

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Psalm 139

July 17, 2005
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Psalm 139

For the director of music. Of David. A psalm.

- 1 O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.
- 2 You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.
- 3 You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.
- 4 Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD.
- 5 You hem me in—behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me.
- 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.
- 7 Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?
- 8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
- 9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,
- 10 even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.
- 11 If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,"
- 12 even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.
- 13 For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.
- 14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.
- 15 My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,
- 16 your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.
- 17 How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!
- 18 Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I awake, I am still with you.
- 19 If only you would slay the wicked, O God! Away from me, you bloodthirsty men!
- 20 They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name.
- 21 Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD, and abhor those who rise up against you?
- 22 I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies.
- 23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.
- 24 See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

What scares you? What makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand up with fear? What makes your skin crawl and your heart start beating faster? What brings a band of sweat to your brow and makes you want to run the other way? What makes it feel like your stomach has dropped down to the tips of your toenails?

Public speaking is the number one fear in America. Some of you in this congregation can appreciate that statistic. I've heard you lament having to make an announcement. Or, I've seen your hands and legs shake as you stand up here behind the pulpit. Maybe you're one of the people who fear flying, they would rather get in the car and drive a thousand miles than find themselves in Row 9, Seat B of a Boeing 747 enroute from Traverse City to Orlando. Or perhaps it's some kind of critter that sends your heart a-pounding. The mere thought of encountering a snake fills me with terror. If I'm flipping through a National Geographic and come upon a picture of a snake, I've been known to screech like a pterodactyl and throw the offending issue straight up in the air in surprise and horror. My fear of snakes is so out of control that I even taped two pages of one of Nathan's bedtime story books together because there is an illustration of a snake on one of them.

Now if we were to really examine these kinds of fears, we would discover that there really isn't all that much to be afraid of. With public speaking, there's the risk of being embarrassed by a mistake, but how is that really going to hurt anyone in the long run. And with critters such as mice and snakes, there's a risk of getting bitten, but it's small and the chances of the mouse carrying some dread disease or, in the case of living around here, the snake being poisonous, are very small. And we've all probably heard the statistics that the chance of crashing when you're in Row 9, Seat B of a Boeing 747 is much smaller than if you're in a Buick on Rt. 75 enroute to Toledo. But, there's nothing that says fear has to be rational. Our fears are, often by their very nature, irrational. And yet, that doesn't make them any less real. However, it does make them rather avoidable. Though I hate snakes, I don't live in constant dread of one slithering across my path. And for those of you who hate public speaking, there aren't many occasions in this life when it is required. And no one can make you get on a plane if you feel more comfortable driving. These kinds of fears are real, but in the grand scheme of things, they don't put too many limits on our lives and they don't cause us ongoing anxiety or panic. And so, when faced with the prospect of coming across a snake on a hike with Corey and Nathan, I can reason that if it were to happen I'd be okay and my desire to be outside spending time with them trumps my fear of the dreaded serpent. When it comes to these kinds of fears, we can reason with ourselves and remind ourselves to have faith, everything is going to be okay.

But what about those other kinds of fears that we sometimes have to face in this life. What about the fear that comes when you're diagnosed with cancer? What about the fear that comes when the hospital calls to tell you that your child has been in an accident? What about the fear that comes when you've been told that you, or someone you dearly love, is going to die soon? What about the fear that comes from living with an undiagnosed physical or mental illness during which you wonder each and every day what's wrong with your body and are you ever going to get better? What about the fear that comes when you've learned that you've been "let go" and you're not sure where the money to buy food for your family is going to come from? What about these kinds of fears? They aren't irrational and they can't be reasoned away. These kinds of fear are real, they can be consuming, and they often limit our options and exhaust our resources. These are the kinds of fears that, when push comes to shove and we wonder if we're going to be okay, we're not able to give a definitive answer because we really don't know.

