

## **“Wherever We Go” – Psalm 139:1-18**

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Gracious God, we give you thanks for your steadfast love and steady presence in our lives. May we tune our hearts to your guiding Spirit. May we trust in your grace, experience your comforting compassion, and listen for your word to us this day. Amen.

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I've always loved Psalm 139. I love its beautiful poetry, its rich metaphors and imagery. I love its central question: “where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?” And I love its theological answer to that question – nowhere is beyond God's reach and that God is with us wherever we go.

Especially in times when I have felt a little isolated or disconnected, worried or wondering where God was in a particular experience, I have often turned to this psalm for a reminder of God's presence with us in all things. And I've often wondered if that is why the psalmist wrote it. Psalms are poems and songs, and they are also prayers that often reveal the deep desires of the psalmist's heart.

Perhaps the composer of this psalm needed a reminder of God's presence in their own life and circumstances. Maybe they also understood that others would need to be reminded of God's presence too.

If you read the end of the psalm (the part we didn't hear today), it is clear that this person was dealing with some kind of conflict, either personal or political (or maybe both). In those verses, which are pretty vengeful, the psalmist pleads to God to deal with their enemies once and for all.

But the real strength of this psalm is in the portion we heard today – in its personal inner reflection about our relationship with God. The psalmist clearly desires to be fully known by God and then affirms that God's knowledge is comprehensive. The message is that God knows us, inside and out, perhaps even better than we know ourselves at times. God knows our actions, our thoughts, our words (even before we say them). The psalm speaks of an intimate connection, a deep and personal relationship, a bond that cannot be broken.

God, our Creator, knows how we are made. Often in scripture our creative God is likened to a potter who forms (and re-forms) us as a potter forms clay – creating a vessel for spirit and love. Riffing on this idea of God as an artist, in this psalm, God is compared to a knitter or a weaver. God fashions us one prayer-filled stitch at a time, bringing together our varied fibers into one fabric.

Both of these beautiful metaphors imply loving care and attention to detail in the creative process. And the psalmist affirms that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made.” The word fearful need not throw us off. This phrase implies reverence and respect, along with awe and wonder. The psalmist is awed by the creative process that brings forth life in its myriad forms and implies that our Creator is too.

The message is that we are each unique, beloved, important, and worthy of dignity. And, as our Loving Creator, God has a claim on us and a claim on this world.

And, not only has God created us and knows us, but God goes with us everywhere we might go; to the heavens, of course, but also to Sheol (literally the pit) – the place of the dead, the grave; and to the farthest limits of the sea (to the literal or figurative ends of the earth). Even to those far away, unknown, and sometimes frightening places, God’s hand will lead us; God’s hand will hold us. Even if we try to flee, God will pursue us.

Even into the darkest and most difficult places, God goes with us. God knows darkness, as if it were light, says the psalmist. Nothing is beyond God’s sight. And God’s Light, God’s Love, is pervasive, persistent, and present in all things, even in places that appear dark to us.

The message of this psalm is that we can never get out of God’s reach. God is invested in us and God is invested in this world. In love, God created this world, created us, and is still creating. God is not out there somewhere beyond our grasp. God is here with us.

And though we don’t know everything on God’s mind; God knows what’s on ours. We can trust in God’s knowledge of our hearts and minds. We can trust in God’s presence. We can trust in God’s love.

And isn’t that what faith is all about? Trust. Too often faith is equated with belief. But faith is more than a mental exercise. Faith is about living into this relationship, living into this invitation to trust. We may have different beliefs from one another about some things. Our beliefs may change and develop over the course of our lives. But this journey of learning to trust God is at the heart of our faith. And this journey of trust in God is one place where we can find some common ground, I think, with people whose perspectives, backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences differ from our own.

And it’s true, this journey of trust will challenge us sometimes. Perhaps that is when we need to revisit texts like today’s psalm for a word of encouragement, hope, and inspiration.

On this weekend when we are invited to pause to remember the work and witness of our forebearer in faith, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., I’ve been thinking a lot about how we trust in God’s presence wherever we go and in God’s guidance as we seek to love our neighbors. In particular, with God’s help, how do we do the work of love in the public sphere and seek a more just and peaceful world for all?

There are many lessons to be learned from Dr. King’s legacy. And the first one is to be grounded in something deeper and bigger than oneself. His leadership and his work for

civil rights was not about boosting his own ego. It was about something much bigger and much more important. He once said, “an individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.”

Our personal concerns matter, but so do the concerns of our neighbors. In listening to the lived experiences of others, we get a fuller picture of reality, a deeper sense of our common humanity, and a better of understanding of the needs of our society.

