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Text: Psalm 139
Sermon: There and Back Again
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Baptism of the Lord

Several months ago, I got an email or text message from the credit card company asking whether or not I had ordered keto gummies, which resulted in a long back and forth of paperwork and signing various documentation and showing emails that in fact I did not order keto gummies and should not be responsible for the charges on the credit card. Earlier in the year, you and me and anyone who has a state driver's license were notified that the DMV system had been breached and potentially our personal information could be compromised. Just this week the Securities and Exchange Commission reported a breach of their account with X, formerly known as Twitter because someone had not set-up a two-factor authentication code. And in fact, much of my life is consumed by logging in, re-logging and trying to remember if this is my password, my updated password, or an entirely new password because it wouldn't let me use my normal password because it was too close to the password before. When ancestry DNA was all the rage several years ago, I got it as a birthday or Christmas gift, and I remember talking to a friend about it who said that no way would they ever submit their DNA to the 'system.' They preferred a life under the radar and off the grid.

Right next to the 23rd psalm, the 139th psalm is one of the most powerful, personal, authentic, and substantive psalms in the psalter and passages in all of scripture. There are very few places in all of scripture that can express such profound, personal and deeply theological insights into the character of God. The psalm reveals something that I believe is at the heart of our Reformed way of approaching God, that God is the vastness and boundlessness and sovereignty of God, and the deeply personal and intimate and compassion at the heart of God. For the psalmist, the God of psalm 139 is no dispassionate being sitting up high upon the clouds looking down on semi-bored at our lives from afar. Rather, the god of psalm 139 knows us intimately and embraces us or is coming to meet us even when we feel far away or we fall away or we lose our way. The questions that we ask of the children at a baptism seem like they may have been ripped from the pages of psalm 139...if she cries will you comfort her, if she falls will you help her get up, if she loses her way, will you hold her hand. These are not just grounded in the baptismal liturgy, but in the character of God. The prodigal God who goes into the far country to bring us back home. The God who is nearer to us than we are to ourselves even if we life in Sheol, hell, or hellish

circumstances. The God who hymn 274 says is the everlasting instant. The life of Jesus Christ is the human form of Psalm 139, Savior who refuses to be such without a company of humanity that he is at work knitting together, pursuing even at the risk of the other 99, and redeeming, exalting, and enabling to flourish through persistent, love, compassion, and care.

So apologies in advance for taking Psalm 139 in a weird direction, but let's imagine for a second if the author of the psalm was a computer hacker at the DMV or the coder or bot who hacked my account and sent me Keto gummies that we are talking to. 'You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away....even before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely. I cannot flee your spirit or escape you.' Okay end of the exercise and I apologize for ruining Psalm 139 briefly, but so much of our lives is spent protecting our personal information, being guarded about our personal information, living with a sense of fear or anxiety of the whole of our lives were laid bare, and yet I think for the most part when we hear from the psalmist that God knows us deeply and is acquainted with all our ways and loves us so much that he will pursue us to the ends of the earth and beyond, it comes not as a fright, but as a deep assurance and comfort. What is your only comfort in life and in death, the first question of the Heidelberg catechism asks. And the answer is that I belong in body and soul, in life and in death, to Jesus Christ, I belong to God, and not just any God, but the God with the character of psalm 139, a God who is willing to go to hell and back to find me, a God who won't let the darkness ever subsume me or make my bed in anywhere that is separated from God. We may try to separate ourselves from the love of God. We often do or at least often think we have accomplished it, but there is simply no place we can go or reach that can outrun the love of God. God knows us deeply and God's presence accompanies us in 'every moment, every place, every circumstance,' and what this psalm 139 proclaims to us and celebrates is the inescapability of God. As Old Testament scholar Pat Miller declares, 'whatever my experience or fate, I am not cut off from the presence of God. But it is also the case that whatever I do, wherever I go, I cannot get away from God.'¹ And yet, for the psalmist, and I would venture for us too, both of those statements are good news.

Late last year, I had the opportunity to preside at a graveside service for a member of the church I grew up in from the age of infant to 8th grade. This person was not a relative, not a member of my immediate family, but

¹ Patrick D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 147.

to paraphrase Leslie Higgins in the Ted Lasso series, there is the family you are born with and the family you make along the way, and she was part of the family I was blessed to make with along the way. In fact, there are worse definitions for church than that: 'the family you make along the way.' When I was in 8th grade, we moved away from that community, and I grew up too, going to high school and then moving on to college, but wherever I was in the world, I would keep in touch and would write letters and give updates especially after moving away from people I loved and not being an intimate part of their lives anymore. Long after the graveside service was over and I had the honor of remembering her life as we laid her to rest, I received a manila envelope from her son and inside was every letter I had ever written her, from a thank you note for a birthday gift to letters I wrote when I moved away to letters when I was gone to college to Christmas cards with pictures of my children. Reading the thoughts and musings of my 8th grade self could be cringy. I would share my anxieties about school, tell on my mom for getting mad at me for spending too much money on baseball cards, and express my frustrations with having to start over in a new place. I remember opening those letters when I realized what they were and being fearful of reading them. And then as I read thinking to myself or about my much younger self, 'could you be a bit more discreet,' 'did you really have to share all that,' 'why do you have to share so much,' 'she doesn't need to know all that.' Why didn't you go ahead and give her your personal credit card information too, all your passwords, and the rest of your intimate details while you were at it, younger Chris?

In addition to taking the trouble to put that bundle of letters into a brown envelope and send it to me, her son wrote these words: 'I thought you might enjoy reading the enclosed notes and remembering a very special relationship.' What I really received in the mail was not some insight into my 4th grade self or 8th grade self or high school self or college self, but into someone who loved me, cared about me, held onto my correspondence in a file or in a drawer or a place in the heart. All the letters were held, kept, bundled together. And yes, if I could edit or rewrite them or had a chance to share my thoughts now, I might be a bit more discreet or reserved, but that would be beside the point. The point wasn't the personal challenges or oversharing that were there in those words, but that someone valued it all with love and compassion and listened to it all, knew it all, and the whole relationship, the whole person, the whole life; the messy details were there, all lovingly held together at the heart of the relationship. Perhaps that tracks similarly to the God of Psalm 139. A God who knows us intimately, a God who discerns our thoughts from far away, a God we cannot escape or outrun, a God who forms us intricately and

uniquely, and a God who listens patiently to our cringeworthy thoughts and our letters full of stream of consciousness musings, a God who bundles it all together in the envelope of our lives and refuses to ever let us go.