



CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

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## A HIGHER AND MORE NOBLE LIFE

*the Rev. Dr. DeWayne L. Davis*

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*Lead Minister*

**Text: Psalm 139:1–6, 13–18**

One theologian says that Psalm 139 “is a prayer that does not ask for anything.”<sup>1</sup> The psalmist makes only one request at the very end (search me and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts); but this psalm is mostly and largely about God’s closeness and knowledge of the human creation. Whoever the writer of this psalm is, she taps into an experience of God that emphasizes God’s inseparable, inescapable connection to her. Whoever the writer is, the prayer celebrates being known—that above all else and despite all that may come against her, God is intimately aware of and present with her, as close to her as her very breath and knows her through and through. This is a testimony to a relationship and connection to God, eternal and infinite.

But this is one of those chapters in the Psalms in which we rarely read the second half. If we read on, we find out this is not just a spontaneous hymn of praise nor a generic piece of liturgy to fill out worship. When we read further, we discover why the psalmist talks about God’s knowledge, presence, and power as it relates to them. The poetic language of the text we read today, with its praises of God’s direct involvement in the psalmist’s life and existence and its testimony of being known and loved by God, is the prayer of someone who has known great suffering at the hands of the wicked, bloodthirsty, and malicious mentioned in the second half. This is someone who has been oppressed, rejected, and falsely accused and needs God to take a stand and judge those who do not do justice. This psalmist appears to testify to being known and loved by God to reinforce their own humanity in light of oppression and injustice. When Psalm 139 is read in its entirety, we see a bigger truth. These are more than just words of praise for God’s knowledge, presence, and power. It is a protest that, even if the world refuses to acknowledge it, one’s very humanity bears the mark of God and thus has worth and dignity.

So, when this suffering psalmist sings “you have searched me and known me,” “I am fearfully and wonderfully made,” and “my frame was not hidden,” we are invited to see the presence of God within them. We are invited to see the presence of God in our neighbor, to celebrate each other as the living manifestation of God. God’s appearing may not come in the miracle or the grand display of power or the natural wonders of the earth but in each of us, in our neighbor, in the most vulnerable, in the suffering souls whose humanity has been denied and personhood assaulted. None of us is hidden from God, rather, we are inextricably connected to God and each other. In another chapter of praise, the psalmist asks, “Who are we that God is mindful of us?” Psalm 139 is the reply: We are those beloved, knitted and formed by the hand of God, known and fearfully and wonderfully made, the wonderful work of God who present in us.

Oh, I can hear the psalmist singing the song in a new key, echoing claims of humanity in the cries that Black lives matter; no justice, no peace; gay is good; women’s rights are human rights; me, too; no one is

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Brueggemann et al., eds., *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary, Based on the NRSV, Vol. 1: Year A* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 409.

illegal; trans lives matter; I have a dream. It is a psalm that beckons us to sing with the harmony of liberty for every member of the human being.

As we prepare to observe Martin Luther King Day on Monday, how do we sing and pray the truth of God's knowledge, power, and presence at a time when humanity is regularly denied and personhood routinely assaulted? What, in our words to the world, testifies to the divinity that resides in our neighbor when injustice abounds? It warms my soul that we observe the King holiday during the season of Epiphany, for I believe it is through the words, work, and legacy of Martin Luther King that God may be revealing something, some wisdom, some prompting, that can inspire our pursuit of justice. This is also a time when people will take to social media and post their favorite King quotes. I confess it is the saturation of social media with King quotes that raises the most concern for me. Now, I don't want to begrudge anybody's appeal to the wisdom of Dr. King, especially during the King holiday, however, I worry that far too many do so without understanding how truly radical, prophetic, uncompromising his words are.

Just as we need to read all of Psalm 139 to understand the true power of the prayer, I hope we read beyond every posted King quote to know the true power of his witness. Behind every speech and every sermon King gave is the lived experience of Black lives that were degraded, segregated, victimized, and—yes—even killed. And so, unless we are willing to know the suffering that gave rise to the words, we run the risk of robbing them of their true power and dulling their light of truth and revelation that's straining to be unveiled.

So to and for suffering Black people, King's words were a testimony to a truth that eluded America . . . that Black people are loved and known by a God. This nation justified enslavement, segregation, and oppression of Black lives by claiming that God ordained it. Dr. King gave voice to Black worth and dignity, that because Black people were fearfully and wonderfully made and—despite law, culture, and religion—bore the imprint of the eternal and infinite God. Black lives are infused with *somebodiness*. And with his familiar words about choosing love over hate, pursuing justice, the power of nonviolence, and being a true neighbor who lifts the bruised and beaten to a higher and more noble life, King joined the psalmist in bearing witness that every person is the wonderful work of God.

Perhaps that what the psalmist offers us during this season: an awareness of the *somebodiness* of humanity, an invitation to recognize God's knowledge, power, and presence in each of our neighbors. It is a hymn that sings about Black lives mattering, LGBTQ lives being celebrated, and immigrant and refugee lives being welcomed. It is a reminder that, although we are menaced by death, oppressed by injustice, dominated by the powerful, our humanity and our personhood are intricately woven into God's very act of creation from the beginning of all time.

In the aftermath of the violent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, I was listening to a talk radio show focused on the event when a distraught listener called in. With sadness and frustration, the caller kept asking the radio host what can we do to get along? How can people not see their neighbors as enemies to be killed? I don't recall the radio host's answer because the answer I kept hearing echoes the psalmist's own prayer . . . see our neighbors as known and fearfully and wonderfully made by God . . . see our neighbors as the manifestation of God's presence. For it is in seeing God in our neighbors, seeing our neighbors as fearfully and wonderfully made that we can begin to overcome the scourge of white supremacy, anti-Semitism, sexism and misogyny, homophobia and transphobia.

In God's inescapable presence, each one of us is a unique, particular, individual life known and loved by God. The empire, our culture, and religious institutions may see us as citizens, voters, races, patients, clients, consumers, ethnicities, believers, congregants, or respondents. But the psalmist goes beneath the surface of all these socially constructed identities to get to the heart of who we truly are—God's own beloved creation. And it is wonderful to be seen and known truly and deeply. That is God's gift to us, which belongs to us and which can never be taken from us—the gift of being known. And it is too wonderful.