

The 15th Sunday after Pentecost
Psalm 139 "Being Known by God"

September 5th, 2010
the Rev. Michelle Slater

*O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
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.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.*

*Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night',
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.*

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written*

*all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.
How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them – they are more than the sand;
I come to the end – I am still with you...*

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

I'm very happy to be standing in this pulpit again, back home after a year of maternity leave, followed by two months of sabbatical time. Yet it's been harder than I imagined, to start writing sermons again, if only because I don't feel I can just "jump" right back into the scripture texts, as if I've never been away.

Part of me wants to spend some time sharing with you what I experienced over the last 14 months, what I learned and how I have been transformed. Mostly, what I've marveled at and been so grateful for, has been the ways my understanding of God has shifted and expanded, and how my relationship with God has deepened through becoming a mother. And here's my problem: I really don't want to be the minister who used to be a half-decent preacher...until she had a baby, and then that's all she could talk about! And I'm sure you don't want me to become that minister either.

Yet, I have to confess, the experience of being pregnant, giving birth and then spending such close and intimate time with my son Nicholas has given me an unimagined growth in my image of God, learning about the nature of God, and a great deepening of my relationship with God.

So I really pondered and prayed this week, as I considered the sermon for this, my first Sunday back here at Dunbar Heights United Church. Wondering if I should preach from the lectionary readings from Scripture, or rather, explore some of my learning and deepening over the last year, even if it means talking more about my baby than anyone really wants to hear.

It was when I finally cracked open the Bible and found the Psalm for today that I realized that I could do both. For many, Psalm 139 is a favourite, a song that proclaims the constancy of God's presence with us; the depth of the knowledge and intimacy that God has with us; the impossibility of going anywhere or doing anything that would remove us from the bounds of God's saving presence and love.

Most of all, to me, this poem, this song, holds together the amazing mystery and paradox of God, that God is, on the one hand, creator of all, transcends us all,

spanning all time and space but not contained by either. And, on the other hand, that God is also in a deeply personal relationship with every one of us, profoundly close to each one, closer than our very next breath.

I feel as if I've been living this psalm, over the past year. There is nothing like a new life to make you realize that there is something bigger, something more powerful, something mysterious at work in the universe. And to participate with God in creating life was, for me, nothing short of miraculous. As Rich and I have beheld Nicholas' growing body over the last year, and marveled at his daily and weekly growth in skill and ability, I've exclaimed, along with the psalmist, that we human beings are "fearfully and wonderfully made." Becoming a parent has given me a deepening awe of the wonder of creation, and of the great mystery of life and love, God's life and love, that creates and sustains us all. As the psalmist says, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it."

Yet I've also experienced God's presence so profoundly close to me, close enough that I could almost reach out and touch that presence. It first happened in the middle of the night, when Nicholas had awakened, again, and I stumbled into his bedroom with bleary eyes. As I rocked and sang him back to sleep, I felt such strong and passionate love for him, and desire for him to be happy and loving and protected, that I wished my love and hopes and desires for him could somehow physically pass from my arms into his body. That all that love and hope and protection could tangibly pass into him, sustaining him throughout this life, even and especially in times when I wouldn't be with him the way I was at that moment. Then it struck me: that the way I felt about Nicholas, is the way God feels about me. And you, and you, and each one of us. And I felt that as I was rocking Nicholas, God was rocking me.

It was a powerful image, one that brought tears to my eyes. It is the kind of intimacy, of deep knowing, that the psalmist talks about this morning: "O LORD, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways."

As I ponder the last year, and the very close and intimate relationship that I have had with Nicholas, it is almost overwhelming to think that God is seeking that same kind of relationship with me. After more than a year, I know my son very well indeed: what cry means "I'm hungry" and which means "I'm tired" or "I'm overwhelmed" or "I'm sick." I know his schedule, his routines, when he'll be getting tired and when he should be waking up. I know every food he's ever eaten, every person he's ever met or spent time with, and how he will react when he sees a dog, a cat, or a bird. I know him, with the knowing that comes from being intimately and personally connected, from the beginning of his life...and that is the way that God knows each one of us.

And not only knows us, but claims us. No matter what our failings, no matter

where our wanderings, God will never let us go, because we are bound to God forever: "Where can I go from your spirit?" asks the poet. "Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast."

Not only is there is nowhere we can go, that is outside the reality and bounds of God's saving presence: there is nothing that we can do or experience, nothing that can ever happen to us, that will put us outside God's presence either: 'If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,' even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you." Not "if," not, "in the hypothetical possibility that I might know dark times", but "when I need you, when it is dark all around, you are there."

I am sometimes present with people who are in those moments of feeling overwhelmed, when the way is dark, when the marriage appears to be dissolving, when the prognosis is terminal, when the child is estranged and addicted. When these situations are encountered, all I can do is remind us all of our relationship with God, of God's tenacious love for us, of God's steadfast presence. All I can do is hold out the promise that God will never let any of us go, and that the final word in our lives will not belong to the darkness but to the God who makes light appear even in the darkness.

When we're in need, this steadfast presence, this tenacious seeking out of relationship, can be comforting. But when we think we're doing okay, it can actually be uncomfortable, or even frightening. A good friend told me yesterday that this psalm makes her feel claustrophobic, as if God were a transcendent stalker from whom she could never escape, even if she wanted to. (Which is a good corrective for me to hear as a new parent!)

Perhaps it can be uncomfortable because to be known so intimately is ultimately to be totally open to the one who knows us, and therefore, to be completely vulnerable. I can certainly understand that fear, as my own waves of passionate love and fierce protection for my son are sometimes accompanied by waves of anxiety and even fear. To open yourself fully to another in love is to open yourself to the possibility of pain and loss. It is scary to be stripped bare of whatever we might hide behind, whatever false selves we construct to protect ourselves from the world, whatever false securities we strive to cling to.

Yet it can also, ultimately, be a release, to not have to pretend with God. Not because our limitations, our faults, our wounds, our fears, disappear, but because God already knows them and is working to bring forgiveness and healing and wholeness and courage, in ways that sometimes even we don't know...but God knows.

My final words about my son in a sermon (at least for a while, I promise!): I

know that there is nothing Nicholas could ever do, which could ever end my love for him. He may do things that make me sad or cause me great pain and sorrow; he may do things that make me angry; he may do things that make me wonder what on earth he was thinking. But nothing he could do, even the very worst, could ever end my love for him, my deep connection to him, or my desire for his well-being.

I knew before, in my head, that that is but a glimpse of the way God feels about each one of us. But over the course of the last year, I have now learned it in my heart and my bones: “God, you have searched me and known me...I come to the end – I am still with you.” Thanks be to God. Amen.