***NOT UNKNOWN***

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Texts: Psalm 139:1-18, 23-24 and John 1:43-49

 *Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me…* How many of you would like to make that your prayer this morning – inviting God to conduct a thorough examination of your heart, mind, and intentions to see if there is any sin lurking there? This is not just inviting a criminal background check to confirm that you have not been convicted of some awful crime. This is a more personal examination, a deep dive into your soul, looking not just for overt acts for which you are willing to be held accountable, but also for those sins that may have been tucked away in the dark corners of your heart or mind where you hope they will never see the light of day.

 The psalmist invites that kind of scrutiny from God, in part because he knows that the Lord already sees into those shadowy places of his heart, mind, and soul; God already knows the good, the bad, and the ugly that can be found there. “*Lord, you have searched me and known me*,” he sings. “*You know everything about me*. *There is no escaping you*.” The psalmist seems to find comfort in that reality, comfort in knowing that God has always known him, knows him better than he knows himself, and is always with him. There is no place to go that is beyond the reach of God, as Jonah learned. Do you find that kind of intimate divine knowledge and presence comforting – or a little unsettling?

 When I was in law school, I worked in a prison clinic working with inmates in the Camp Hill State Prison. One of the mail runners in the prison was an inmate by the name of John Yount who would pop in and out of our offices from time to time; he was serving a life sentence for murder. He had been a high school teacher and had an affair with one of his students; when she threatened to expose him, he killed her, ironically because he was afraid it would ruin his reputation. A couple of years after I left that clinic, I learned that John had escaped. A guard had been taking him out of the prison to his home to play tennis; one day, John went inside to use the bathroom and disappeared. Years later after an episode of America’s Most Wanted that focused on his story, John was found living in Washington State under an assumed name. He had married and was working and living in the community there without anyone knowing his true identity. For years he eluded capture, but I do wonder if every day he woke up wondering if this might be the day that someone might recognize him and turn his world upside down because they knew who he really was.

 God does know who we really are – not who we pretend be, not who we wish we were, not who we aspire to be – but who we are in our heart of hearts. For better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, God knows us. How remarkable that the same God who created the stars and galaxies, the same God who knit together life out of the primordial soup and wove together strands of DNA to make living things could know us so intimately and claim us as children! That a transcendent God who could do so much as creator of all things could also be so near to us and hold us dear is, in the words of the psalmist, “too wonderful for me!” It is knowledge beyond our understanding but not beyond our believing. It is knowledge that shocked Nathanael in his encounter with Jesus when he asked, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus’ reply that he had seen Nathanael even before Philip spoke to him, led Nathanael to confess, “You are the Son of God!” Do you then dare to believe what the psalmist says and what Nathanael discovered – that God could know you as you are – as you really are?

 In his book, *It’s Not the End of the Earth, But You Can See It from Here*, Roger Welsch shares a Native-American tale:

*Coyote lived in a lodge at the edge of the village with his grandmother.*

 *“I think I’ll go outside, Grandma,” said Coyote.*

*His grandmother replied, “Now, don’t you go over that hill where the Big Bull Buffalo is tearing up the sod all the time. With those horns and hoofs of his, he’d grind you up like a rabbit pellet.”*

*But of course, that is exactly what Coyote did. He lay there on the hill in the sun most of the day watching the buffalo. Pretty soon that Big Bull Buffalo drifted over to Coyote and said, “What do you want, you scruffy little pipsqueak? You better watch yourself or I’ll turn you into food for the magpies.”*

*“Oh no, Mr. Bull Buffalo, I have just been sitting here all day watching you, and I have been thinking how handsome you are and what a fine life you lead,” said Coyote.*

*The Bull Buffalo looked at him and kind of rolled his eyes like buffalo do when they aren’t sure what is going on.*

*“I mean, look at you,” Coyote said. “You don’t have to chase mice and rabbits for your supper; you get to eat this nice, tender grass, and there’s no shortage of that here. Everywhere you look, you see food. When there are storms, I have to find some dark, wet hole to crawl in, or a hollow tree, but you…you are so big and your fur is so thick that you stand there like a mountain and let the storm blow around you. You have such a big family, and all I have is my grandmother. I’m afraid of bear and elk and even you! Any time I hear something a little scary, I run off and try to find something to hide under, but you are so big and strong and powerful. You don’t have to be afraid of anything. So what I am wondering, Mr. Bull Buffalo, sir, is this: Is there any way I can be a buffalo like you?”*

*That proposition took Big Bull Buffalo by surprise. He’d never heard anything like that before, but he remembered from the old days the way those things are done. So, he said to Coyote, “You just stand right there and don’t move. I am going to come running and hit you with my horns and that will change you into one of us. But if you really want to be a buffalo, you have to stand still.”*

