. We grow into ourselves and read a psalm like the one we just heard, “O Lord, you have searched me and known me,” and wonder if we are worth searching or knowing, if we are worthy of God’s great big love, knowing that God really sees us for who we are. But the truth remains: we are fearfully and wonderfully made. We are deeply known and deeply loved. And not just the babies! All of us.

We are focused in on the book of Psalms this Lent at Westminster, and it has been such a gift to spend time in

the poetry and prayer of the psalms. There is rich wisdom within the 150 psalms, and I've been grateful for your reflections in the Lenten devotional booklet, and for the guidance of this year's Church in the Round materials, which many of you are moving through together in small groups. What has continued to strike me throughout this season is the *particularity* of the writers' words. A psalm of praise is not simply "Thank you, God!" Though that is a great prayer! A psalm of praise is more like, "Praise God! Praise God with trumpet and cymbals and tambourine and dancing and let *everything that breathes* praise God!" A psalm of lament is not simply, "I am sad, God." Though, again, that is a great prayer. A psalm of lament is more like, "my tears have been my food day and night; I long for you like a deer longs for streams of water."

Psalms 139 is no different. The psalmist uses words that paint a picture of what's happening here, and together the images lead us so deeply into the affirmation that God knows us and loves us. Listen to the verbs – go; flee; ascend; take wings; settle; wrapped; make my bed in the depths. Try as the psalmist might, there is simply no fleeing from God's knowledge of them. They can try to go, flee, ascend, take wings, make their bed in the depths of Sheol – but God is there. My Old Testament professor from seminary, Bill Brown, has a brilliant quote about this

psalm that makes me chuckle every time. He says it's a "celebration of God's invasion of our privacy." We get that strong sense from the psalmist in all those action verbs – the psalmist could try *really hard* to get away from God's knowledge of them, but it's just not possible.

It is a very real human impulse that the psalmist is describing here. We like to protect ourselves from invasions of privacy. I'm reminded of the myriad times that I've been talking to someone about a product I'm considering buying and the next day I'm seeing ads for that product on my social media feed and on the side of search engine websites. One time I went to visit a friend who was getting married, and when I got home I had ads for bridesmaid dresses and reception venues. It feels a bit violating... even if I *know* I've made a choice to allow my phone to listen to me at all times. We are naturally a bit suspicious of invasions of our privacy – it's all over dystopian literature, movies, and television, these scary futures where we're watched and tracked and have access to way too much information about one another.

What's going on here in the psalm, though, is something different. Preaching scholar Tom Long writes, "We do indeed hear of a God who knows and searches and watches without ceasing, but God's watchfulness is not the abstract gaze of a traffic cam or an all-seeing drone

flying overhead just out of sight, and even more, it is not the punitive scrutiny of a wrathful judge. The Eye of God in Psalm 139 can best be understood in parental terms, as the watchfulness of a loving [parent].”

I recall again my Thursday morning visit with a church family. These loving parents know their infant and their toddler; they hold those children fast, weaving together a life of love in their family. When the toddler picked up a toy racecar and started showing it to me, they instinctually translated his toddler-speak: yes, that’s right, that’s mommy’s car, and there’s daddy’s car, too! When the infant locked eyes with me, they explained that she’s grown interested in contrasting colors and was likely interested in my brown-and-white speckled glasses. This is deep, intimate knowledge; deep, intimate care. And it goes both ways. When it was time for the toddler to leave for preschool, he said to his dad, “Keys?” Both parents laughed – this young one was remembering the many times that dad had walked out the door without his car keys. Deep, intimate knowledge of the other.

In this way, Tom Long’s assertion makes sense: Psalm 139 shares about a God whose love for us is as a loving parent or caregiver. In contrast to those strong action verbs that the psalmist uses to describe their experience, listen to the

verbs assigned to God in this psalm: search, know, discern, acquaint, hem in, hold fast, form, knit, make, weave. These are words of such intimacy. God knows us and cares for us so tenderly.

It's important here to note that our images and metaphors for God only get us so far – they never fully embrace all of who God is, because that's just impossible with the limitations of our language. One of the limitations of this metaphor is that we don't all have the gift of identifying with this image on a personal level. We do not all come from homes with a loving and caring parent. Such is the nature of language for God. But if we *can* imagine aspects of a loving and caring home with deep love and nurture, we have grasped something of who God is, especially in this particular psalm.

In the patterns of our worship services, the end of worship includes a charge and benediction. The charge is an invitation to go out into the world and make our lives in a particular way, grounded in the grace we've received. The benediction is a blessing, a reminder that God goes with us all the way. I find that there is both charge and benediction in this psalm – both blessing and call to action. The blessing is what we've just discovered together – the blessing that God goes with us to all the ends of the

earth, that God has known us from before we were born and will never leave us, even all the way to death and what lies beyond death. The charge is implicit, just below the surface of the words. If we are known, embraced, and loved in this way, then so is the whole human family. That means we live and move in the world as those who affirm the full humanity of *all* our neighbors. God's love is not a blanket that covers me and my family and friends, tucking us into our quiet little corner of the world. God's love is more like a giant patchwork tapestry – rich in colors and fabrics – that covers every community, every family, every individual, in deep knowledge and care. We are invited to live our lives as those who know that this is true.

This past month, a nonbinary teenager named Nex Benedict died the day after a violent encounter with bullies in their high school bathroom. The whole story here is shrouded in confusion and imprecision – because of course it is, bullying so often happens behind closed doors in hushed tones. What's not confusing about this is the link between gender- and sexuality-based discrimination – especially when it's state sanctioned – and the flourishing of trans and nonbinary teenagers.

This is not the kind of thing that happens in a world where we remember the Psalm 139 love of God for all

people. This is the kind of thing that happens when we forget that truth, when we fail to advocate for better policies that advance the flourishing of all of God's beloved ones.

The charge implicit in Psalm 139 is to live and move in this beautiful and hurting world as those who know that all people are known and loved by God.

As we move into a time of silent reflection, as is our Lenten practice in worship, I'd like to share the words of a contemporary hymn writer, Paul Vasile. Amanda Weber sent me this hymn earlier this week, and it has remained in my heart. This is the blessing of today's psalm.

God calls you good, beloved child.

You are a treasure deeply prized.

And you can say to every doubting voice,

"God calls you good, beloved child."

Amen.