

Pentecost 6, Proper 11, Year A, 2014  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

About fifteen years ago  
I set myself a task.  
One day a week  
I would set aside time for a walk,  
and I would spend that time  
memorizing a psalm.

And the psalm I chose  
was the one we read today.  
Psalm 139.  
I have to admit  
that I only got less than halfway  
but even the first few verses  
changed my life.

LORD, you have searched me out and known me;  
you know my sitting down and my rising up;  
you discern my thoughts from afar.  
You trace my journeys and my resting-places  
and are acquainted with all my ways.  
Indeed, there is not a word on my lips,  
but you, O LORD, know it altogether.  
You press upon me behind and before  
and lay your hand upon me.

Many of us grew up  
with a picture in our heads  
of God  
as an old man with a white beard  
who lives in the sky.  
As we got older  
we learned that maybe that picture of God  
wasn't quite right.  
Back in the middle of last century  
(doesn't that sound a long time ago?)  
J.B. Phillips wrote a book called  
Your God is too Small.  
In it

he listed a whole bunch of ways that we often think of God - resident policeman

parental hangover  
 grand old man  
 meek and mild  
 absolute perfection  
 heavenly bosom  
 god-in-a-box  
 managing director

and so on.

And went on to explore  
 who the God that we know in Scripture and in Jesus Christ  
 really is.

He's right.

Except I suspect  
 that what many of us took away  
 is that if our God is too small  
 then God must be huge,  
 enormous,  
 beyond our comprehension,  
 and therefore  
 a long way away.

And somehow we found ourselves back with the idea  
 of God somewhere off  
 in heaven.

And us here  
 on earth.

This psalm,  
 this psalm  
 says something very different.

LORD, you have searched me out and known me;  
 you know my sitting down and my rising up;  
 you discern my thoughts from afar.  
 You trace my journeys and my resting-places  
 and are acquainted with all my ways.  
 Indeed, there is not a word on my lips,  
 but you, O LORD, know it altogether.  
 You press upon me behind and before  
 and lay your hand upon me.

This God  
 is not far away. This God

is right here,  
right beside us.  
This God  
is so close to us  
that he knows us  
through and through

Or as the apostle Paul said in his sermon to the Athenians in Acts, This is the God in whom we live and move and have our being.

I was trying to think  
of a way to describe how this feels,  
and the best I could come up with  
was the feeling of swimming in the sea,  
especially in summer  
on those days when it is warm  
and calm.  
The water holds you up;  
you almost feel  
as if you are part of it.

I imagine that's what it must feel like when we were babies,  
still inside our mothers.  
fully enclosed, fully supported, fully safe.

That's how we are  
with God.

It's no wonder  
that in the part of the psalm that we skipped today, in verses 12 through 15, we read  
For you yourself created my inmost parts;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
I will thank you because I am marvelously made;  
your works are wonderful, and I know it well.  
My body was not hidden from you,  
while I was being made in secret  
and woven in the depths of the earth.  
Your eyes beheld my limbs, yet unfinished in the womb.

Sometimes these words are used politically, as an argument in the abortion debate,  
but that's not what they were intended as.

What they are  
is a statement, a reminder

of how thoroughly God is involved with our lives,  
 how thoroughly  
 God knows us,  
 how thoroughly  
 God loves us.

It reminds me of the hymn we sang last week,  
 that goes back to the sixteenth century:  
 God be in my head, and in my understanding;  
 God be in mine eyes, and in my looking;  
 God be in my mouth, and in my speaking;  
 God be in my heart, and in my thinking;  
 God be at mine end, and at my departing.

Sarum Primer, 1558

We live  
 in God  
 and God lives  
 in us.

And the psalmist goes on,  
 Where can I go then from your Spirit?  
 where can I flee from your presence?  
 If I climb up to heaven, you are there;  
 if I make the grave my bed, you are there also.  
 If I take the wings of the morning  
 and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,  
 Even there your hand will lead me  
 and your right hand hold me fast.  
 If I say, "Surely the darkness will cover me,  
 and the light around me turn to night,"  
 Darkness is not dark to you;  
 the night is as bright as the day;  
 darkness and light to you are both alike.

