“Purls of Wisdom”

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

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Psalm 139 has long been one of my favorite psalms. It’s actually the text for the first sermon I ever preached in seminary.  Every time I study it, I get a new appreciation for the language and the metaphors found within. It’s a psalm that makes me think, makes me consider God in a different way than many of the other ones.

As one commentator points out, this psalm *is*a little different from the rest of the book of Psalms.  Think back on other psalms you know — perhaps the 23rd Psalm with its Good Shepherd imagery or Psalm 121 — a favorite for many folks in this congregation given our beautiful mountain surroundings — “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?”

Many of those favorite psalms deal with the immediate observable reality for the psalmist: the knowledge of a shepherd’s tasks or the protection that mountains offer. Many other psalms deal with God’s saving actions in Israel and celebrate how God has done marvelous things for God’s people.

And yet, this psalm is different. This psalm zooms out from what is observable to that which is not fully observable — a God who “remains firmly beyond words or comprehension.”[[1]](https://docs.google.com/document/u/1/d/e/2PACX-1vTEYAbNBLCuIRllmAZIyuEgnnl9eL0aloezF8dbz6BleyGejLO9cU39Kn5j0okVlVO8p95bLcY44QNZ/pub#ftnt1)

“Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is so high that I cannot attain it.”

As God is depicted in this psalm, God not only created the cosmos and is the source of all divine knowledge, but God also knows the psalmist intimately.

“Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.”

God intimately knows not only the psalmist, but each and every one of us.

As I was studying up for this sermon, one writer used the phrase, “the psalmist *and* *those who worship with this psalm*.” That phrase made me pause. How do we worship with Scripture in worship? Yes, we read the passages before the sermon. Yes, many of our hymns reference if not are direct interpretations of scripture. Yes, much of our liturgy is crafted from scripture.

But what does it mean to worship with Scripture? If Scripture is one of the most important ways we learn about God, then what does it mean to incorporate it into our worship?

In our wonderful Presbyterian Book of Order, the relationship between Scripture and the congregation is thus:

“The role of the congregation is to listen prayerfully, actively, and attentively to the Word that is read and proclaimed. Such listening requires expectation, concentration, and imagination.”

When you heard the Scripture passages read earlier, did you listen prayerfully, actively, and attentively? Did you listen with expectation, concentration, and imagination? If so, well done! If not, *that’s okay*. Sometimes I struggle with all of those things as well. Sometimes my off-task imagination gets in the way. Sometimes I’m distracted by all sorts of things.  Sometimes it’s difficult for me to relate to certain passages of Scripture because of their context or their purposes or their language.

But today’s psalm provides a unique opportunity to flex our Scriptural imaginations and to find ourselves within the text. Whereas the Gospels are stories *about* Jesus and his followers and the narrative portions of the Old Testament contain stories *about* God’s relationship with Israel, this psalm, with its first person point of view, allows us to think about the perspective of the writer. Instead of saying, “This is a psalm about someone who knows God intimately,” *we*can become the narrator and consider what these words might mean to us.

So let’s try that. Let’s do something outside the box in worship this morning. After all, I’ve only got a few weeks left at Covenant, so why not get *zany* with things?

The portion on Scripture from the Book of Order I read a few moments ago continues to describe the congregation’s role by saying:

The congregation may participate in the presentation of Scripture through unison, responsive, or antiphonal readings, or by following along with printed or projected materials.”[[2]](https://docs.google.com/document/u/1/d/e/2PACX-1vTEYAbNBLCuIRllmAZIyuEgnnl9eL0aloezF8dbz6BleyGejLO9cU39Kn5j0okVlVO8p95bLcY44QNZ/pub#ftnt2)

Don’t worry. I’m not about to start projecting things on the walls in my last weeks here. But, I *am* going to have some congregational participation today through some repeat-after-me back and forth.

I’m going to re-read a few lines of this psalm, and I want you to repeat them back to me. But as you do, I want you to close your eyes and imagine that you are the only person in the room. I want you to remove the Psalmist who wrote it from the picture and to place yourselves in the “I” position. I want the words that you say become words that you are saying directly to our God who is listening. And I invite you to pay attention to how it makes you feel.

So here we go. It’s in the Book of Order. You have to do it.

Close your eyes, if you are comfortable.

As I say a line, repeat it after me.

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 hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

I come to the end — I am still with you.

How did that feel? Did the words comfort you? Or did they make you a little nervous? Did a God who hems you in, behind and before, cause you to feel safe? Or did you feel a little claustrophobic?

