

I begin this sermon on Psalm 139 with a confession. Psalm 139 is the lectionary text for today, the Second after Epiphany, but not for this year of the lectionary readings. For those new to this concept of the lectionary, it is an attempt by an ecumenical committee some decades back to allocate most of the Bible to a specific Sunday in a three-year cycle. They leave out certain items; see for example that the committee stopped our reading just before v.19, and we will return to this in a bit. Part of the committee's intention would be that over three years most of scripture would be read in public worship. Their choices of which texts to pair on a given Sunday sometimes makes good sense to me and sometimes I am drawn to different connections. Some preachers of the lectionary choose one or two texts and focus on them, and such is the case this Sunday. Today we have a part of Psalm 139.

When I began looking at the texts for today some weeks ago, I was distracted and delved into the potential texts for the correct Sunday of the church year but from the wrong year. Once recognizing my error it seemed a bit late in the worship planning and sermonizing process to change course. Upon reading Psalm 139 I found myself drawn to this imagery of a God who finds us where we are. It seemed a poignant reminder for us all as the Omicron variant leaves many isolated. Let me detail just some of what I have been observing in the last weeks.

I was distracted, in part, because the health of my mother-in-law dramatically declined the last weeks of December and early January. She has lost strength to the point she is sleeping in her living room chair because climbing in and out of bed is too taxing. There are other challenges but all the details do not need to be shared. Simply put, it is a hard time for her and her family that loves her. It is imperative for her to remember Psalm 139: that God is acquainted with all her ways; there is no where she will go that God is not; that while there may be clouding of thought or future for her, God has gone before us into the future and God's thoughts remain lucid, full of compassion, full of care.

And if those whose health is failing need to remember these lessons of Psalm 139, so do family members trying to do their best for them be they near at hand or at a distance. There is only so much family can do for a loved one who is suffering in body, mind, or spirit. There are times, many times actually, in which the best we can do is be as near as we are able, hold loved ones in God's presence, and know that there is no place any of us can God which escapes God's presence.

I feel for students and teachers in this Omicron season. After a year of on-line studies at most Canadian Universities, the U of S and other institutions of higher

learning, returned to in person education for the first term. The sense I got in conversations with university student is that this was a good thing. Many students actually enjoy being with other students, and even learn a few things from them. Now we are largely back to on-line education and again experiencing the cancelation of some extra-curricular events. On my drive out to Tiefengrund this past Tuesday I had a chance to listen to Matt Galloway on *The Current* (a CBC radio production) on the Omicron's impact on kids. Many pediatricians are voicing the importance of socialization for children and that closer of schools and extra curricular activities circumvents this part of their emotional well being and growth.¹ I am not certain we every out grow this need for connection which comes from being around other people. And yet, right now, students and all of us are being asked to limit our contacts, and some students are being sent home. Many who crave the social dimensions of school and living are once more navigating waters of isolation.

Teachers in high school and grade school face different challenges. These front line workers need to be present if the kids are present; they have no choice. They are amongst a population with lower vaccination rates than the general public. The share with their classroom pod and bubble whatever they have and have brought to school, and they take back to their homes what they have received. In some respects the classroom is an incubation chamber for their Omicron. I will grant that students are masked, but word is from the health care profession is that not all masks are created equal; and even the best masks are ineffective is worn improperly.² Those with no choice but to face clients, customers, or church people are in an equally difficult situation. While the Omicron variant is not leading to the rates of hospitalizations, no one wants to compromise a vulnerable family member or health care worker. For those required to be in the public who hold Omicron concerns, it is a lamentable situation as case counts rise. And lament is the appropriate word.

