

You Are There

Psalm 139:7-12

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Good morning. Welcome to Christ the King. If we haven't met, my name is Penny, and I'm the senior pastor here, and it's good to be with you. If you are a guest or a visitor, we're glad that you would join us this morning, and my hope, my desire is that what you would know this morning, if you are a guest or a visitor, or if you've been coming for many years, my hope, our desire is that you would know the hospitality of Christ, that you would know the welcome of Jesus, that you would experience kindness and grace from his people, that you would hear that from his word, and we would experience it in song. And as we dine at his table, and as we connect with one another after the service, we desire, we hope, and pray that what you experience is God's grace, because the truth is, is that's what every single one of us is in need of. Every one of us needs his mercy. Every one of us needs his kindness. Every one of us needs his grace, regardless of who you are or where you come from. That's what you need, that's what I need, and so our prayer, our hope, is that that is what we would know more of this morning as we come to worship. So, if you are a guest, welcome. We're glad you're with us.

Well, this morning, normally, we would be continuing in our series in Colossians. If you've been with us for the last number of months, we've been going through the book of Colossians. We've been going verse by verse, chapter by chapter, line by line through Colossians, and we're nearing the end of the book. We were scheduled this morning to enter into the latter half of chapter 3 and the very beginning of chapter 4. This is the section of Colossians that's known as the household codes, and so this part of Colossians talks about husbands and wives and parents and children and masters and bond servants, but we're going to take a break for a week from Colossians. We'll get to that. We'll come to that. We'll be in that passage next week. So, kids, you can look forward to hearing about your interaction with your parents next week. You can read ahead if you would like, but this morning, instead, what I would like for us to do is to do a little reflecting on a psalm, Psalm 139, and so if you have a Bible, you can turn to Psalm 139.

If you don't have a Bible, there are Bibles in the chairs in front of you, and the passage is projected on the screen. You'll be able to follow along there, but I'm wanting us to reflect on 139 because the truth is that the last not just week, not just few weeks, but really the last month has been pretty heavy. I felt the heaviness, the weightiness, right? We feel the weightiness in the world. We look at the world around us, and we see immorality. Immorality within our national and state leaders. We see the adoption of laws that are contrary to God's kingdom. We're being encouraged to adopt laws in our own commonwealth that are contrary to God's kingdom and wicked at best. We see wars. We see the warnings of an AI apocalypse, right? That's the world around us, and then when we get closer to home, we experience in our relationships strain. We see friends that are suffering. We have people that we know who turn their back on what is good and true, and then we come into our walls. Many of you are struggling with chronic pain and have little expectation of relief. We're burdened with worry about our children, our siblings, our parents.

Recently, very healthy men in our midst, Terry and Scott - an abscess on the spine and a stroke - these medical problems that just seem to arise out of nowhere and terrify us and create fear in us. A couple weeks ago, Louise England was born, and we rejoice that she

came into this world, but we know that for the next number of weeks, maybe even months, she's going to live in the NICU. Then, this past week, Rebecca died. And for those who have just been with us for the last couple months, you may not know, Rebecca was our music director for the last four or so years, and her body gave way to the disease that was riddled with it. Then we add to these things the normal burdens of our day, the fatigue that we experience from caring for others, the weights that we bear that no one knows. We're weighed down. We're heavy. We're burdened.

And as I was thinking about these things this past week, a hymn kept coming to my mind. It's a song here. It's pretty sad, actually. It's called "Beams of Heaven," and there's a line in it that says, "Burdens now may crush me down. Disappointments, they're all around. Troubles speak and mournful sigh sorrow through a tear-stained eye," and that feels like the last month, doesn't it, and we wonder when we experience burden, when we experience the weight of the world, when we experience death, we wonder where is God in the midst of this, and maybe we even wonder if we're allowed to wonder that. Are we even allowed to ask that question? Well, that's where Psalm 139 has been rattling around in my head. It's these words of the Lord, these words of David that begin in verse 7. Follow along. David writes,

"Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall 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 dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light about me be night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is bright as the day,
for darkness is as light with you." (ESV)

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord. Let me pray for us.

Lord, we ask that as we come to your Word now, that your presence would be made known to us, that by your Spirit you would lead us, that our eyes would be opened to your glory, that our ears would be unclogged so we could hear your truth. And so we pray, Father, be near to your people, be near to us. We pray in Christ's name, amen.

