

Second Sunday after Epiphany

January 14, 2024

Faith, Okemos

I Samuel 3:1-20, Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18, I Corinthians 6:12-20, John 1:43-51

*O God, you search me and you know me. All my thoughts lie open to your gaze. When I walk or lie down you are before me; ever the maker and keeper of my days.*

*You know my resting and my rising. You discern my purpose from afar, and with love everlasting you besiege me; in ev'ry moment of life or death you are.*

*Before a word is on my tongue, Lord, you have known its meaning through and through. You are with me beyond my understanding; God of my present, my past, and future, too.*

*Although your Spirit is upon me, still I search for shelter from your light. There is nowhere on earth I can escape you; even the darkness is radiant in your sight.*

*For you created me and shaped me, gave me life within my mother's womb. For the wonder of who I am, I praise you; safe in your hands, all creation is made new.*

All Creation Sings, 1082

I was struck this week as I read and pondered the texts for this Sunday, especially Psalm 139 and John 1, struck by the awareness that God knows, Jesus knows, my every thought. This was especially evident on Thursday morning when I noted with alarm an email that I had just purchased some software for well over \$200. Included in the notification was a number I could call if this was in error. That began an hours-long journey through a thicket of multiple layers of fraud, cleverly masked as legitimate enterprises. I was increasing anxious when one purported helper noted that nearly half of my saving account had through the night been withdrawn.

In the words of Psalm 139 and John 1, the Lord knew my every thought, every emotion; knew my increasing anxiety.

Enter Mara, our middle child, whose family has been living with us as they, after moving from Virginia, look for a new home. She sat next to me as we made call after call to finally purge the threat. I know that I, and I think all humans, can't think clearly when we are anxious. Mara was much less anxious: "Dad, this doesn't feel right. I think we should hang up on this caller."

We learned that hackers are masters of deceit. We learned that they can mimic credible organizations like Pay Pal and Microsoft and Amazon and even our local bank.

*O Lord, you have searched me and known me...you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways...*

*When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit..."*

God know us intimately. Jesus knows me intimately. This is both disconcerting and immeasurably comforting.

The psalmist writes: *Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.* For me on Thursday, Mara was a little Christ, God's knowing what I needed, hemming me in, so to speak, preventing me from falling into the hands of those who would exploit me. And God was in the credible security folks we finally reached who placed new guard rails to protect me.

God who "fearfully and wonderfully" made each of us, loves us, all of us, quirks and all. Sins and all. We know this best because, in the words of St. Paul in Romans 5, "God proves his love for us in that while still were sinners Christ died for us."

Who of us has been and/or is not hard on ourselves? We may be ashamed of how we look or how we act or how dumb we feel. We may feel guilt for words spoken in unbridled anger or for our indifference to those neighbors who need our help. Or like those masters of deceit I experienced on Thursday, we may lie to protect ourselves or to benefit from other's innocence or naivete. "While we were still sinners..."

Here a word about Jesus and Nathanael about whom Jesus said, “truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.” You may remember the story of Jacob and Esau. Jacob deceived his blind, dying father, Isaac, receiving the blessing of the birthright that rightly belonged to his elder brother Esau. Just before the brothers were reconciled when Esau forgave Jacob after years of deep hatred and estrangement, God came to Jacob in the night in the form of a man and wrestled with him until daybreak...

*When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket, and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking. But Jacob said “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”*

When Jesus said to Nathanael, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you,” he saw not just his physical body but, I think, also his heart. Which led Nathanael to proclaim, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” When Nathanael said to Philip, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Jesus knew his thoughts, his skepticism, knew he was an Israelite, one who struggled with God and humans with perseverance and honesty. “Truly,” said Jesus, “an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”

I so love these texts for today. I love that God loves us so much that in the Son God has taken into Godself all of our darkness, all of our hatred and anger, and died on our behalf as a criminal. I love that the LORD of Psalm 139 and the Jesus of John 1, one and the same, knows my every thought, my every emotion, my every word. And in the words of Professor Craig Nesson, whom I heard in a talk at Bethlehem Lutheran Friday afternoon: through Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross, God enables us to transmute the energy of our darkness, our hatred and anger, our alienation from one another into words and acts of mercy and forgiveness, of kindness and generosity.

I love that Jesus comes very near to us, certainly through the bread and fruit of the vine in Holy Communion, but also through those sisters and brothers sitting near to us this morning, whether physically or virtually. I love that Jesus was sitting with me on Thursday in the wisdom of Mara.

The challenge for all of us this afternoon and tomorrow and beyond is to remember and trust that the Son of God and King of Israel is hemming us in, behind and before, in every moment of our lives.

*God, be the love to search and keep me; God, be the prayer to move my voice; God, be the strength to now uphold me; O Christ, surround me; O Christ, surround me. Walking behind to hem my journey, going ahead to light my way, and from beneath, above, and all ways; O Christ, surround me; O Christ, surround me. Christ in the eyes of all who see me, Christ in the ears that hear my voice, Christ in the hearts of all who know me; O Christ, surround me; O Christ, surround me.*

All Creation Sings, 1084, vss. 1, 4 and 5

Amen.

JDS