

THE GOD WHO GOES AHEAD OF US
Psalm 139:1-12

Introduction:

One of the certainties of life is uncertainty....change happens and you can't know what those changes are going to bring.

Some of you are feeling the pain of change this morning as you realize that we don't have our pastor here any longer. For six and a half years this church has enjoyed Dan's ministry. We have grown accustomed to his perceptive counsel, his scholarly approach to scripture, his warm smile and his presence when there were crises and questions and hard choices we faced. You may be asking some questions about what this means:

What is going to happen to our church over the next months? We have some serious decisions to make and we need our pastor's guidance.

What if I have a serious personal crisis and I need my pastor's counsel?

What if there are family stresses and strains and we need a pastor's patient wisdom?

What if there is a death in the family, who is going to be there to help with decisions and provide comfort and encouragement?

What if?...what if?..two of life's most challenging words when they are put together with a question mark.

They bring up the issues of uncertainty, change, and pain....life is full of these kinds of moments. We face them as a church, but we also feel them individually, in our families and throughout our culture.

We all try to insulate our personal lives from this pain in dozens of ways:

We surround ourselves with familiar people,

and build carefully structured routines into life,

and take out insurance policies for all the contingencies we may ever have to face.

But in the end, there are interruptions of our comfortable plans . . . illness, accident, rebellion, vocational changes, and a thousand other "unexpecteds" intrude into our lives and keep us off balance. These are universal experiences that are written into the DNA of human experience.

Let me direct you to our text from Psalm 139, a written record from thousands of years in the past.

To understand scripture I think you have to ask questions about what the writers of scripture were experiencing as they wrote their convictions and discoveries of faith. That is surely the case with this selection from Psalm 139. What had this poet been living through when led to pen these words? It seems to have followed some times of wandering, some experience when the perception had been that God was nowhere to be found.

Could it have been a time when this person of faith **had actually tried to hide** from God's eye. We all have our moments when we had just as soon God, or anyone else for that matter, doesn't see what we are up to. You know, "what happens in Las Vegas stays in Las Vegas."

Of course it could have been in the midst of **some illness or infirmity** which had resulted in a sense of isolation. Those experiences can surely leave the strongest of believers grasping for some sign of God's presence.

Then again it could well have been in **an experience when life circumstances just were overwhelming**. Maybe the economy had soured and left his survival at risk. Those were challenging days with little in the way of a safety net to catch one if the bottom fell out. Or perhaps a loved one had died and the resulting grief threatened to cut off any sense of a merciful and gracious God.

No matter what the situation might have been, this poet of the Psalm made a marvelous discovery. No matter where one **turns, or runs, or finds himself or herself**, you can't outrun God. Ride a rocket into space or try to hide out in the depths of some hidden cave in the earth, and this sensitive soul found that God was already there. Pack up and leave family and friends and run to some distant island, or retreat into your own dark night of the soul, and sooner or later you discover that the God of creation is already there. Wake up in the throes of some life-threatening illness and even there God is present, no matter how hard it is to believe it.

As this perceptive poet put it, "*You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.*" And note the way this psalm begins....see the subject of the sentences: "*O Lord, **you** have searched me and known me. **You** know...**you** search...**you** are acquainted...**you** know...*"

Throughout those verses it is God who takes the initiative and reaches out to us, even when we have not asked nor even wanted God's knowledge or presence. God, with all of the divine grace and love of which we read in scripture, is there ahead of us, waiting to greet us and keep us and bless us in the discoveries of our soul.

What do we discover of God in these moments of our separation?

- Sometimes we find an epiphany of healing. Lives are changed, hurts healed, and hope restored as we discover the presence of our God.
- Sometimes we sense God's challenge for us to change, a call to new faithfulness in face of our rebellion.
- Then again, this does not mean that God "fixes everything." Some circumstances won't change...crippling illness, death, divorce, broken promises, lost opportunities, these may not change but God is there. Sometimes we sense only God's hands on our shoulders, weeping with us until we come to terms with the inevitable.
- Even when you come face to face with the ultimate unknown – death – we need to remember that even there God has gone ahead of us. **See the Lord of the table, the Christ of the cross, and you will see God's love triumphant over the great mystery of death.**

No wonder Jesus called us to eat and drink these simple elements, and remember....remember what God has done for us.