King was deeply grounded in faith and took his inspiration from the very path that Jesus walked, a path of compassion and service. His faith in God and his trust in God’s love for all people clearly gave him the courage and strength to go into challenging places. He had his moments of doubt and struggle, I’m sure, but he seemed to trust in that pervasive, inescapable presence of God that our psalmist wrote about.

Second, I think we can learn to practice hope. King was a modern prophet. He experienced and knew the struggles of his people. He called out the injustice he saw. And yet, even in the toughest of times, he offered words of hope (much like the prophets of ancient Israel). His powerful speeches still inspire us because they give us hope; they give us something to aspire to, a vision to work towards.

In those moments that tempt us to give up, his words still ring true: “We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.” We can’t give up. The stakes are too high.

Dr. King also exhibited a commitment to seeing others as God sees them, along with a commitment to the common good. His theological convictions and his humanitarian convictions led him to lead others to envision and work for a better world for all.

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

Those words from King’s *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* are probably some of the most often quoted. And did you notice the weaving metaphor has reappeared? Not only has God woven us individually, as the psalmist said, but God has also stitched us together.

That letter was sent to white people, white preachers in particular, who were sympathetic to the cause, but hesitant to get too involved. It’s truth still convicts and inspires. And it is as important now as it was then. King truly believed that seeking fairness, equity, and justice for African American people would improve our society for all. He was right. And though we’ve come a long way in some ways, we still have a long way to go.

Our faith has always called us to seek justice. Justice is love of our neighbors on a societal level. It is as simple and as complicated as that. Perhaps the psalmist’s assurance of God’s presence with us and God’s love to guide us can help give us both the courage and the

encouragement to keep at it, and to find the ways we are individually called and equipped to engage and support this cause for the sake of our collective common good.

King was also committed to nonviolence and to organized, meaningful action. The point of protest should be to shine a light on the things that need our collective attention, the injustices that need to be addressed, the wrongs that need to be righted. Strong feelings and strong convictions can be expressed in peaceful, nonviolent, meaningful ways and get the attention of the powers that be. Change can happen for the better.

The difficult thing is that sometimes one's commitment to nonviolence results in being the receiver of another's violence. This happened to Martin Luther King Jr. This happened to Jesus.

King was also committed to the democratic process. He worked for unjust laws to be changed. He worked for a better and more just democracy for all.

These commitments to nonviolence, to organized and meaningful action, and to the democratic process are all important because they honor the dignity and worth of all people. They are important because they seek not to upend society and cause chaos and hardship, but instead to improve our collective life together.

"The way of violence leads to bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers," King said. "But the way of nonviolence leads to redemption and the creation of the beloved community."

The beloved community. Isn't that what we hope for? Isn't that what God hopes for too? Isn't that what Jesus worked for as he ministered, healed, and taught?

Finally, I think that Martin Luther King Jr. trusted that God would continue to be at work and would continue to guide those who followed him. He knew it was a long road. But he had hope for the future. He had hope for the generations that would follow.

It's the same with us. We are called to do our part to seek justice, to love our neighbors near and far, in our own way, in our own brief span of time upon this earth. We probably won't see the end of the road in our lifetime. And that's hard to come to terms with sometimes. But we have to keep walking. We have to keep working. And we have to keep trusting that God goes with us wherever we go.

And so, I want to leave you with some powerful and inspiring words for your journey, for our collective journey, from another faithful sojourner who has gone before us and walked alongside and worked with Dr. King, the late congressman and civil rights leader, John Lewis:

*Study the path of others to make your way easier and more abundant. Lean toward the whispers of your own heart, discover the universal truth, and follow its dictates.*

*Know that the truth always leads to love and the perpetuation of peace. Its products are never bitterness and strife.*

*Clothe yourself in the work of love, in the revolutionary work of nonviolent resistance against evil. Anchor the eternity of love in your own soul and embed this planet with goodness.*

*Release the need to hate, to harbor division, and the enticement of revenge. Release all bitterness. Hold only love, only peace in your heart, knowing that the battle of good to overcome evil is already won.*

*Choose confrontation wisely, but when it is your time don't be afraid to stand up, speak up, and speak out against injustice.*

*And if you follow your truth down the road to peace and the affirmation of love, if you shine like a beacon for all to see, then the poetry of all the great dreamers and philosophers is yours to manifest in a nation, a world community, and a Beloved Community that is finally at peace with itself.*

*(John Lewis with Brenda Jones, *Across That Bridge: A Vision for Change and the Future of America*, Hachette Books: 2017, ©2012, 208.)*

May it be so.

Amen.