

“Still with you”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
September 8, 2019

*Psalm 139:1-18*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Love is many things. Passion. Commitment. Work, and delight. Above all, it is knowing someone and being known; it's being there, for all the moments of life, and not turning away—even if it gets hard, or ugly. It's saying, “I see you”—the *you* that you hide, the *you* you're afraid others will reject.

On Monday, Jenna and I had a date night, because love—whether it's marriage, or friendship, or family, or the Christian bonds of fellowship—requires time and investment. We dropped off Emerson at a friend's and went out to dinner. There, Jenna suggested that we each share something the other didn't know about us.

I regaled her with one of my childhood dreams—to become an architect (I'm looking at you, Mike Hahn). I liked how architecture combined art with precision and order (see, I was always a good Presbyterian). Jenna told me how she had been the exact opposite: as a child, she hated coloring, hated it! And so one day, when her teacher asked what her favorite color was, she chose the worst, most boring shade of brown she could think of. Why? Because of spite, that's why!

It's amazing. Even after eight years together, there are still things Jenna and I are learning about each other. That's the exciting thing about human relationships—there's always more to learn, more to love.

There is also, however, comfort in believing that there is One who knows us entirely, who was there when we thumbed our nose at our teacher or when we delighted in carefully measured lines and proportions. There is comfort in this One who, even knowing it all, loves us completely: our God, the best life partner one could ask for (no offense, Jenna).

The problem is we're not sure we really believe it. The psalmist talks a good game, but God doesn't always seem so present and available. In fact, life's hardest times are often so difficult precisely because God feels absent. In such times, we are more like Job, when he says, “I go forward, but God is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive God; on the left hand, I seek him, but I cannot hold him; I turn to the right hand, but I cannot see him” (23:8-9).

The psalmist understands that feeling. He's no pollyanna. In fact, he ends this psalm with a portion we didn't read today—a cry of distress in the face of oppressive and cruel enemies. This is a man who knows deep pain and injustice. And yet, he insists that God is present. He verily shouts it!

His psalm suggests that the problem may reside, not in God's absence, but in our far too narrow definition of God. The psalmist describes a God who is as much at home in the dark as She is in the light; a God who occupies every portion of our lives, every thought, every deed; a God who is not only enthroned in heaven but enfleshed on earth; a God of death as well as life; a God of everything.

Such a God, of course, is beyond comprehension—the psalmist says as much: “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain” (139:6). And such a God, who gives everything, would ask the same from us: everything. Our whole life. That's the kind of love God wants to share with us—a mutual and total presence.

That scares us. We don't like what we can't understand, what we can't fit into a neat and tidy category (remember those precise and orderly lines I enjoyed so much!). We're more comfortable with the God of the creche, the God we cart out at Christmas time and then, afterward, put away in a box. Because if we're being honest, we don't like to share. We're happy to give some of our life to God; indeed, some of us give quite a lot. But inevitably there are pieces we keep to ourselves.

I imagine it like the eating habits of Adrian Monk, the genius detective with extreme obsessive-compulsive disorder, in the TV show *Monk*. Whenever he eats a meal, he has to separate all the foods on his plate: peas go over there, chicken over here, bread in this corner, never touching. In many ways, this is how we treat God. We divvy up our life, putting God over here, family over there, work in that corner, fun here.

We reduce God to something manageable, an idea, a doctrine, a Sunday morning, a nice prayer at night, a corner of our plate, and exclude God from the other parts of our lives.

“There is a tendency,” writes Chet Raymo, “for us to flee from the wild silence and the wild dark, to pack up our gods and hunker down behind city walls, to turn the gods into idols, to kowtow before them and approach their precincts only in the official robes of office. And when we are in the temples, then who will hear the voice crying in the wilderness? Who will hear the reed shaken by the wind?” (*The Soul of the Night*).

In the end, we get what we ask for. If we ask for a small god, we get a small god, who is little equipped for the challenges of life, for the thoughts that stare into the mystery. We construct a god who has no room for our doubts, or our mistakes, or our curiosity; a god who knows nothing of poetry, or love, but only the stilted death of our religiosity. But if, as does the psalmist, we should dare to submit to the infinitude and magnitude of the God who pervades all, we will find that God is present not only in the light but in the dark as well, not only in the temple but in the wilderness, not only in word but in silence.

The great 20th century Jewish philosopher Martin Buber speaks to God, saying,

Where I wander - You!  
Where I ponder - You!  
Only You, You again, always You!

You! You! You!  
When I am gladdened - You!  
When I am saddened - You!  
Only You, You again, always You!  
You! You! You!  
Sky is You, Earth is You!  
You above! You below!  
In every trend, at every end,  
Only You, You again, always You!  
You! You! You!

—*Tales of the Hasadim*

Elsewhere, Buber writes, “Whoever truly goes out to the world, goes out to God.”

There is a word that comes down to us through the years, from the ancient Israelites of the Psalms to Jesus Christ himself, who was paradoxically both divine and human, both heaven and earth—who was present for us, even when God felt most absent. In Jesus, God went to the cross—not just any cross, but our cross—and shouted, as we have shouted, quoting the psalmist, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In Jesus, God was present with us, even in our experience of absence.

The word is Emmanuel, which in Hebrew means, “God with you.” God is here. Not just an idea, but an intimate presence, a touch, a lover.

The psalmist speaks to God directly, saying “you” 10 times in just the first six verses, and refers to himself 13 times: “you have searched *me* and known *me*... *my* thoughts... *my* path” (cf. Nancy deClaisse-Walford).

When the psalmist says that God knows him, he uses the Hebrew word *yada'*, the same word used to describe Adam and Eve’s conception of a child. That’s how intimate this knowledge is. It is a union of God and the psalmist. It is love. God knows and sees the psalmist, not in parts and pieces as most people do, but sees him whole—everything.

The psalmist sings: *There is nowhere that I can go, in life or death, that is separate from you. You take me by the hand and lead me.*

He tries to consider God’s weighty and vast thoughts. He cannot count them. They are more than the sand. He says, “I come to the end—I am still with you” (139:18).

I pondered existence, the meaning of life; I traversed the whole course of science, religion, and philosophy; I sank into the words of poetry and the strains of music; I doubted, I feared, I lost myself in addiction and depression, in rage and hurt, in old age and dementia; I kissed my spouse, and cried on a casket; I peered through a microscope, worshiped your name, wandered woods, climbed mountains, sailed oceans; I lived my life, a life of groceries and books and evenings on the couch, a life of work and vacations and dog kisses, a life of children and bosses

and bullies; I lived it all, and still, when I came to the end, I was with you. You, God, were still there.

Has life gotten so busy, so full of distractions, riddled with lesser gods, that we have forgotten this Emmanuel, this God with us? Maybe we also need a date night—with God. Maybe that's what this is—this worship—a chance to remember, to look in the eyes of the One who loves us and ask them to tell us something we didn't know. Maybe it's time to fall in love again, to give to God our whole life—our work, our family, our tiredness, our sins, our fun—trusting that when we come to the end, God will still be there. Because God is everywhere, in everything, and is in all moments driven by one singular desire: to seek you, to love and know you, to mend what was broken and make it whole. **Amen.**