

Awakening to Our Purpose
Psalm 139: 1-6; 13-18
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“LORD, you have searched me and you know me.” *God knows us*

A small-town prosecuting attorney called his first witness to the stand in a trial — a grandmotherly, elderly woman. He approached her and asked, “Mrs. Jones, do you know me?”

She responded, “Why, yes, I do know you, Mr. Williams. I’ve known you since you were a young boy. And frankly, you’ve been a big disappointment to me. You lie, you cheat, and you manipulate people and talk about them behind their backs. You think you’re a big shot, but you don’t have the brains to realize you never will amount to anything. Yes, I know you.”

The lawyer was stunned. Not knowing what else to do he pointed across the room and asked, “Mrs. Williams, do you know the defense attorney?”

She again replied, “Why, yes I do. I’ve known Mr. Bradley since he was a youngster, also. I used to baby-sit for him. And he, too, has been a real disappointment to me. He’s lazy, bigoted, and he has a drinking problem. The man can’t build a normal relationship with anyone and his law practice is one of the shoddiest in the entire state. Yes, I know him.”

At this point, the judge rapped the courtroom to silence and called both counselors to the bench. In a very quiet voice, he said, “If either of you asks her if she knows me, you’ll be jailed for contempt!”

In the 139th Psalm, David warmly praises the Lord, before whom he stands in awe. He also expresses the close personal relationship he feels with the Lord. He is astounded by how thoroughly and intimately the Lord knows him. God’s “knowing” David is prominent in the psalm; the Hebrew verb “to know” has a rich range of meanings — to have intimate knowledge of, to take care of, to understand, and to experience.

Psalm 139 is one of my favorite Psalms. It has particular meaning to me because it was one of the scriptural text’s that Rev. Coleman Brown used in his

“charge” to me at my service of ordination almost 37 years ago on February 16, 1969.

Coleman is such a special person to me. While I was in seminary he was the pastor at Olivet Presbyterian Church on Chicago’s near north side. For the summer of 1966 and the following school year he was my field work supervisor at Olivet.

It was such a meaningful and memorable time in my life. That summer, along with members of the Olivet Church and thousands of others, I walked with Dr. Martin Luther King on several open housing marches in Chicago.

Two years ago on the occasion of my 60th birthday, Colman sent me a copy of the sermon he preached at my ordination service. It was a wonderful gift then, it has been an even greater gift to me now. You see, I didn’t remember any of his words. I remember that he was there; that he preached; it was good; and his presence meant so much to me, but what he said, I didn’t remember any of his words.

After reading the opening verses of the 139th Psalm, Coleman spoke: “I am charging you to make these words of the psalmist’s your own words, Don: ‘All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.’ Your days are already held, already written; they’re already programmed, man. Your job is not, finally, to decided, Don what you will do and be. Don’t fight to hold on to an anxiety that God in His love seeks to take from your heart. That isolated, autonomous self responsible for deciding – “what you want to be when you grow up,” that autonomous self has died, man. Your life is hid with Christ in God.

Your job is not to decide, but to discover. To discover; That’s what the 139th Psalm says to you; Your job is not to decide your life, but to discover it. And how to discover? By doing, Don; hear God’s word and do it. You will discover your life by doing it.”

To hear this “again for the first time,” was a great awakening for me. To reflect back on my life – the many years that I spent trying to decide “what I wanted to be when I grew up;” and to realize that these years were part of God’s plan, part of the discovery process. That revelation was in itself a discovery, an

awaking to my purpose. I have been doing it, that is... discovering God's will and purpose for my life, doing it by the living out of my days realizing that it is God who is in charge and not me.

"All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."

Last Sunday we celebrated the Baptism of our Lord as we remembered and re-affirmed our own baptism. We realized that we have been claimed, been marked as God's very own, now and forever more. Marked for what? Marked for service.

Tomorrow we celebrate and we remember the life and the ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King. In the course of his life, Martin Luther King walked through many dangers, toils and snares, but through it all he knew that God was walking with him. The Lord was his divine companion in the Civil Rights struggle, giving him the strength and the courage to face any disaster that came his way. He had the very same faith as the writer of Psalm 139,

"You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is too lofty for me to attain" (vv. 5-6). Although life is fragile and full of danger, we can draw comfort from the knowledge that God is with us, in all that we do. In the midst of external tension, God can give an inner peace. This peace gives us courage and confidence, inspiration and insight, serenity and strength. Most of all, this peace frees us to do God's will.

This is important, because peace doesn't necessarily protect us from pain and suffering - it doesn't shield us from the hardship that comes from taking bold stands for the Lord in a world that so often resists his reign.

In fact, in the short life of Martin Luther King, death by an assassin's bullet came just one day after his speech at the rally in Memphis. God's peace didn't give Martin Luther King a long life, but it was *life long*.

It never failed him. This peace enabled him to say to the Lord, along with Psalm 139, "I come to the end - I am still with you" (v. 18). And it made all the difference in his work for racial justice.

- If Martin Luther King had not felt inner peace, he would not have been able to organize the Montgomery bus boycott.
- If he had not felt God's inspiration and insight, he would not have been able to give his "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington.
- If he had not felt God's courage and confidence, he would not have been able to launch the major voter registration drive "Crusade for Citizenship."
- If he had not felt God's courage and confidence, he would not have been able to defy death threats, march in Gage Park here in Chicago, and stand with the Memphis sanitation workers.

The Lord's peace always frees us ... frees us to do his will. It also frees us to die for what we believe in. King knew this all too well on the night before his own death.

"It really doesn't matter what happens now. I got into Memphis this morning, and [people] began to talk about the threats that were out on me ... about what might happen to me from some of our sick white brothers.

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the Promised Land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

As we awaken to our purpose – we realize we are marked as God's very own, "we are searched and we are known."

How precious are those thoughts – "we are known" – we are God's special people who are called to be together in this time and place – we are not called to decide "who we are" – we are already claimed, we are called to discover – to re-discover this **a-new** together.

The Long Range Planning Council is calling the entire congregation to begin a time of study together to begin that discovery process. To explore God's leading, as we claim our high calling as God's people – sent out into the world as representatives of Christ. That intentional discovery process will begin in worship on January 29th.

Awakening to our purpose is here and now – it is not something we need to decide, it is something we need to discover together.

Listen again to the words of Martin Luther King that I shared with the children this morning: "If you want to be important, **wonderful**, If you want to be recognized, **wonderful**, If you want to be great, **wonderful**, **But** recognize that he who is greatest among shall be a **servant**. That's a new definition of **greatness**

This morning what I like about it is that by giving that definition of **greatness** it means that **Everybody** can be **great**, because everybody can **serve**. You don't have to have a college degree to **serve**. You don't have to have to make your subject and your verb agree to **serve**. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to **serve**. You don't have to know Einstein's "Theory of Relativity" to **serve**. You don't have to know the Second Theory of Thermal Dynamics in Physics to **serve**. You only need a **heart** full of **grace**, a **soul** generated by **love**, And **you** can be that **servant**."

God does not free us from all troubles and toils, struggles and snares. He knows that we're bound to hit potholes along the road to the Promised Land, and that we'll need his presence and his power to stay on the right path.

Like Martin Luther King, we're never going to be free from adversity. But we are always free to serve God in every time and place and situation.

May our freedom be used to do the will of the one who is our King, our heavenly King, as we continue to awaken to our purpose as God's people.