So David is the author of this psalm, and we heard what he asked, right? He asked, "where shall I go from your Spirit? Where shall I flee from your presence?" And he's asking that question that we've wondered, isn't he? Isn't he basically asking, *God, where are you, Lord? Are you there?* Right? And he doesn't just throw this out into the ether. He doesn't just throw this out into nowhere. He actually starts to get into very specific places, right? God in heaven, in Sheol, in the morning, in the uttermost parts of the sea, in the darkness, in these places. *God, are you there? Are you with us? Are you near your people?* I mean, think about the places that David mentions, right? Heaven, the place of glory, the place of goodness, the place of God's abode, right? It is where he dwells. But then David contrasts it with Sheol, the place of death. In some places, this is the place of judgment. He then talks about the morning when new hope arises, and the uttermost parts of the sea, right? When we are far from people,

when we are isolated, when we are alone. And then he moves into the place of darkness, be it the darkness of night, or the darkness of sadness, or the darkness of deep depression.

These are places we've known, right? Maybe not all of them, maybe not each one of us knowing all of them, but these are the places that people know. These are the places that we have been, and if you haven't yet, you will, right? Because we know that in life there is glory and goodness, but there is also sadness and grief. We know that in this life we'll be surrounded by community, by people who love us, who care for us, who abide with us, but we also know that there will be times of loneliness and isolation. And in those times, we ask again, *God, are you there? Are you there? Are you with us in the O.R.? Are you with us in the NICU? Are you with us in goodness and grief, in celebration and sadness? Are you there?* And David answers. He says, "God, you are there. There you are."

Now, we might think, well, of course God is in heaven, right? That is his abiding place. That is the place where he rules and he reigns. He is on his throne and he is dwelling from there. Of course he is there, but what David's telling us is that no matter where we go, no matter where we find ourselves, God is there. Look at verses 11 through 12: "If I say, surely the darkness shall cover me and the light about me be night, even the darkness is not dark to you. The night is bright as day, for darkness is as light with you." Y'all, that is remarkable to think about. It is remarkable to think about that the darkness to us, right? The night that is blacker than a moonless sky, right? I know the last couple of nights, the moon has been bright and majestic. My daughter has been sending me pictures to prove it. It's been wonderful, and yet we know that there's a darkness that can settle in, that the brightness of the moon can be shadowed by the clouds, that there is a darkness so deep, and yet it's not too deep for the Lord, right? That it is not dark to him, that's what David said, that there is nothing hidden from his sight, that darkness doesn't overshadow him.

It reminds me of a line from my favorite writer, Wendell Berry, who passed away this month. In his wonderful book, *Jaber Crow*, he writes, "There is a light that includes our darkness, a day that shines down even on the clouds. A man of faith believes that the man in the well is not lost. He does not believe this easily or without pain, but he believes it. His belief is a kind of knowledge beyond any way of knowing. There's a light that includes our darkness, a day that shines down even on the clouds." Berry was right, that there's light in the midst of darkness, that the clouds, though they may be heavy and black, there is a day, there is a light that shines upon them. Later in that same hymn, "Beams of Heaven," the writer writes, "when in the darkness I would grope, faith always sees a star of hope." And that's what David is telling us. That's what he is telling us, that though the clouds may be thick, though the darkness may be strong, there is hope. Hope that doesn't deny the dark. Hope doesn't say that the darkness isn't really there. No, it's a hope that knows the darkness cannot overcome.

I mean, do you remember how John began his gospel? John chapter 1, he says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." And then in verse 5, so very quickly into John's gospel, he actually introduces us to the theme of light. He moves off of the theme of the Word, and he moves on to the theme of light, a theme that features prominently in John's gospel and in his epistles. And he says, this of Jesus, "In him was life, and the life was the light of man. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." You see, God pierces the darkness, and he shines the light of his Son into the world and into our lives. God, you are there in heaven, in the darkness. When we feel abandoned and alone, you are there. You're there even in death.

Did you see what David said? “Where shall I go from your spirit? Where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.” I already mentioned Sheol was sometimes referred as the place where the wicked would go, but sometimes it's also just referring to the place of death, the place of the grave. And that's how David is using it. He's saying, even there, when we lay in the grave, even there we are not hidden from the Lord. Even there, he is there. Y'all, it is easy to believe that God is there with us in joy and celebration and good times, but this psalm in the Bible tells us that God is with us even in the worst of times, even in the hardest of places, and we know he is there with us in those times, because Jesus himself went through the hardest of times and went to the most horrific of places, that of the cross. He went to the horrible cross. He went there and he was abandoned to die, and in the middle of day, when it should have been bright, its brightest hour, the sky went black and the earth became dark, like the night. And Christ died and descended into the grave, but the darkness and the grave and death itself could not contain him, because the light of resurrection broke through the darkness.