Sometimes our Christian faith, or some people's take on the Christian faith, is rather hostile to fear. There are lots of sayings in the Bible that would back up an interpretation that being fearful equates to not having enough faith. Jesus even said, "Fear not, I am with you always." Or there's a familiar song based on scripture that goes "Be not dismayed, I go before you always, come follow me, and I will give you peace." So are we somehow "lesser" Christians, not faithful enough, if we feel real, genuine, unadulterated fear at critical moments in our lives instead of the peace Christ promised?

I don't think so and I would go so far as to say that that line of reasoning is harmful to folks who already find themselves in a difficult position in which they are feeling a lot of fear. It is, in a way, blaming the victim. And why is the victim blamed, well I think it's because so many of us don't want to admit that so many of the things that happen in this world are, ultimately, out of our control—including, sometimes, our feelings and emotions. And fear is a feeling. And

psychological studies have shown again and again that negating or avoiding our feelings leads to stress, illness, and dysfunctional relationships.

A few weeks ago there were a number of news stories regarding the comments Tom Cruise made about Brooke Shields using an anti-depressant to help her in her battle with post-partum depression. He derided her decision saying . . .

These drugs are dangerous. I have actually helped people come off. When you talk about postpartum, you can take people today, women, and what you do is you use vitamins. There is a hormonal thing that is going on, scientifically, you can prove that. But when you talk about emotional, chemical imbalances in people, there is no science behind that. You can use vitamins to help a woman through those things.

Mr. Cruise has, since that time, continued to deride psychiatry and claims that vitamins are the cure for what ails you. Well, I don't know enough about vitamins to know if they can cure psychiatric illnesses, but what I do know is that post partum depression—or any other kind of depression or anxiety disorder, is one of the most fear-inducing states in which someone can find oneself. And Mr. Cruise, like so many others, blames the victim, in this case claiming that she has some kind of vitamin deficiency. It is akin to the ways in which some Christians blame people who are ill or doubting or fearful of having a faith deficiency.

And perhaps it reveals my own faith deficiency when I admit that there are times when I have been so scared and felt such an overwhelming wave of fear crashing down upon me that I have nearly, or even on occasion completely, forgotten about God in the equation of my fear. But I don't really think it reveals a lack of faith so much as it reveals my humanity. But I have learned, in hindsight, that God was with me throughout those experiences. And what they taught me was that when I feel that kind of intense fear, I need someone around to remind me about God. Not someone who will tell me to not be afraid, but someone who will tell me that they know I am afraid, that God knows I am afraid, and that I am not alone. And so, when I was admitted to the Emergency Room two days after Nathan's birth because they thought I was having a stroke, the first thing I did was have my friend who had taken me there call Pam Fulton. I was so scared, had so much fear in my heart that I wouldn't live to see my brand new baby grow up that I was struggling to even remember that there was a God. But once Pam got there, she did all the reminding for me. And she didn't question my faith, put me on the spot, or try and make me feel better. She didn't make me false promises that everything was going to be okay. She was just there—just like God was there—and in those moments she was Christ to me.

And that, to me, is the message of Psalm 139. It is not a psalm telling us to deny our feelings. It is not a psalm meant to discipline us against fear or anxiety. It is a psalm of reassurance. A psalm that tells us that God, even God, knows fear. Not that in God there is no fear, but that God knows fear, knows when we're suffering from it, and is right there in the midst of it. To know fear is not to not know God. And Knowing God doesn't keep us from suffering, hardship, and doubt. Rather, knowing God, and knowing the people of God, helps us to feel just as the psalmist felt . . . hemmed in behind and before, with God's hand lying upon us. Knowing God reminds us that if we go to the heavens or to the bed of the sea, God is there. For even the darkness, the black darkness in which we know profound fear—even that darkness is light to God. And that is good news to the fearful, knowing that fear is not the final word, but rather that God loves and cares for us and the promise that one day, even if it's not in this earthly life, all fear will be over and we will know only peace and love. Indeed, we will know fear no longer.