

Our Story in God's Book

Second Sunday in Epiphany—January 17, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

*O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts
from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all
my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my
mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your
works; that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. All the days ordained for me
were written in your book before one of them came to be.
How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am
still with you.*

The much-loved Psalm 139 has long been celebrated as a song of wonder. The psalmist stood in awe as he considered his amazing God – One who was omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent and a few other “omnis” to throw in with those! God is amazing, and the wonder of God is not merely confined to the Almighty Himself that we might only be amazed from a distance. Much of what is so amazing about God is that God is with us, all around us, and knows us through and through, and still loves us! The psalmist also marveled at how God had created us and knew our every part. I count verse 16 as the height of wonder as the psalmist stands in amazement as he considers God’s plan for our lives. *All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.* Our lives are a glorious story written in God’s book! I remember delighting in this passage around the time of my first son’s birth. This was the passage that was preached at his baptism. We did not know just how his life would unfold, but we could delight that God had a plan and that the story is good!

Does the thought of your life as a part of God's story in His great book excite you, or are you so weighed down by the gloom of January and quarantine that this truth has lost much of its power? What better time to reclaim this wonderful truth about our lives and to consider our stories, written in God's book.

When I think of our lives as a glorious story, I think of Bill Bright, the evangelist and founder of "Campus Crusade for Christ." He put together an evangelistic tract called "The Four Spiritual Laws," and the first of these laws spoke the psalmist's heart. *God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.* Amen! We are quick to insist that God loves everybody, but we usually forget to carry that just a little farther. God has wonderful plans for us. Our Heidelberg Catechism begins on a similarly joyful note as it affirms that we belong to our loving Savior who is at work in our lives. God, like any loving parent, has plans for their children. We also know that a good parent is one who has plans and ideas for their children's future, but also loves their children enough so that they do not force or manipulate them into following their plans. We serve a wonderful God who has wonderful plans for each of us! How blessed we are.

Not only is this a delight for the believer, but it is also a message which the world needs to hear, for the world denies this message and often leads us into doubt and sadness. To those who can see no deeper or farther than the laws of science, life is only a physical phenomenon with little other meaning. Is it any surprise that we live in a depressed world! Many are simply overwhelmed by the discouragements of life such that they can no longer believe in God's good plans. Thoreau famously remarked that "The mass of people live lives of quiet desperation," and sadly, he was correct. We have Good News which our world needs to hear!

It is amusing that our world, which claims to be so married to science and materialism cannot help but put forth their own notions of our lives having some deeper meaning and narrative. In the scientific world we hear frequent mention of our continually evolving toward some improved version of ourselves. Such alleged natural improvement may involve thousands of generations, but the story is still held up as a source of hope. With the great advancement in telescopes over the recent years we are also hearing great hopes of discovering and connecting with superior life forms from other distant planets. (I wouldn't hold my breath waiting for that to happen!) Disney's "Lion King" invited us to celebrate "The Circle of Life," as though the continuing of generations by itself offered us hope for meaning and purpose in our daily lives. The world senses that our lives have some meaning, but they cannot, or dare not, grasp the great and joyous truth that this meaning comes from God, and a life of relationship with Him.

The sweet truth is that our lives are not random accidents of nature, but are a part of a plan and the ongoing story of our loving God. God is that story's author and source of energy and life. We are blessed to be a part of it all. *All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.* Before we continue this

celebration any farther, we had better pause to address a deep concern which some of you may already be sensing. The questions go something like this. “But if God is the author and controller of this story, where does that leave us? Are we mere puppets in God’s play? You’re not preaching that dreaded doctrine of predestination, are you?” Good questions. Some are quick to insist that God has only foreknowledge of our lives. God knows in advance what we will decide and do by our own free wills, but *we* are the ones in control. This explanation seems to settle the logical and philosophical question of how God can be in control, yet we also have free will, but I doubt that this explanation would pass muster with the psalmist whose whole sources of amazement is with the thoroughgoing control and plan of God. I must also be clear that in our Reformed tradition we have long stressed the sovereignty of God and God’s control over all. As the Catechism celebrates, referring the words of our Savior, *He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven: in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.* (Heidelberg Catechism #1, Matthew 10:30)

Our talk of the absolute sovereignty of God does raise the question of free will. If God is in absolute control, where does that leave our free will, and does that relieve us of our individual responsibility? This debate has raged in the Church over the centuries. My response to this great controversy is rather simple. Here we find ourselves dealing with a great paradox—a mystery—which will defy any attempted human explanation. This much we do know. The Bible is clear on two points. God is in control, and we are people with a free will and are responsible for all that we do. How these can both be true at the same time, I do not know, but they are, and I praise God for both truths. I rejoice that I have been created to have freedom and a will, and I rejoice all the more that God is in control.

