

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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Psalm 139

January 18, 2009

When I was a kid growing up in Fort Worth going to Sunday School, we learned three words to describe God. I don't know which of our teachers was such the overachiever, but at least one of them thought kids should learn some theology. So we were drilled on three big words that we were supposed to remember about God. God is omnipotent. God is omniscient. God is omnipresent. For a kid those aren't just big words, those are big concepts. All-powerful. All-knowing. Everywhere. For an adult, too. God is all-powerful, all knowing, and everywhere. God is omni.

So we understood better than most kids when the museum announced it was building something called an Omni theater. No one had ever heard of such a thing. But we imagined it immediately. It was a movie theater that was all-powerful, all-knowing, and you'd be able to see it from everywhere. Awesome.

The reality of the theater was only one shade less awesome than imagined. Soon after opening day we bought tickets and stood in line for an hour to get into the theater. All they had were documentaries: sea, space, speed. It didn't matter that *Star Wars* wouldn't be playing on this screen. The show was the theater itself. Once admitted, you tried to jostle about three quarters of the way up the steep stadium steps to the best seats. That was where you could see everything.

The screen wrapped around you. Below, above, all the way side-to-side. You became part of its spherical atmosphere. The screen was massive and surrounded you completely. So big you couldn't see everything. There was too much. Which was one part good museum strategy to get you to come back. And one part a subtle documentary commentary on real life. You never see everything. Life, the world, is just too big.

One secret to the theater was that if you didn't get the best seats you could just wait for the prequel, which was a helicopter ride over and through the skyscrapers of downtown Fort Worth. When the nose of the helicopter simultaneously dips and turns, and with it the entire screen, and with it your stomach, people get nauseous, and you could get their seats when they ran out.

It was a fun experience to look at a screen that big and wide and tall and surrounding. It was Omni. Like God. The only difference—well not the only difference—but certainly a difference, is that in the theater, you watch it.

Psalm 139 suggests that with God, the order is reversed. This not God's prayer to you, no matter how long or how serious or how spiritual you are as a Christian. "You have searched me and known me! You know when I sit and when I rise. You discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down. You are acquainted with all my ways." How wonderful it would be to hear those words from God. But even the great biblical heroes still fell short and lived with the verdict, "My ways are not your ways. My thoughts are not your thoughts." Abraham took matters in his own hands. Moses protested. David wandered. Peter denied. Thomas doubted. Judas betrayed. Paul asked "Why don't I do what I want to do and why do I do what I don't want to do?" Even Jesus said, "Take this cup from me. But not my will but yours be done."

We should study the Bible deeply, carefully and thoroughly. We should do theology and learn from those who do it best and explain it in ways we can understand. We should learn all we can. Be

the best students of the words of Jesus and the actions of Jesus and their implications as we possibly can. We should teach our children, our youth, seekers, and new Christians what this way of life is all about. We should never stop being students. “How precious to me are your thoughts, O God.”

But, we must always remember that even the most studious among us will never graduate from the school of Jesus. We will never have enough knowledge. We will never know enough. We will never fully understand.

Because the spiritual life is not ultimately about understanding and knowledge. That’s just one part. The psalmist says, “Your knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it.” It’s not ultimately about how you fully know God. The spiritual life is about how you live with the awareness that God fully knows you.

Augustine puts the words of this Psalm as a prayer on the lips of Jesus as a model for all of us. “O Lord, you have searched me and known me. Where can I go from you Spirit? Where can I hide from your presence?”

Spiritual formation is about two things. It’s about knowing more and learning more about God. We do that through studying the Bible, learning from the great teachers, evaluating our own experiences.

It’s also about being formed to live with the awareness that God knows you. God is searching you and knowing you. That God knows when you sit and when you rise. That from your birth to your death God knows you fully.

Spiritual formation means being shaped to live every moment with acute awareness that God knows you—all of you.

On one level, it’s a get-right moment. The monks called this the first level of ascendancy to God. It’s rooting out what is wrong in our lives.

The Desert Father Makarios wrote with great insight about us:

“The heart itself is only a small vessel,
yet dragons are there, and lions,
there are poisonous beasts,
and all the treasures of evil,
there are rough and uneven roads,
there are precipices....”

One of the first reactions many of us have to the awareness that God knows us is to remember one of the first lessons many of us learned in Sunday School. “God is watching you. And it ain’t from a Bette Midler distance.” God is watching you. So live right.

Not untrue. The Psalm, which expresses the vulnerability of one who is completely unmasked by God, ends with a surrender, “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts. And see if there is any grievous way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.”

The Christian spiritual life begins with repentance and discipline. Ancient Fathers described the first stages of the Christian life as a fight against our passions and mastering our desires. The person who wants to please God often begins by trying to live right and the person who tries to live right often experiences a great freedom and joy never before experienced in their lives. At the end of

Romans 6, Paul asks, “What benefit did you gain for the things you are now ashamed of when you were a slave of sin? But now you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God.” Testimonies of new Christians often include stories of the joy of living free from the life-sucking habits that once dominated their lives.