What would it look like to worship with this psalm for a week? After all, worship doesn’t happen *only* on Sunday mornings and as we’ve learned through this pandemic, it doesn’t have to happen *only*in this sanctuary.

What if you began each day by reading this psalm out loud, placing yourself in the narrator role? If we did that, each of us, how would we view ourselves by the end of the week? How would we view God’s role in our lives?

Historically, there have been two major interpretations of this psalm. One is that because God knows everything about us, God is someone to be feared. God, in this psalm, is always the all-knowing judge over us.

“Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.

In your book were written

All the days that were formed for me,

When none of them as yet existed.”

If we view God *only* as an omniscient judge, then the relationship between God and creation is characterized by power and responsibility.

But, another way we can view this psalm is that the relationship between God and humanity is one of intimacy and trust.

Theologian Sallie McFague’s work was based largely on her analysis of how metaphor lies at the heart of how we may speak about God. She argued that “much of the theological tradition we have inherited has sacrificed a sense of God’s connection to the world in favor of an emphasis on God’s rule over (and thus from) the world.”[[3]](https://docs.google.com/document/u/1/d/e/2PACX-1vTEYAbNBLCuIRllmAZIyuEgnnl9eL0aloezF8dbz6BleyGejLO9cU39Kn5j0okVlVO8p95bLcY44QNZ/pub#ftnt3)

McFague argues that while it is important for us to know God as sovereign and Lord, when we mentally keep God at a distance like that, we lose the other more intimate metaphors for God.

This psalm is one of the best examples of how we might think of God both as the creator of the cosmos as well as the One who created not only the great, unknown expanses of the cosmos, but each and every one of us as well.

“For it was you who formed me in my inward parts;

You knit me together in my mother’s womb.”

I love picturing God as the knitter of our lives. This image of God as knitter has been one I have continued to return to as I’ve grown on my own faith journey.

When I put the bulletin together for this service, I tried to find a good knitting pun for my sermon title. So I googled, “knitting puns” to get me started. While I chose, “Purls of Wisdom” as the title, the one that made me literally laugh out loud, was a picture that said, “If I’m sitting, I’m knitting.”

I laughed to think of God, sitting in a rocking chair in a craft room somewhere, knitting needles moving at a fevered pace, counting stitches and thinking through the current child of God that is being knit together, and a framed sign above God’s shoulder that says, “If I’m sitting, I’m knitting.”

I want to be clear to say that my laughter is not borne out of disrespect, but of delight. I love that my God who is mighty and strong can also be an intimate creator, who delights in all of my quirks because it was God who gave me them when I was formed in my inward parts.

It’s important that we work hard at how we think of God, that we don’t try to confine God to one attribute whether it is lord or king, male or female, shepherd or knitter. As our youth explored in their June Sunday school series, God doesn’t dwell in binaries, but lives comfortably in a spectrum of metaphors.

God has given us the Scripture so that we might continually explore the many facets of God’s love and God’s care for creation. If there are some images for God that make us uncomfortable, it’s even more important for us to spend time worshiping with those texts. While we may never fully understand God, part of our job as a congregation, as Christians, is to keep at it, keep worshiping with Scripture, keep tuning into the God who has fearfully and wonderfully made us, who searches us out and knows us completely.

There’s an important promise at the end of today’s psalm. It’s a promise that no matter where we go, whether it’s physically on this earth or emotionally in our hearts, God will be with us. God welcomes our explorations, our questions – because God will always be with us, no matter where we go.

How weighty are your thoughts, O God!

How vast the sum of them!

I try to count them — they are more than the sand;

I come to the end — I am still with you.

God is still and always will be with us.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

[[1]](https://docs.google.com/document/u/1/d/e/2PACX-1vTEYAbNBLCuIRllmAZIyuEgnnl9eL0aloezF8dbz6BleyGejLO9cU39Kn5j0okVlVO8p95bLcY44QNZ/pub#ftnt_ref1) Ellen Armour; Feasting on the Word. Year C Volume 4

[[2]](https://docs.google.com/document/u/1/d/e/2PACX-1vTEYAbNBLCuIRllmAZIyuEgnnl9eL0aloezF8dbz6BleyGejLO9cU39Kn5j0okVlVO8p95bLcY44QNZ/pub#ftnt_ref2) Presbyterian Church (USA) Book of Order: W-3.0303

[[3]](https://docs.google.com/document/u/1/d/e/2PACX-1vTEYAbNBLCuIRllmAZIyuEgnnl9eL0aloezF8dbz6BleyGejLO9cU39Kn5j0okVlVO8p95bLcY44QNZ/pub#ftnt_ref3) Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*