

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"The wonder of being known"

Scripture: Psalm 139, Romans 8:37-39

Hymns: Sing praise to God who reigns above 327 (1-4), He's got the whole world in his hands 339, Let all things now living 338, (10,000 reasons), Cry of my heart 1991, Bless his holy name 1973, Bless the Lord oh my soul 2011, Psalm 23 1996

June 25, 2017

Rev. Steve Filyk

Today we continue our summer journey through the Psalms.

Old Testament scholar Tremper Longman
says of the psalms that they:

"teach us about God and our relationship with Him...

[and that] The Psalter may be thought of as a portrait gallery of God,
presenting us with multiple images of who God is."ⁱ

Not all of you were likely familiar

With that psalm of lament we covered last Sunday.

But my guess is that most of you recall today's psalm,
Or at least part of it.

Scholars are in agreement that "Psalm 139

is one of the most familiar and beloved poems in the Psalter.

Its soaring affirmations of God's incomparability,

couched in the deeply affective and relational language of prayer,
warrant its designation

as both a doctrinal and a devotional "classic."ⁱⁱ

Even if you are not a chapter and verse Christian,

You probably recall those lines:

"For you created my inmost being;

you knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made..."ⁱⁱⁱ

I praise you because of am fearfully and wonderfully made!

Most of us can agree with this observation of the psalmist.

An observation expressed earlier by Robert Service

In "The Wonderer".

We are all 'fearfully and wonderfully' made!

Just consider these interesting facts

About the human brain:

"A piece of brain tissue the size of a grain of sand [imagine that grain]

contains 100,000 neurons and 1 billion synapses
all communicating with each other...

All brain cells are not alike.

There are as many as 10,000 specific types of neurons in the brain...

Brain information moves anywhere between 1 mph

and an impressive 268 miles per hour.

[which] is faster than Formula 1 race cars...

The average brain is believed to generate

around 50,000 thoughts per day..."^{iv}

Some interesting facts about the brain!

But if this amazes you, you should consider reading a little

About the emerging field of neuroplasticity.

At the moment there is a growing understanding

"that the human brain[,]

for centuries thought a fairly fixed

and unregenerative organ...

is in fact capable of much more significant
self-repair and healing.

Not only that, but [that] much of the healing...

can be stimulated by conscious habits of thought and action,

by teaching the brain to "rewire itself".^v

In his book, *The Brain's Way of Healing*,
Dr. Norman Doidge tells the story of John Pepper,

"a man diagnosed with Parkinson's disease more than 20 years ago
who, at 77, has managed to reverse all of its symptoms
using "neuroplastic techniques"...

[Through] trial and error,
and an understanding of how Parkinson's
typically acts against sequences of muscle memory,

[Pepper] taught his body,
first through entirely conscious relearning
of the sequences involved in walking,
and then in all other actions,
how to **think differently**.

Pepper [discovered],
"through conscious walking,
a way of using a different part of his brain to walk..."^{vi}

Amazing stuff.
"It's hopeless -- all my words are vain
To tell the wonder of my Brain." ^{vii}

But while we wonder at the brain
in its proper functioning
And regenerative capacity,
We mourn its dysfunction and inevitable decay

In an article for the United Church Observer
Globe and Mail columnist Andre Picard
Shares the sad story of Judy Chui.

"In 2011, Judy... Chiu's frozen and lifeless body
was discovered on the sidewalk just 300 metres
from her home in a frigid January.

Chiu, then 66, believed to be in the early stages of dementia,
left her comfortable suburban Scarborough, Ont., home
in the middle of the night
and ventured into the cold.

She discarded her coat and glasses and wandered aimlessly.
When she couldn't find her way back home,
confused and scared,
she screamed for help.

She banged on people's doors and tried to claw her way into vehicles,
setting off car alarms.
[But] Chiu died alone, her pleas ignored.

Picard reported that "Chiu's death... sparked a discussion
about the benefits of tracking devices like GPS ankle bracelets
for dementia patients who wander."

But he noted that "tracking is not of much use
in a life where there is no one
who cares about your whereabouts."^{viii}

Which begs the question:
does it really matter if we are 'fearfully and wonderfully made'
If there is no-one who notices us?

What the psalmist would tell us
And those who lament Chiu's demise
Is that the greatest wonder of life
Is not the complexities of human anatomy,

But the God who both created us
And continues to care for us.
the God to whom all of us are known.

How does God know us?
Well the Psalmist counts the ways.
Please turn to Psalm 139 vs 1-4.

"You have searched me, Lord,
and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.

