



# First United Church of Oak Park

## God Knows Me

Psalm 139

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Our scripture this week is Psalm 139, but instead of reading it now, I'm going to weave it in as we go. I want to start by talking about someone I associate with this Psalm.

Poet, pastor, mystic, philosopher, and theologian, Howard Thurman. He prayed Psalm 139 every day of his life. Thurman said if the whole of Scripture except one chapter were to be taken from him, all he would need is Psalm 139. Why is that? I believe part of the reason this Psalm gives us enough to ponder for a lifetime is because it almost feels as if we have wandered into the bedroom of a giant of the faith and found their diary laid open on the bed, revealing to us their innermost thoughts. And as we read what feels almost too personal for our eyes to see, we are overcome with the reality that the Psalmist, this great figure of the faith, feels as vulnerable and is as ambivalent about it all as we do. In that realization, I find reassurance for my own journey of faith. Reassurance that I am not alone; that I am not some fraud because my relationship to the divine is not a pleasure cruise. The waters of faith can feel rough, even to the writer of that Holy Scripture that Howard Thurman called "The Great Passage." And so let's dig into this open diary we've found laid open for us to read, and let's listen for the Psalmist's journey of faith, summed up in a chapter.

I think of verses one through six as the first encounter ... the time in the Psalmist's life when they are first becoming aware of the holy. The first awareness that they are not alone, but have a holy companion who knows them deeply.

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

<sup>2</sup> You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
you discern my thoughts from far away.

<sup>3</sup> You search out my path and my lying down,

and are acquainted with all my ways.

<sup>4</sup> Even before a word is on my tongue,

O LORD, you know it completely.

I look behind me and you're there,

then up ahead and you're there, too —

your reassuring presence, coming and going.

This is too much, too wonderful —

I can't take it all in!

This is a joyful encounter, at first. This is a new faith. I remember as a young child, thinking about how vast time and space was ... how far away the stars were ... how long history had stretched ... and to think, I was known. To think I mattered in the least. It was all too wonderful for me.

But this takes a turn. The Psalmist realizes that if the holy is omnipresent, there is no denying their vulnerability. This God knows every word spoken, every rude thought, every avoidant behavior, every moment of hustling and over-functioning to prove your worth: God sees it all. That vulnerability is a little too much. The Psalmist begins to panic a little and fight that vulnerability. Verses 7-12 say,

Is there any place I can go to avoid your Spirit?

to be out of your sight?

If I climb to the sky, you're there!

If I go underground, you're there!

If I flew on morning's wings

to the far western horizon,

You'd find me in a minute

you're already there waiting!

Then I said to myself, "Oh, he even sees me in the dark!

At night I'm immersed in the light!"

It's a fact: Darkness isn't dark to you; night and day, darkness and light, they're all the same to you. To be fully seen, as we are — no shining up the rough places, no putting our best foot forward, no hiding in a dark corner, but being seen as we are — can be a frightening experience. We fight that vulnerability. We want to keep some of ourselves away from God and from each other. A paraphrase of this part of the Psalm might say "Could you just leave me alone

for, like, ONE second???" And why are we so afraid to be seen fully? Why do we fight our vulnerability? Because we have been taught to expect to be criticized, shamed, or rejected. We have been trained to put our best foot forward, but God created both our feet. We have been trained to never let them see us cry, but God gave us the ability to cry, and the Psalmist says our tears are precious to God. We have been trained to keep our chins up, but beloved, God gave you that incredible fully articulating neck and expects you to use every angle. When we show ourselves in all of our fullness to God, we are not risking anything, because God already knows. We are simply honoring our creator by showing the fullness of her incredible creation.

This seems to be the thought of the Psalmist, who then comes to an acceptance of this vulnerability. This acceptance leads to joy and praise. In Verse 13, the Psalmist says,

For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

<sup>14</sup> I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderful are your works;  
that I know very well.

<sup>15</sup> My frame was not hidden from you,  
when I was being made in secret,  
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

<sup>16</sup> 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.

<sup>17</sup> How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!  
How vast is the sum of them!

<sup>18</sup> I try to count them — they are more than the sand;  
I come to the end — I am still with you."

What a glimpse into the personal faith journey of the Psalmist. Like a peek into the Psalmist's diary. Or perhaps, like a peek into our own faith journey. A journey of wrestling with our vulnerability, of fighting it and accepting it in fits and starts. Of the pain of trying to hide our true selves and of the joy of showing up fully and being accepted just as we are, just as we were created to be. Beloved of God,

we cannot hide from God. Your frame wasn't hidden from God when you were being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. God knows you fully, even on the days when that feels like the last thing you want. This is not a Psalm you read once and you're done. This Psalm takes a lifetime of wrestling. Howard Thurman knew, in his wisdom, that it needed to be prayed every day. As you continue to pray this Psalm and wrestle with your vulnerability, may you find fewer and fewer days lamenting that God won't leave you alone for, like, one second, and may you experience more and more days when you are praising the God who knows your inmost parts, and loves you still. Amen.