The second level of the Christian spiritual life builds on the first. For the one who discerns that Christianity is more than a list of ‘thou shalt nots’ it is a time and stage of growing fervor and understanding. We ponder the great mysteries of the faith and our lives become shaped by such thoughts as beauty, tradition, community, Trinity, virtues, and worship. Our prayer lives change in this stage as well. As someone once put it, “I began to sing with my eyes closed and pray with my eyes open.” Our imagination, some might say our worldview, becomes captive to the divine.

The final level is reached by the person who can pray in the depths of her heart. Theophan the Recluse, a Russian mystic, describes prayer in this way: “To pray is to descend with the mind into the heart, and there to stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all-seeing, within you.”

The experience of this stage in the spiritual life is less about what you have to say and think and more about your true self, laid completely bare before Truth itself. The prayer of the heart is a prayer that does not allow us to limit our relationship with God to interesting words or pious emotions. One writer reflects, “By its very nature, such prayer transforms our whole being into Christ precisely because it opens the eyes of our soul to the truth of ourselves as well as to the truth of God. In our heart we come to see ourselves as sinners embraced by the mercy of God. It is this vision that makes us cry out, ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’”

In college, I decided for one summer to apply to be a BSU summer missionary, thinking I’d like to go work at a Boy’s Ranch in Oklahoma. As things often work out, I learned I would be sent to teach English and work with two youth groups in the city of Brasov, which is definitely not in Oklahoma, but in Romania. Being a good Texan, I was already prepared to take a tank of Lone Star air and a gas mask to breathe, not convinced life really existed beyond the state border; certainly not in Oklahoma, where I was sure you needed a passport to travel to. I had no idea where to find Romania.

Part of the orientation, besides a crash course in geography was to meet one on one with the denominational official charged with assuring that our orthodoxy and values were in line with the organization’s. It was in line with my mother’s admonition when we left the house as teenagers, “Whatever you do, don’t embarrass the family.” So we chatted a while and I felt comfortable or naïve enough in the conversation to pose to him a deep question, a doubt that I’d had simmering in my mind. It went something like this:

“I believe that Jesus is the Son of God. I believe that he was born, lived and died as the scriptures say. I believe he rose from the dead. I believe all of this is true...if there’s actually a God. There’s not another version of God that competes for my allegiance, but what if this is all made up? What if there’s no God at all? I’m struggling with that. Can you help me out?”

I’d posed this line of thinking only once before, to an older mentor who’d talked with me through a sense of call to ministry. When I posed this question to him he said, “If you don’t believe there’s a God, you shouldn’t be going into ministry.” Fair enough. That seems perfectly reasonable, but wasn’t particularly helpful. I did believe in God. I just wondered. And it continued to bother me. It wasn’t a crossroads; it wasn’t a crisis of faith. It just was. It just sat there like a lump, like dead weight. If there was a chance I shouldn’t be going into ministry, maybe I shouldn’t be going to be a missionary. So I posed the question, hoping there would be some sort of tome of systematic theology I

could read, some apology for the existence of God that would prove God's existence beyond reasonable doubt. I hoped he would teach me something that would solve the riddle in my mind.

He looked at me like I'd lost my mind. I don't think this was in the denominational handbook. To send a doubter to be a witness of faith? To send a heretic to tell about Jesus? I didn't know what to expect. "You shouldn't go into missions or ministry" was about what I thought I might hear. Would he send me home?

From some hidden well of grace and wisdom he dipped a cup of surprisingly cool water and held it to my lips. It was living water. "That's a good question," he said. Then as if he were thinking it through out loud, he said with deep sensitivity and growing conviction, "We don't know the answer without some doubt in a way that's provable. That's why it's faith. You have faith. You also have doubt. That's okay. Most of us have some of both."

"Go and share your life with the people and love them. Share your faith when you can. Share your doubt if you need to. And one more thing. Memorize Psalm 139." "The whole thing?" "The whole thing. See what happens in you as you do."

So I went and settled on the far side of the sea and God was there. I rose and sat and thought and spoke. And it seemed like God knew all those things before they happened. I preached some really bad sermons. I made some really good friends. Some days were full and busy and God was in them. Some days were full and lonely, and God was in them, too.

It wasn't God that was lost; it was me. It wasn't God that needed to be revealed to me. It was me that I had to let go to be revealed to God, trusting that if I fell headlong into His arms, he would catch me. He always catches us. For all our sinful ways, all our doubts and inner disputes, and failures, and shortcomings. For all that you want to be and are not, for all that you are that is beautiful by His creative hand. He knows me. He knows you. He searches us and knows us. And leads us in the way everlasting.

I only read half of Makarios's description of the heart. The whole description is true.

"The heart itself is only a small vessel,
yet dragons are there, and lions,
there are poisonous beasts,
and all the treasures of evil,
there are rough and uneven roads,
there are precipices;
but there too is God and the angels,
life is there and the Kingdom,
there too is light, and there are apostles
and heavenly cities,
and treasures of grace.
All things lie within that little space."

And God knows them all. So may you live today unmasked, revealed, open to God's penetrating vision of you, in you, and for you. And may this awareness turn your life and your prayers inside out.