

The Inescapable God

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Psalm 139:1-6; 23-24

Sermon Series:
Best Spiritual
Practices

*...we are both
fully known
and fully
loved.*

I grew up in the country, away from the glare of city lights. I lived on a farm that included my parents's home, my aunt and uncle's house next door and my grandparents, who lived in the farmhouse down the lane. My cousins, siblings and I learned to entertain ourselves in the days before personal computers. These days you can play Hide and Seek by yourself on the internet, but when I was a kid, we played Hide and Seek the old-fashioned way. My youngest cousin usually got the nod of being "It" first. He would close his eyes, count out loud to twenty and then shout, "Ready or not, here I come." The first person to be found would become "It" in the next round of the game. The goal of the game was to stay hidden the longest. Anyone who was still out there hiding could come in free when "It" shouted, "Ollie, Ollie, in come free."

Hide and Seek has been around as a children's game for at least four centuries, but adults have been playing Hide and Seek with God from the beginning. After Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden fruit, they attempted to hide from God. Imagine, trying to hide from God. But, hey, people do it all the time.

We've been focusing our sermons this month and last on Best Spiritual Practices, as we're calling them. We're using the book *Sacred Rhythms* to guide us in this journey. Today we're looking at the practice of self-examination. Some of you would rather I preach today on Mother's Day, on the institution of motherhood. The theme of self-examination is entirely relevant to mothers and fathers, single and married people, children and senior citizens alike.

You may approach self-examination with fear and trepidation. Who knows what you might find once you start scratching under the surface. In the words of Ruth Haley Barton, "Our sense of self-worth is so fragile and our perfectionism so pronounced that we are not sure if we can bear up under the scrutiny."

So, what are we trying to accomplish in this process of self-examination? The prayer of Richard Foster comes to mind: "Precious Savior, why do I fear your scrutiny? Yours is an examen of love. Still, I am afraid...afraid of what may surface. Even so, I invite you to search me to the depths so that I may know myself—and you—in fuller measure." The goal of self-examination is to know myself and God in fuller measure. We approach this process

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confident we are both fully known and fully loved. I'm not interested in self-flagellation and morbid introspection. I simply want God to show me what is true about me.

When Socrates went to trial for encouraging his students to challenge accepted beliefs and think for themselves, he declared that "The unexamined life isn't worth living." The Socratic ideal of "know thyself" can best be understood in relationship to the One who both knows us and loves us.

Psalm 139 is a prayer of self-examination. It begins with the acknowledgment in verses 1-6 that God knows us. "O Lord, you have searched me and known me." The word "know" appears four times in a span of six verses. It is not an intellectual knowing but a personal, intimate knowing. It's the kind of knowing described in Genesis when "Adam knew Eve and she conceived and bore a son" (Genesis 4:1).

This knowing is captured exquisitely in the prayer read earlier as our confession. This prayer was originally composed by Thomas Cranmer in 1548 for the *Book of Common Prayer*: "Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid...."

How does it feel to be fully known by God? Maybe this surveillance gives you the willies. You don't like being watched by anybody, not even God. So, your first impulse is to flee. The second section of Psalm 139, verses 7-12,

begins with a rhetorical question. "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?" The question begs an answer: nowhere. If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, even death brings me no escape from God. Darkness doesn't hide me from God, for God sees with perfect night vision. Hiding from God is an exercise in futility.

"O Lord, why do I fear your scrutiny? Yours is an examen of love." Knowing that God loves us unconditionally enables us to face the truth about ourselves. We are both fully known and fully loved.

Francis Thompson was born in 1859. At age 18, he entered college in hopes of preparing for the priesthood. But he lacked the disposition for the priesthood, so he left school. His father, a doctor, talked him into going to med school. But his real desire was to become a poet, not a doctor, so he dropped out of medical school. He moved to London, became addicted to opium and lived homeless on the streets.

