

2011 Life Sunday Sermon – Lutherans For Life – www.lutheransforlife.org

Text: Psalm 139:1-6; 13-18

Theme: The Divine Weaver

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In a time long ago in a faraway Asian country, there was a family in a small village with a daughter of marriageable age who became pregnant by her secret boyfriend. When her parents found out, they demanded to know who the father was, but their daughter refused to tell them, not wanting to bring shame upon the young man or his family. When they would not let up, however, she named the local Zen priest as the father of her unborn child. Her parents then went immediately to the temple and angrily confronted the priest, who simply replied, “Is that so?”

After the infant child was born, they brought it to the temple and turned it over to the priest for him to raise. By now his reputation in the community was ruined, but he set all of that aside and did whatever he could to care for the child, getting milk and anything else the child needed from his neighbors.

Finally, after a year had passed, the infant’s mother could no longer allow the priest to go on living under this wrongful stigma, and she blurted out to her parents that the priest was not the true father of her child. The real father, she said, was a young man who worked in the fish market. Totally shocked and humiliated, the parents immediately went to the priest and apologized profusely, asking his forgiveness for all the wrongful shame they had heaped upon him during these months. They also asked that he return the child to them, and in yielding the child, all the priest would say is “Is that so?”¹

Perhaps there has been a time when you were in a situation like this priest or the unwed mother and were forced to live under the scorn of others. The accusation may have been unjust, as in the case of the priest, or perhaps you were like the young unwed mother in the story and had to bear the painful consequences of your own wrongdoing. The weight of that load of shame seemed greater than you could bear. How did you respond? To whom did you go with your load of guilt and pain? In this Psalm, it would seem that the writer is living with an unjust accusation; some have speculated that he had been

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accused of idolatry. How does he deal with his suffering? To whom does he turn? The Zen priest in our story dealt with his injustice through detachment, by denying that the world around him is real; the unwed mother tried to shift the blame to someone else. The worshiper in our psalm takes a very different approach: rather than facing his dilemma with denial or shifting blame, he turns to the One who knows him better than anyone else, to the One who is acquainted not only with the outwardly observable aspects of his life, but who also knows his deepest, innermost thoughts, even to the very core of his soul.

He takes his case in prayer to the God who knows all things, beginning with the words, “O LORD, you have searched me and known me!”ⁱⁱⁱ In today’s text we have the opportunity to listen in on an intimate conversation between a person and his God. This is not a piece of instructional literature telling us things about God; instead, it is both prayer and hymn or song in which the writer speaks of the Lord in terms of his relationship with God. He takes refuge in God’s deep knowledge of him, which becomes the theme of his psalm, expressed with different forms of the word “know” in verses 1, 2, 4, 6 and twice in verse 23.

Right from the start we see that God knows this Psalmist in the most personal way: every thought, word, and deed. God is intimately bound up with His human creation—wherever we are so is He. In many places of the world today, when one goes to a place of worship, one claps his or her hands, or rings a bell to get the attention of the god or gods. But with the God of the Bible, we are always in His thoughts—when we are asleep, when we wake in the morning, when we sit or when we rise, He knows it. In verse 2 the psalm writer says, “You discern my thoughts from afar.” Every thought in our minds, every word, even before it passes our lips, God knows it. He knows us far better than we even know ourselves. To the psalmist, God is not some abstract theological concept, distant and uninvolved. No, for him, God is very much found in the everyday experiences of life. In verse three he says, “You search out my path

and my lying down; you are acquainted with all my ways.” No single aspect of our lives is outside of His knowledge.

Now, is this a comforting thing or a frightening thing for our psalm writer? “You hem me in,” he says, “behind and before; and lay your hand upon me.” In the following set of verses, starting at verse seven, he speculates that even if he did want to run away from God, it would be pointless to try, it’s impossible. There is certainly a frightening aspect to this truth, but there is also a comfort in it—God is never far from us; we are never out of His thoughts or His care. There is never any kind of situation that slips by Him or that He cannot handle. There is nothing too small or too big for Him—it all matters. He cares about every aspect of life that comes our way—the most trivial and the most wonderful; the joys and the sorrows. He’s there in the light and in the darkness; He’s with us on the mountaintop and He’s there with us in the deepest pit of despair, when we might think that all hope of deliverance is gone. And yet the message here is not just that all things matter to God, but that He fully and completely knows us. For the Psalmist, what is important is not just to know God, but also to be known by Him.

And who can know us better than the One who has made us? To illustrate this, the psalmist uses the image of a divine weaver. While other passages of Scripture employ the image of a potter when speaking of God as the Creator, in this psalm the writer depicts God as One who knits. He interweaves strands together as with muscles and veins. After having shown us how God is so far above and beyond us in so many ways, and how His knowledge is too wonderful for us, the psalmist raises the point that God has chosen to include us as part of the divine miracle of His creation. “For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (139:13-14a). The Bible speaks of human creation like no other—we were not simply spoken into being, we were created in the very image of God; He formed Adam with His hands and breathed His

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divine breath into him. Here in our psalm, God is portrayed as knitting us together in our mother's womb.

