

First Presbyterian Church
Psalm 139, “Search Me and Know Me”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 9/5/2021

Lost anything recently? Searched for anything?

Has anyone else ever done a Google search on their computer for,
“Where is my phone?” It feels a little silly, but I’ve done that.
Apple now has their new air-tag system
for doing that better than ever...
which also means they are searching us
and knowing us more than ever.

Searching for things is common to humanity.

We search for food, we search for companionship,
we search for security,
and sadly we search for our masks when going into public.

Jesus said the Kingdom of God is like a woman searching for...a lost coin.

We are very accustomed to being the searchers,
to longing for something we cannot grasp.

But Psalm 139 turns these experiences of searching on their head.

In David’s prayer imagination, our usual experience of things
gets turned upside down, God, the maker of everything,
has searched out David’s own soul.

We are people who search –

but do we realize that we are also those who are searched out?

This psalm draws us into David’s prayer imagination.

We all have a prayer imagination – prayer is an act of creative speech
or thought, and thus requires imagination.

But for many of us (myself included) our prayer imagination doesn’t get
worked out very much and we fall into predictable patterns in prayer.

Few of us tap into the kind of expansive and powerful imagination
we see on display in this Psalm.

When we pray through the Psalms or in other ways that expand our imagination,
we allow God to shape how we view the world, ourselves,
and God's own character.

The beginning and closing verses of the Psalm both draw out this theme,
and the verses in the body of the Psalm
provide specific examples of what God's searching reveals.

David begins like this, "*You* have searched me, Lord, and *you* know me."

We often think of the Bible
as exploring and searching out humanity's knowledge of God.
But in verses 1-6, this psalm explores
God's comprehensive knowledge of David!

God's awareness of David extends from his movements –
whether he stands or sits – all the way to his inner thoughts.

A common feature of Hebrew poetry is to repeat concepts in parallel fashion
but with additional perspective or insight.

We see this in the way verses 3 and 4 expand
on the topics of bodily movement and inner thoughts
that were introduced in verse 2.

In verse 3 – God knows "my going out and lying down,"
and 4 – God before a word is on my tongue, Yahweh knows it completely.

I wonder how many of you begin to feel a little uneasy
when considering the idea that not just your actions
but also all of your thoughts are laid bare before God.

How many sermons or Bible studies have used these verses
to inspire contrition and guilt in our hearts?

But David is not anxious or worried in these verses. Not in the least.

It's true that we are all sinful people,
and if God knows everything we say and do and think,
then our sin is included in that.

But this is not where David's imagination is focused in these verses.

He's no stranger to corruption in the human heart, but even so,
look where he goes with the knowledge God has of him in vv. 5-6:
"You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me."

This is not judgment. Not condemnation or cross-examination.
"Hem me in" – within your complete knowledge I'm snug and secure.
"Lay the palm of your hand upon me."
– provide me assurance and comfort.

This is a prayer focusing on the gracious knowledge of God,
that there is nothing God doesn't understand, care about and provide for.

And so David concludes in v. 6, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain."

David cannot see in himself all the things that God can see in him.
David, even as a human who knows how to search things out,
cannot find all the treasures and wonders
in his own being that God can find there.

This is true for each of us as well.
For even as people prone to wander away from God,
we are fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God.

Surely those of you who have children or have cared for children
know the things they do wrong.
But when take time to search out their souls;
watch them play and eat and bathe,
you don't primarily focus on the things they do wrong.

We are God's beloved children, and he takes delight in us –
not in our sin, but in the people we are becoming.
Let that be an encouragement to you today.

While the first six verses focus on God's comprehensive knowledge,
the next six verses focus on God's comprehensive presence.

"Where can I go from your Spirit?" David asks in v. 7.
"If I go up to the heavens you are there; if I make my bed in the depths,
you are there."

This is true both literally and figuratively.

Whatever mountaintops David climbs to in life,
and whatever desert canyons he descends to, God is with him always.

There is no time or place where he can look at his setting and say,
“God is utterly absent from me now.”

In verse 8, David considers the passage of the sun over the land of Israel.
He says, “If I rise on the wings of the dawn”
[when the sun would be rising in the East over the land of Israel],
or “if I settle on the far side of the sea”
[where the sun would set in the west over the Mediterranean]
– “even there your hand will guide me.”

This, too, is a welcome and grace-filled comfort to David.
No circumstance or location can separate us from God’s guiding hand.

But another possibility is considered in vv. 11-12.

What if a person *didn’t want to be seen*?

Have any of us ever had intentions we’d prefer to keep secret?
Of course. And the best way to keep something from being seen,
is to keep it in the dark.

So David suggests, “If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light
become night around me’ even the darkness will not be dark to you.”

There is no hiding of schemes or plans or ulterior motives from God,
for what we consider dark is not dark to the Lord.

“The night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.”

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In the third section of the Psalm, David’s prayer imagination
moves on from God’s comprehensive knowledge
and God’s comprehensive presence
to God’s comprehensive creative work
spanning time and space.

I remember the feeling the first time I saw a film
about the development of a human embryo.

I was awestruck, watching as cell by cell, division by division,
this tiny creature came into view,
and then grew limbs and a head,
and eventually became a tiny person within their mother's womb.

Even with all our scientific insight into such things, David's description
of God's intimate involvement in forming a human body
is incredibly fitting: "You knit me together in my mother's womb."
and in v. 15, "My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place."

God is active in the details. God cares about the smallest things in our world.

Not only has God created each cell in our body, but also each day in our life.
"All the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be."

In the final verses of the Psalm, David prays against his enemies
and declares his perfect hatred toward those who align themselves
against the Lord.

Is it okay to pray about hating people?

To be sure, God has shown us the way of perfect, self-sacrificial love in Christ
who called us to love our enemies, not hate them.

But David isn't trying to pray perfectly, he's praying honestly.
He's saying that if someone is against you, God
if someone tries to do things that oppose you,
then I don't want to be around those people
and I really wish you would take care of them!

So when I pray this passage from Psalm 139, the emphasis isn't on hating anyone,
but on rejecting the false way of religion
that we so often see around us.

Finally at the other end of the Psalm, David returns to the language of search.
He already declared in v. 1 that the Lord *has* searched him out.
Even so, he invites more in v. 23, “Search me, God,
and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

Even here, where the concept of sin arises,
there is such a deep trust in God’s goodness.

David is anxious, yes. He admits as much.
But he’s not anxious about God! He’s inviting God into his anxiety,
and if there’s something offensive,
he’s not afraid for God to see that either.
For he trusts that God will lead him into the way everlasting.

Is God really like this?
YES. This is the God we see in Jesus of Nazareth, is it not?
Jesus did not tolerate sin in the least, but he LOVED sinners.
And he loves you.

Is this the God you encounter in your own prayer-imagination?
Or do you pray to a God who is disappointed?
Are you wondering if you should really be hiding in a corner?

The Triune God knows each one of us perfectly, and God is perfect,
but God is not a perfectionist.

God doesn’t need you to come today without blemish.
God just wants you to come.

We can invite God’s knowledge and presence into our whole selves
without anxiety, because our Creator’s deep desire is to comfort us,
to welcome us, and to lead us into the way everlasting...even now.