He wrote several poems on the wrapping paper of a bag of sugar and sent them to a London paper publisher. This publisher was so impressed that he printed his poems in the paper, hoping this aspiring poet would step forward. One day Francis Thompson visited the publisher in his destitute, ragged condition. The publisher and his wife took him into their home. Thompson's best known poem is autobiographical in nature—The Hound of Heaven. It begins:

I'm not inviting God to know me. I'm inviting God to help me know myself.

“I fled Him, down the nights
and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of
the years;
I fled him, down the
labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the
midst of tears
I hid from him....”

Thompson describes God’s pursuit as gracious and relentless, like a hound picking up a scent. We are both fully known and fully loved.

The third section of the Psalm, verses 13-18, invites us to ponder how we are made. This portion of the Psalm includes the memorable verse, “I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” We take our bodies for granted. How extraordinary that our brains can make 100 trillion calculations per second or that our eyes, composed of two million working parts, can process 36,000 bits of information each hour. We have been created with 100,000 miles of blood vessels. Each of us has been fashioned with unique temperaments.

“This may seem like a simple thing,” Barton writes, “but it is not. Some of us have ambivalence or even shame about some aspect of our bodies or personalities.” It’s easy for us to look at ourselves and declare ourselves to be unredeemable. Get a grip. We are fearfully and wonderfully made.

Most of us would be content for Psalm 139 to end at verse 18. The next section, verses 19-22, seems so out of place in this beautiful Psalm. “O that you would kill the

wicked, O God....Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them as my enemies.”

Let me take you back to the purpose of this Psalm. The Psalmist, identified as David in the introduction, brings a spirit of self-examination to his prayers. He pours out his truest thoughts and feelings in prayer, asking God to help him sort it all out.

Most of us censure our prayers. We pray only about nice things. Psalm 139 teaches us to pray honestly. We can bring anything to God—even our rage is brought into the presence of God. David believes it is better to pray our hate than suppress it. Once our hatred is exposed, David leaves it with God. He surrenders the right to get even. Nowhere does this prayer give us the right to take hatred into our own hands.

The last section of the Psalm, verses 23-24, returns to the words David prayed at the outset, “Search me, O God, and know my heart.” The paradox of these verses is that David invites God to search me and know me when in reality God has already searched me and known me. I’m not inviting God to know me. I’m already completely known by God. I’m inviting God to help me know myself.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.” I am asking God to be my judge and jury so that in the end, God can be my shepherd. God’s

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judgment is never ultimately punitive; it's meant to be restorative—to lead me in the way everlasting.

We can't accomplish this self-examination on our own. Otherwise we will become too lenient or too harsh with ourselves. We need the counsel of trusted friends in the church to help us recognize our blind spots.

John and Charles Wesley, during their student days in Oxford, formed a small group for Scripture, meditation and prayer. A few years ago, I came across the 21 questions they used to hold each other accountable to live the Christian life. We would never dare asking these questions in our freedom-loving, it's-none-of-your-business culture we live in today. Let me read a few of them to you:

- Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am better than I really am? In other words, am I a hypocrite?
 - Do I confidently pass on to others what has been said to me in confidence?
 - Can I be trusted?
 - Am I a slave to dress, friends, work or habits?
 - Am I self-conscious, self-pitying or self-justifying?
 - Does the Bible live in me today?
 - Do I insist on doing something about which my conscience is uneasy?
 - Am I jealous, impure, critical, irritable, touchy or distrustful?
 - Is there anyone whom I fear, dislike, disown, criticize, hold

resentment toward or disregard? If so, what am I doing about it?

- Is Christ real in me?

I mentioned at the outset of this sermon that I used to play Hide and Seek as a child. My grandfather would sometimes play right along with us. It always baffled me as a child why my grandfather would hide in such obvious places. When I became older, it dawned on me. He wanted to be found.

God is not playing hide and seek with us. God wants to be found. When I come to the end of an engaging novel, I realize the author has been leaving clues for me, wanting to be found. We are fully known and fully loved.