And because the light of resurrection broke through the darkness, this means that no matter where we go, no matter what we experience, there is nowhere where God is not there with us. It doesn't mean there's no darkness. It doesn't mean there's no sadness or times of pain or suffering or loneliness. No, it doesn't mean every day is Sunday morning with tulips and butterflies. No, no, it means that despite those times, whatever we feel, we can be sure that God has not turned his face away. I didn't read the beginning of the psalm, but if you have your Bible still open, listen to how David begins. “Oh Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up, you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, oh Lord, you know it all together. You hem me in behind and before and lay your hand upon me.” David's saying God knows you. He knows me. He knows every part of you. He knows where you are physically. He knows where you are emotionally. He knows where you are spiritually. He knows the recesses of your heart and the deep corners of your mind. He knows everything about you and he does not turn away. He does not turn away, right? David said, “you hem me in.” You hem me in.

As soon as I read that, my mind went to that scene in *The Patriot*. Do you remember that movie, *The Patriot*, right? Mel Gibson's movie about the American Revolution and his son in the movie, right? This soldier, he's courting this woman and as he's courting this woman, he's going to spend the night at her parents' home with the woman there and her siblings. And so what did they do? They take this bag and they sew him up in it. Do you remember this? It's not a sleeping bag that he can unzip. There's no buttons. They literally sew it around him so he cannot get out and he can't go near their daughter. God hems us in, but he doesn't hem us in so that we can't break free. He doesn't hem us in to constrain us. He hems us in because he loves us. He surrounds us. He is with us. But David says, “you hem me in,” but he doesn't stop there. He says, “you lay your hand upon me.” You lay your hand upon me. Presence and touch, I mean, that's what we want. That's what we need in sadness, isn't it? In fear. We know this.

I mean, just watch two children as they're watching a movie. Watch, just watch one child as they're watching a movie and something comes on that terrifies them, that scares them. And what do they do? They bury their head in your shoulder and they feel your arms wrapped around them. Or they cry out in the middle of the night because a dream has woken them and they're terrified and they're afraid. And so what do we do from our rooms? We yell, “it's just a dream. Go back to bed.” No. We go down the hall. We climb into their bed. Or they come

sprinting down the hall and they burst through our door and jump into our bed. And we hold them. We touch them. We give them our presence. This is what our children need in times of fear and terror, but this is what we need. Kids, it's not just something that you grow out of. No, we always will need presence and touch. We need people to wrap their arm around us and to put their hand of comfort on our shoulder.

And what David tells us is that we don't just receive that from one another. But we receive it from the Lord of heaven. You lay your hand upon me. A hand of comfort, a hand of guidance, a hand of assurance. God is gentle with us. He is there. Now listen, every Sunday we come and we bring a whole host of things with us when we walk through these doors. Many things that other people may not know about, things that everyone knows about. And so maybe this morning some of you walked in and you came and you're in the heights of heaven. Maybe others are in the deepest of darkness and probably many of us are somewhere in between. But the promise of this psalm is that regardless of what you bring and wherever you may be, God is there also. Nicholas Wolterstorff, the philosopher reflecting on the death, the tragic death of his son in a climbing accident, said that instead of explaining our suffering, God shares it. And he does.

God shares our suffering through his son. Through him going to the cross and bearing what we could not bear. And going to his death and knowing what death comes, what it brings. And rising again and giving us life. God shares in our suffering. He knows it intimately. So that when we ask, where are you? We hear God say, I am with you. Hemming you in. Laying my hand upon you. Regardless of where you may be. The heights of heaven or the depths of Sheol. If we rise on the wings of the morning or we dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea. If we find ourselves in darkness. God, you are there. Amen. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank you. We thank you that there is nowhere we can go from your presence and there is nowhere we can flee from your spirit, but that you are with us. And so I pray, Father, that for those who mourn and grieve, those who are resting in goodness and joy, and those who are somewhere in between, Father, I pray that you would make your presence known to us. Hem us in. Lay your hand of comfort upon us. And let us know, let us be sure that wherever we go, you are there. And we pray all this in Christ's name. And God's people said together, Amen.