*“Yessir, I sure will,” said Coyote, and he braced himself. But when he saw Big Bull Buffalo coming at him, he just couldn’t stand still, and at the very last moment he jumped aside and Big Bull Buffalo ran past.*

*“I thought I told you to stand still,” roared Big Bull Buffalo; Coyote just stood there shivering, so scared that all four of his knees banged together. “I am going to give you another chance, you scruff ball,” Big Bull Buffalo said, and he went off about a half mile to make another run. But the closer he got to Coyote, the more scared Coyote got and once more, he jumped back just as Big Bull Buffalo passed him.*

*“I told you to stand still, and I mean it,” he roared. He pawed the dust and his tail was standing straight up, which means he was really mad, and all Coyote could do was nod.*

*But a third time Coyote jumped aside at the last moment, and this time Big Bull Buffalo was so mad that he hooked his horn hard at Coyote, and Coyote could see that with those iron-hard horns, Big Bull Buffalo could tear him apart. So the fourth time that Big Bull Buffalo came running at him, Coyote shut his eyes and hummed his death song so he couldn’t see or hear Big Bull Buffalo bearing down on him. And Pow! Big Bull Buffalo hit him, and when Coyote came to and looked around, sure enough, just like Big Bull Buffalo had said – he had been turned into a buffalo – not as big as Big Bull Buffalo, but a lot bigger than he had been when he was only Coyote.*

*“Hey, this is great!” he said, and he trotted off to join the herd. Buffalo-that-had-been-Coyote set to eating the grass, but it turned out to be peppergrass that tasted terrible. Then he got hold of some ripgut, and it cut up his mouth. And he got a cactus stuck on his nose. “Well, this isn’t as great as I thought it was going to be,” he thought.*

*He strolled over to some other bulls about his size to make some friends, but they pawed the ground and threw dust up over their shoulders and pounded on him with their horns and hoofs until he was covered with bruises. He retreated to the back of the herd where he had to breathe dust all day long. Then a storm came up. Instead of finding some nice warm shelter like he used to when he was Coyote, he had to walk straight into the storm like the buffalo do. Lightning was all around him; there was cold rain and wind, and he thought, “This is getting to be less fun all the time. I wonder if this was such a great idea, me turning into a buffalo.”*

*Then some people came running over the hill and began shooting arrows at him. They had never bothered hm as Coyote, and he had never bothered them, except to slip into camp for scraps of meat now and then.*

 *“These guys are trying to KILL me!” he exclaimed.*

*And he took off running with a couple of arrows stuck in his rump. Then he stumbled in a gopher hole, fell down, and broke a horn. That did it! He limped back over to Big Bull Buffalo; he was hungry, battered, cold and wet, and bleeding where the arrows were still sticking out of his hide.*

 *“Mr. Big Bull Buffalo, sir, I think a mistake has been made,” he said.*

 *“What are you talking about?” grunted Big Bull Buffalo, and he continued*

 *eating grass.*

 *“I think I want to be Coyote again,” he said.*

*“Okay, you miserable pain-in-the-rear. You sure didn’t amount to much as a buffalo. Turning you back to Coyote is pretty much the same process. So stand still and don’t make this any harder for me than it needs to be.”*

*Of course, being Coyote, he jumped aside three times before he finally closed his eyes and hummed his death song, and the Big Bull Bufalo finally hit him, hit him so hard, he is still going up. If you look up along the lip of the Big Dipper tonight, you will see a bright star, and that star is Coyote, still going up into the sky. But when he comes back down, he will be Coyote again, and he will be glad that he is.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

 We are fearfully and wonderfully made, says the psalmist. Every one of us, fearfully and wonderfully made! As someone once said, God doesn’t make any junk! We may wish that we were more like Big Buffalo or Taylor Swift or Lebron James or some other person who seems to have so much more going for her than we do, we may even try to fool others or ourselves or even God into thinking we are better than we know ourselves to be, but the truth is that God knows us and loves as we are, as God made us. We cannot hide from God, nor can we hide from God those sins that lurk in our hearts, for GOD KNOWS US better than we know ourselves, yet still God loves us and perseveres with us. While that may not make any sense to us, knowing ourselves as we do, it does make perfect sense to God. So, maybe if God knows you so well and claims you and loves you as you are, you might just as well love you too, and then love your neighbor – as you love yourself. Amen

1. Roger Welsch*, It’s Not the End of the Earth But You Can See It From Here*, Villard Books:1990, pp.174-178 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)