Rather than leave this debate with a philosophical explanation, let me leave you with a song: “Amazing Grace.” John Newton, a former slave trader, was overwhelmed by the grace of our sovereign God, and so he wrote this wonderful hymn. At the end of a believer’s life, we commonly sing this at their funeral, and rightly so. And though that person lived a life which exercised a free will, what is it which we celebrate when it is all over? We celebrate God’s loving power, God’s grace, which “taught my heart to fear,” and then relieved those fears, which brought us safe thus far and will lead us home. In a wonderful and mysterious way which far transcends our understanding, God’s loving power and direction are at work in our lives, and we would be lost without that grace! How blessed we are. You may continue to argue over the place of free will and God’s sovereign grace, but I will delight to let God work out that debate.

The joy for the believer is in watching that gracious plan of God unfold before our eyes as we live God’s amazing grace. At this time of year, we usually have a lunch meeting which we have come to call “Time Out.” We take a time out in life’s game to look back over the year past, and then to look ahead in hope. COVID concerns have shelved this

year's gathering, but perhaps we can try this again as early as Lent. What a joy it is to look back over what may have first appeared to have been a year of random events, and to rejoice to see God's loving plan unfolding! God's story unfolds and we are blessed to be a part of that story.

We must not forget the future implications of our lives being a story and being a part of God's story. Our bulletin cover features verse 16 along with a picture of a newborn child. This is a great verse to celebrate at the beginning of a person's life, and we commonly remark about all the events which lie ahead for that child, but in doing so we can easily miss out of another great truth. We each have a marvelous eternity ahead of us! There are many great chapters yet to unfold in our earthly stories, and then we move on to an eternity of joy. This brings us to my final point.

The psalmist is inviting us to draw near to the wonderful Author of our Salvation, and to keep our stories interesting! When I speak of our lives as a wonderful story, I will undoubtedly be reminded by several folks that their story is not too exciting. Does our lives being included in God's book mean that our lives must be full of constant excitement? While every life can use a little adventure, this should not be the measure of how well we are living for our God. I often remember the program at the Scout House some years ago which featured a young couple which had recently climbed Mount Everest. Not only had they climbed the world's highest peak, but had also managed to accomplish several other exciting feats of daring all around the world. This couple was not boastful or proud in what they had accomplished, and they gave a fascinating presentation, yet I remember feeling a little sorry for them by the end of the evening. I kept thinking to myself, "They have had many adventures, but have they really discovered the joys of an abundant life?" The excitement and thrills, in and of themselves, can leave us empty. Some of the richest lives are lived in quiet servanthood which is always quietly looking out for others and giving help at every opportunity.

Our calling is not to pursue a thrill-seeking life, but we must also be on guard against an even greater failure for the Christian. Too many of us have fallen to the opposite extreme of seeking lives which involve no risk whatsoever, as if this is the path of godly wisdom. And then we wonder why our safe little lives lack excitement! There are still chapters yet to be written in our earthly lives, so there is still time to jazz up the plot! This morning a bunch of folks are stepping forward to be claimed and set apart in Christ's service as elders and deacons in the Church. That, my friends, is an adventure. No, the meetings are not generally so exciting, but we are presenting ourselves for service, to face problems, to seek God's guidance for this family of faith, and to offer ourselves as servants of the Master and to then experience God's work among us. Life will get more interesting for these folks, especially for those who raise their hands and say, "I'll take responsibility for that." Let us all step up and serve. You will be surprised how much more interesting your story becomes when you do.

Here we are in this challenging month when our life stories seem to go into a sluggish hibernation. Perhaps we have times like these so that we can pause and better evaluate what God is doing and where we are going. Let us consider God's work in our lives, let us rejoice in that grace, and let us delight that the best is yet to come. *All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.* Our lives are a wonderful story. God is at work in our lives, shaping and guiding that story, and this all has a place in God's book! Onward people! The saga continues.