He is weaving us together and ordaining the days of our lives in His book long before we have the opportunity to live them out.

The Bible speaks very highly of human life. From the time of conception to the hour we leave our mortal bodies, God is intimately involved in planning out who and what we are to be, assembling us together, growing us, guiding us, correcting us, forgiving and restoring us as needed, until we become all that He has in mind for us. In Psalm 8 the author exclaims "...what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? You have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you put all things under his feet" (8:4-6).

The struggle to preserve the dignity of human life has been with us since the earliest of times, from the fall of humanity. From the day that jealous Cain murdered his righteous brother Abel, we have lived with the fear that someone might also determine that our life is expendable, that it is not worth living. Still today we live with human trafficking and slavery, with totalitarianism, with racism, with oppression of the poor and the weak. We hear debates over assisted suicide and abortion, and the Terri Schiavo case from 1990 to 2005, involving the removal of a feeding tube from a person who had severe brain damage, brought the topic of euthanasia into the national spotlight. On this Sanctity of Life Sunday, we again want to consider the high value that the Bible gives to human life. We want to think about the dangers of declaring anyone a non-person, the dangers of declaring anyone's life to be of little or no value. Our society today still suffers lingering effects from the tragedies of declaring black slaves and Native Americans to be non-persons, of lesser value than the white race. The world is still suffering from the effects of declaring Jews in Hitler's Germany to be persons of no worth or worse yet, of being a curse

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to humanity. And today we are a divided nation over the issue of whether or not human life and personhood are the same thing. With many questioning the personhood of the unborn we find ourselves on the horns of an ethical dilemma over using embryos for stem cell research. These are more than political questions to be settled by the victors in a culture war. These are questions that confront us in a culture of death.

Death comes to us in many forms—it is anything that wars against life. It comes in the form of disease or in the trappings of racism, crippling poverty or any kind of oppressive force that works against the life of any person. It is a force that wars against all who have no voice or power, whether it is the baby in the womb, the victims of a terrorist act or the victims of a bloody war. As believers in the Creator God and His Son Jesus Christ, let us stand against the enemy of death in all of its demeaning and tragic forms. Let us be the first to raise our voices whenever we hear someone challenge the dignity of any human life created in God's image.

But let us also stand against death by standing for life. The primary reason that the Bible defines the holy institution of marriage as the union of a man and a woman is that this union reproduces human life. This is a sacred union through which God brings the precious gift of life into our world. Let us also stand for that which enriches the gift of life: accessible education and medical care, equal opportunities under just laws that preserve the dignity of all people: male and female, rich and poor, believer and unbeliever, for Jesus taught us that God causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. God is for us, He does not want anyone to perish, but for everyone to come to repentance and to receive the gracious gift of eternal life with Him. And let us not forget that we affirm life most powerfully when we witness to others the good news of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, who brings us life eternal.

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The psalm that we are considering today is a powerful expression of how much God values His human creation. Regardless of our circumstances we can be confident that we are intimately known by God, and that He is directly concerned with and involved in every minute detail of our lives, more than we can possibly know or understand. The Divine Weaver has woven together every human life and He desires to call all people—most definitely including those who are vulnerable and in need—into a loving relationship with Him through Jesus Christ. He has knit us together in our mother’s womb, and, remarkably, in that very same way He personally came to us in His Son Jesus Christ, in human form, given birth by a human mother in a dirty stable. Born into poverty, into a nation of a people oppressed, He died the death of a lowly criminal. These are the lengths that God went to, in order to show us just how much He cares for all of us. He did this because our sin created a wall of division between God and His creation. Through His submission to death on the cross, an instrument of death, Jesus paid the penalty for our rebellion against the Creator, brought down that wall of division and accomplished what we could not: full reconciliation with God and with each other. Through His resurrection from the dead, Jesus gave us the gift of hope for an eternal life free from the effects of our sin.

Where do you stand today? Are you in need of hope, do you need God’s mercy and forgiveness? Perhaps someone here today has been involved in a sin against the sacred gift of life. Jesus shed His blood on the cross for that sin too. The Bible tells us that all who come to Jesus come as sinners: there are no exceptions; none of us is without sin. But the Bible also says this about God, that “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (I John 1:9). To all who come to Him, God promises mercy and forgiveness, and that our guilt before Him will be removed. In John’s gospel, chapter 6 verse 37 Jesus promised us, “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.” These promises are written in the Bible for you,

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and for all of us. May the words of the psalmist be our prayer today, as he prayed in the last verse of this psalm, “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” Amen

ⁱ See David Augsburger, *Pastoral Counseling Across Cultures*, Philadelphia: Westminster Pres, 1986, pp. 111-112

ⁱⁱ All quotes from Scripture are taken from *The Lutheran Study Bible: English Standard Version*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009