Before a word is on my tongue
you, Lord, know it completely."^{ix}

According to the psalmist,
The Lord "knows whatever the psalmist thinks and does"^x.

The Lord knows whether he is watching the kids
Or worrying about his finances.
The Lord knows when he's said too much
Or when he's held his tongue.

But that's not all. The psalmist continues (vs 7-10):

Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast."^{xi}

According to the psalmist God
Doesn't just know what he is thinking
But "is present to him wherever he is..."^{xii}

God knows when he's walking through the park,
Or enjoying a book at Starbucks.
God knows when he's lost at the airport in Los Angeles
Or lying in bed, safely at home.

But that's not all. The psalmist continues (vs 15-16):

"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.
Your eyes saw my unformed body;
all the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be."^{xiii}

According to the psalmist
The Lord was with him at his beginning,
Even before his beginning.

The Lord saw those first strands of DNA replicate.
The Lord oversaw the development of his organs.
The Lord knew that he'd be balding one day!

But that's not all.
This time let me quote this time from the NRSV:
"I come to the end—I am still with you."^{xiv}

The psalmist can foresee that at the end of life
God will be with him there.

When his heart stops beating
And his synapses stop firing.
When the minister pronounces the benediction
As his memorial, he will be safely with God.

So did you catch all of that?
What the psalmist is telling us is that God isn't a 'clock-maker',
Who made the whole world
In all its intricacies,
Who wound it up and then walked away.

God is a creator
Who loves his creation,
Who abides, lives in relationship with his creation.

What the psalmist recognise is that God knows his thoughts,
God knows his places,
God knows his beginning and his end.

One commentator notes that as we read this psalm:

“suddenly we find ourselves
no longer questioning the limits of God in our lives,
but considering our own limits
in the context of the life of God.”^{xv}

PAUSE

So how does the psalmist respond to this wonderful knowledge?

The Psalmist pledges his allegiance
Declaring war against all of God’s enemies.
The Psalmist places himself in God’s hands
To be judged and redirected (vs 23,24):

“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.”^{xvi}

PAUSE

This coming Tuesday we are going to remember and give thanks
For the life of Terry Farrel.
As you likely know, Terry was an incredibly gifted artist.
He like to wonder, or as he put it ‘imagine’.

God’s gift in him allowed him to see light and color
in what others had passed over
and bring this to our attention
to notice and enjoy.

Of course like all things in the created order,
Terry’s mortal existence was only temporary.
That amazing network of neurons that was his mind,
In the face of disease,
Began to unravel and disconnect.

In the end, eyes that could once see
What no-one else noticed,
No longer recognized his friends or his own spouse.

He no longer knew himself.

But what the Psalmist tells us
Is that he was, he is known to God.
All of his life. His past. His future.

That he was never forgotten by God,
But was, and is known intimately.

That’s a wonder for him.
And that’s a wonder for all of us.

It’s a wonder for those held close
in the bonds of family.
It’s a wonder for those wandering the streets
In the cold evening air.

The Heidelberg Catechism asks us:
“What is your only comfort
in life and death?”.

What is your only comfort in life and death?

[And the response:]
“That I am not my own,
but belong with body and soul,
both in life and in death,
to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.”^{xvii}

Now that’s a ‘wonder’!
Thanks be to God.
Amen.

ⁱ “25 quotes about the book of psalms” www.leadershipresources.org/blog/quotes-about-the-book-of-psalms/

ⁱⁱ Carol A. Miles “Psalm 139” *Psalms for Preaching and Worship* 357

ⁱⁱⁱ Psalm 139: 13-14 NIV

^{iv} Deane Alban “50 Amazing Human Brain Facts (Based on the Latest Science)”

<https://bebrainfit.com/human-brain-facts/>

^v Tim Adams “Norman Doidge: the man teaching us to change our minds” February 8, 2015 www.theguardian.com/science/2015/feb/08/norman-doidge-brain-healing-neuroplasticity-interview?CMP=share_btn_link

^{vi} Ibid

^{vii} Robert Service “The Wonderer”

^{viii} André Picard “All the lonely people” June 2016 UCObserver
www.ucobserver.org/society/2016/06/lonely_people/

^{ix} Psalm 139:1-5 NIV

^x James L. Mays *Psalms* 425

^{xi} Psalm 139:7-10 NIV

^{xii} James L. Mays *Psalms* 425

^{xiii} Psalm 139:15-16 NIV

^{xiv} Psalm 139:17 NRSV

^{xv} Carol A. Miles “Psalm 139” *Psalms for Preaching and Worship* 359

^{xvi} Psalm 139:23-24 NIV

^{xvii} Heidelberg Catechism “Lord’s Day 1”