*When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride*

II

Now let me hasten to say this morning, all of this talk about a God who goes ahead of us can just be pious talk and nothing more if we let it.

It can be just a subtle form of pie in the sky which is little more than an empty promise, a denial of reality unless we see the next step.

Experiencing this future blessing of God **demands courageous faith** from you! It means venturing into the next months with a serious commitment to follow the Christ of our salvation.

As someone put it, "The Christ of our past is the Christ who meets us in the future."

Our ability to experience the grace of God and His power in our lives in the days to come will be no greater than our confession of need and our trust in His grace today.

We love to sing, "Wherever he leads, I'll go." But it is hard to follow when you can't see where you are going. Life is a pilgrimage . . . an adventure of following. You cannot avoid the changes

and the uncertainties of life, nor can you afford to short-circuit the opportunities of our experiences.

Your calling in life is to **keep your eyes on the God who is always ahead of you . . .** seeking at each day's beginning to know and do God's will.

It is nothing less than to reaffirm our commitment to God today, and to renew our determination to serve God as best we can. The future God is working on is to use this congregation to serve a divine purpose among the people of this community!

There is a world of need out here in Elon and Burlington. . . need which this church exists to identify and to offer ministry.

- There are people who have no real relationship with God....who have no clear idea of who God even is as we know him through Jesus Christ. And you can help them know.
- There are families out here with children and they are living out quiet desperation as they seek to discover a way to lead those children and keep their own sanity at the same time. They are parents looking for some fellow travelers who are willing to share the journey. And you can help them know a peace within that can make them better parents and better people.
- There are 5500 students across the street, a few of whom are looking for a different approach to faith...one that challenges their minds, allows them to question and even doubt, as they pursue a way live in this confused world.
- There are people here in our community who are cut off from their families and their friends because they have AIDS, or cancer, or alcoholism, or some bizarre disorder, and no one wants to be around them now. There are gay and lesbian persons who have been beaten down by judgmental religion but who are seeking understanding and acceptance from a different kind of church.
- There are people out here with so much loneliness within that they dread to see the evening hour come because it means leaving work and coming home to their small world where there is no meaningful contact with other humans who really care about what is going on in their lives, and you can become a friend if you will.

But this church can become a center of love and compassion for some of these, our neighbors, as you live out the spirit of Christ . . . **the Christ who has already gone ahead of us and who is touching those hurting people already**, just waiting for some human beings who will embody His presence with them.

Conclusion

Let me share a story with you that is one of the most insightful ones I know if you will catch the imagery that is caught up in it.

Peter Marshall achieved great acclaim many years ago as pastor of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington during the difficult years of World War II. Some of you are old enough to remember his story. He once wrote in a sermon of the day he left his native Scotland, coming to the United States to seek an education and an opportunity he felt God led him to. It has always been meaningful to me in the transition moments of my ministry.

"Well do I remember the 18th of March, 1927, standing there on the after deck of the ship, watching with moist eyes the purple hills of the Mull of Kintyre sinking beneath the waters of the Atlantic, when every turn of the propeller was driving me farther from the land of my birth--from all I knew and loved.

"And then--I walked slowly and wonderingly forward until I was leaning over the bow. I stood looking into the west, wondering what lay beyond that tumbling horizon--wondering what the unknown tomorrow held for me."

It is tempting to want to stay in safe harbors, to want to avoid the uncertainties of life. But the meaning of real faith is to cut loose from the moorings of mediocrity and launch out to follow the God who has gone ahead of us . . . to follow where we cannot quite see today.

The psalmist reminds us that we cannot escape the God of Creation, the God who goes ahead of us into the future.

You and I do not know exactly what the future holds for our church, but one thing you can know for sure . . . there is a future for God's people who are willing to involve themselves in ministry for His sake and courageously follow the Christ who bids us come after him.

If you will do that, I have no anxiety about our future as a church . . . God has gone ahead of us!
Amen

Benediction:

May the God who shakes heaven and earth,
Whom death could not contain,
Who lives to disturb and heal us,
Bless you now with power to go forth
And proclaim the gospel. Amen.