There is nowhere  
 where God is not.  
 And because of that,  
 wherever we are  
 God is.

We can't run away, we can't hide.  
 Remember Adam and Eve in the garden, back at the beginning of Genesis?  
 They heard God

walking in the cool of the evening.  
 It had been something  
 they had always heard,  
 since their creation,  
 one of the blessings  
 of Eden.  
 But then they ate the fruit,  
 and fear and shame entered their lives  
 and when they heard God walking  
 they hid.  
 But God knew them, God knew them,  
 and all the hiding in the world  
 made no difference.  
 We cannot hide from God.  
 Because out of love  
 God created us,  
 and out of love  
 God continues to be the essence  
 of our world.

And as Paul argues, this time in the letter to the Romans, at the end of chapter 8, not only can we not run away and escape God, but no one can get between us and God.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8: 31-39

God knows us.  
 God loves us.  
 God is with us.  
 Always.

That's the comfort of this psalm,  
one to read  
when we are struggling  
and feel  
alone.

But along with the comfort, comes the call.

Right at the end of the psalm, the final two verses  
we read today.  
Search me out, O God, and know my heart;  
try me and know my restless thoughts.  
Look well whether there be any wickedness in me  
and lead me in the way that is everlasting.

Often we focus on the second last line,  
asking God to find any wickedness, anything that we need  
forgiveness for.  
But it's the last line  
that's most important, I think.  
"Lead me in the way that is everlasting."  
Here we ask God  
to enable us to live  
as his people;  
in Christian terms,  
to follow Christ  
in everything we do.

Yesterday  
I had the privilege  
of co-officiating at the baptism of baby Audrey Lillian Ercole  
at St Joseph's Roman Catholic Church in Ronkonkoma.  
Next week, as we celebrate the Feast of St James,  
we will formally welcome her  
as a member here as well -  
she gets to belong both to her Mom's and her Dad's churches.

And during the service  
the deacon talked about how to raise Audrey;  
he talked about how important it is  
for her parents  
to let her know  
in every way possible

about the God they follow,  
 the Christ who is their savior.  
 To show their love for one another visibly,  
 so that Audrey can see in their love  
 a reflection of God's love.  
 To bless her at night.  
 To pray at meals and at bedtime.  
 To read her stories about Jesus.  
 To bring her to church, even when she doesn't really understand  
 or when she doesn't want to come.  
 So she learns what it is  
 to live and move and have her being  
 in God.

But that's just the one step.

In our baptismal covenant  
 we talk about five different ways that we live  
 following in God's way.  
 Coming to church.  
 Rejecting evil.  
 Preaching the gospel in word and deed.  
 Loving one another.  
 And then, perhaps, the hardest.  
 Striving for justice and peace, and respecting the dignity of every human being.

Just this morning, I received an email from someone  
 linking to the report of a press conference  
 that the Governor of Massachusetts, Deval Patrick,  
 gave on Friday.  
 In it, he talked about the crisis of undocumented children  
 arriving in the United States illegally,  
 and his plans  
 to provide a place for a thousand children to live, play, sleep, and go to school.  
 And he talked about his faith.  
 He said, "it bears remembering that these are children alone in a foreign land...I believe that one  
 day we will have to answer for our actions and our inactions. My faith teaches that 'if a stranger  
 dwells with you in your land, you shall not mistreat him,' but rather 'love him as yourself; for you  
 were strangers in the land of Egypt.'"  
 He's quoting from Deuteronomy chapter 10.  
 And he's making the connection,  
 the connection between these children,  
 who are known by God through and through,

have been known since they were born,  
created, like us, in the image and likeness of God,  
and his responsibility as a Christian.

You might disagree with him politically.  
But you see what he is doing? He is asking the hard question,  
how does God who loves and knows me  
call me to respond to these children  
who are also known and loved by God?

How will the God who lives in you, who knows you through and through, who loves you more  
than you can imagine,  
how will the God you serve  
be present in the things that you say and do  
today,  
tomorrow,  
this week?  
How will you follow  
in the way that is  
everlasting?