

The Inescapable God

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Scripture Psalm 139: 1–12, 23–24.

Good morning. Pastor Sharon is camping and will be back in the pulpit next week. It is great to look out this morning and see so many warm faces, friends, and compatriot ice cream scoopers. Nevertheless, as always I am humbled to stand here in front you.

To me Psalm 139 is one of the most beautiful and touching psalms. I read it with new meaning after learning (not sure how) that it is one of Jim Hook's favorite psalms. It has become one of mine, as well.

I find it striking that the Psalm is so personal and individualistic. The psalmist states: You know my thoughts, you know what I am going to say before I say it. You know my reactions. My first thought is the psalm is a love poem, voicing the shared intimacy one has with a partner. Knowledge acquired only over years with being with some one. Not unique to lovers, necessarily as sometimes siblings and life long friends may also have a close, comfortable relationship. But God's knowledge is even greater: the middle verses (not read) describes a God who knows us before we were formed. God knows us for all time, before, during and after our life.

I find it comforting that I can not escape God. The tone and language of Psalm 139 makes God approachable and personal. David, the author of the psalm expresses his trust in God. It is David who writes: You know me, tell me if there is something in me that offends you, help me follow the path of everlasting life.

Is there something about me that offends you? How frequently do we give that kind of freedom to someone else? God is special, and not like any of us.

Indeed, God knows me, but he also knows [name] and [name] and [name]. The psalm

touches me, because I realize there is nothing special about me. Just as God knows me so too God knows all others, all 6.98 billion of us. God knows me and every one else because that's the way God is. Here we see quickly one of the mysteries of God: God knows us personally and individually, God is always with us and through the Holy Spirit is in all of us. Yet, God has the capacity to have this relationship with each one of us. God is within us, but not like us, is beyond us. That is to say God is immanent (operating within) and transcendent (not of this world). God is great and God is Inescapable; is with me, and with us all; 24/7.

Now I appreciate why the Hebrews of ancient time were unwillingness to speak God's name. To call God by name is to apply the limitations of our human language to God; that serves to make God less than God is.

See how difficult it is to avoiding using our language to characterize God: the natural to way to say the previous sentence is "*that serves to make God less than he is*. That gives God a gender, and using She in place of he does not avoid the problem. Language is human and thus limited; any description or characterization of God suffers from the limitedness of our language. Being unlike us, does not have a gender, does not have a race, is beyond our language. Understanding the God of the Old Testament is difficult.

Fortunately, We were given Jesus, in whom God is made more approachable. And in the form of the Holy Spirit, God continues to be Inescapable: every time we help others, do as God wants us to do, the Holy Spirit works through us, God is with us. We may not be aware of God's presence but the Holy Spirit is another form of Inescapability.

God inescapability means that God is with us when we are surrounded by our enemies, when we are wounded, when the world is too much with us. Yet, there is another aspect of God's inescapability that needs to be mentioned. I don't want to dwell on it, but it's an important part of the Psalm's 139 message. God is also with us when we do *not* follow Jesus' teachings, when we misbehave, act out, in the words of the OT, "act like selfish children."

That gives me pause. I don't have to think too hard to remember situations when I have acted like a selfish child. (Like yesterday.) When I have been mean-spirited, judgmental, arrogant, had a "hard heart" [to quote Moses describing the Pharaoh, an image

that for some reason sticks with me]. Yet, we all have such deficiencies and human limitations. It is not my place to demand that you work on removing your deficiencies. Rather, let me share my experience that by recognizing God's inescapability makes me ask myself — is this how I want God to see me? That pause *sometimes* helps me not lose my way and to stay on God's path.

And God inescapability means love and support and a buffer against my worst instincts and behavior. Instead of a set of beliefs, faith is trust in God 24/7 that becomes a way of life. One that works to be in *relationship* with God. By Psalm 139, God knows what I am thinking, doing and doesn't need my prayer as information. Rather prayer is for me to hear God.

Faith as trust is a rather new perspective for me. At least partially shaped by reading Karen Armstrong's *The Case for God*. It's a couple of years old. I saw it on the sale table at the bookstore and picked it up because I had liked two other books by her. In the *Case for God* she offers a 3,000 year perspective on how humans have thought about God. In doing so, she contrasts our (modern) perspective with historical and ancient perspectives. I find this fascinating stuff. But it is a slow read. Anyone interested can borrow my copy. I should be sometime around Easter (2012).

She makes two points. First, only in our modern society (say the last 200 to 250 years) do we restrict knowledge by what can be measured and verified. Think of the forensic crime shows like CSI as a metaphor. It is the trace elements that submit to chemical and physical analyses that provides irrefutable proof. Rational thought and empirical evidence dominate to exclude everything else.

When authors such as Richard Dawkins, a noted biological scientist, dismiss religion because (among other things) the vast scientific knowledge accumulated over the last couple of hundred years provides explanations for our physical world. We understand hurricanes, tornados, why crops fail etc. In the past these events were ascribed to God. (Science supplants our superstitious beliefs.)

But this leads to her second point: there is more than one kind of knowledge. There is the rational and what Armstrong labels as the mystic. I think of the difference as what I know and what I can prove. The rational is what I can prove but that's only part of what

I know.

What are some examples of mystic knowledge? Great literature. The characters in Dickens novels are meaningful to us because they capture what it is to be human. Same for Shakespeare and other authors. Great literature stands the test of time because it captures part of the joys, the sorrows, of life.

Another form of mystic knowledge is art. There may be physical beauty, craftsmanship, awesome visual display. But it also connects to us at an emotional level. It communicates knowledge without proofs.

Finally there is music. It connects with us at a deep emotional level. Does it communicate — you bet. Think of some of great movies, would they still be great if they didn't have their memorable sound track. When I am down, I listen to music, sometimes classical, sometimes rock, sometimes blues, sometimes all of the above and more.

Armstrong argues that accepting only rational forms of knowledge is a major restriction, and one that will not allow us to address the most important questions. Is there a God? What am I do with my life? What is a good life?

A crisis in modern life is that faith is seen too often only as belief. Rationality and proof dominates all. But this is why I prefer the alternative translation of faith as **trust** rather than belief. To see the difference, our coins have "In God we Trust." Not "We believe in God."

And so, the presence of the Inescapable God argues for trust in God. Living our religion as a way of life, not as a system of beliefs. In God We Trust. You don't have to control the situation or solve every problem. Trust in God. Live and treat others knowing that God is inescapable. This doesn't provide tight answers but it's liberating, especially because I can not control questions that arise in my mind, but I have some degree of control on how I live. Trust in God. Live your life knowing that God is always with you.

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life. (Psalm 139: 23–24)

AMEN.