One of the biblical resources on my shelf describes Psalm 139 as a “Psalm of personal lament”. Lament Psalms are exceedingly important in the Psalter—over one third of all the Psalms in the collection.³ Why might this be? We need constant reminders that God's people have often taken a roundabout way, what T.S. Elliot called detours into “the wasteland”.⁴ In life we do not always get what

¹ <https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-63-the-current/clip/15888343-the-impact-omicron-kids-easing-vaccine-hesitancy-among>

² <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/shahab-omicron-saskatchewan-masks-holidays-1.6294362>

³ William Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1993), p. 293-294. See also Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depth: The Psalms Speak for Us Today*; Revised and Expanded edition (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), pp 235-242

⁴ Anderson, *Out of the Depth: The Psalms Speak for Us Today*; Revised and Expanded edition (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), pp 66, 13.

we want or even what we deserve, and such has been the case for God's people through the centuries. Suffering happens at least a third of time. According to the Psalms, the faith filled response is a lament directed towards God. We are given a form and language to offer our complaints to, and sometimes, about God. These lament Psalms, however, almost always include a statement of trust somewhere within them. In our massive list of Lament Psalms only one of them, Psalm 88, concludes with no words or sentiments of assurance in God. All the other laments make it clear that things are not going as planned or hoped, but that in the end our hope is in God. We are, therefore, brought to a place of thanksgiving not for what is but what we trust will one day be.

When people cite the words of Jesus on the cross of "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" they will sometimes recognize that this was a part of Jesus' Bible. Rarely, though, does a person recognize that this only part one Psalm 22; that the last half of the Psalm (22-31) are all about God's providence and what the Almighty can do with such bleak conditions. It is really worth hearing some of these last verses of Psalm 22.

v. 27-31: All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations. To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him. Posterity shall serve him; future generations will be told about the LORD, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that God has done it.

Maybe this is the kind of thing to which Jesus was pointing. He knew how the Psalm ended. Now, we servants are not greater than our leader who is Christ Jesus. Perhaps we too ought to learn not only the art of lament but the theological art of a Thanksgiving rooted in the future and not the past.

I feel for our medical staff and social servants who are nearing year two of life with COVID and its variants. A number of reports have highlighted the irony that so many people who have received care in our medical system over this pandemic are those who have chosen not to be vaccinated. I can imagine it is difficult to treat patients during a pandemic, but to serve those who have willingly disregarded the science, scientists, and professionals labouring to save their lives seems tragic. It is one of these modern parables of Christ's teachings and living which has also played itself out in church history—sometimes for the sake of our convictions we willingly help those who have done us harm. But it isn't easy. It makes us sad and even mad. The laments give liturgical voice to our outrage.

In this respect I want return to Psalm 139 and pick up the story at verse 19: "O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me". Now, that is strong language and it is not the only time selections of the

Psalms are omitted from public reading. Addressing this situation, William Holladay writes the following. “In laments the psalmist speaks for those who are innocent, whose rights have been ignored; the laments speak for those who are marginalized in the community. In these psalms, worshipers who are marginalized could find their voice.”⁵ Is this one of the cases? While the Psalm taps into this extreme frustration with people who have caused harm, maybe it goes to far.

Holladay continues, “The crucial question then is: With regard to their enemies, what are Christians to wish for and pray for? Ideally, one would wish for their change of heart and for reconciliation with them. Lacking that, one would wish for the recognition that they are in the wrong...One would further wish that they might cease their oppression or that God would take away their power to oppress.” He concludes that it is legitimate in Christian worship that we occasionally are justified in omitting certain sequences in the Psalm based upon the life and teachings of Christ as well as the self-righteous violence it has in the past encouraged.⁶ Still, I can imagine medical personal benefit from acknowledgment in worship of the grief and pain which has been endured.

How then does tie off a sermon which has ranged so far and wide? I was drawn to Psalm 139 because it does affirm God’s presence in all places: when we are feeling lost ourselves or lost for our loved ones; when we are feeling isolated or alone; when we are feeling besieged and oppressed. Words of Paul in chapter 8 (38-39) in his letter to the churches of Rome echo Psalm 139: “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” When our way seems lost or we feel alone or when we feel under duress it is good to remember who we are and whose we are. Laments, and Psalm 139 in particular, help us in this endeavor. The Psalms gave Jesus and our spiritual ancestors strength. May they also do so for us. Amen.

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⁵ Holladay, p. 294.

⁶ Holiday, 312-313.