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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Psalm 139

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is a sermon about how very important you are, to God and to reality. Do not doubt it. This world can be hard, but let nothing dissuade you from this conviction: you are valuable, indeed cherished by God. To get started on this them, let me lift up a verse from this morning's Psalm -- Psalm 139:

Your eyes beheld my limbs, yet unfinished in the womb; all of them were written in your book; they were fashioned day by day, when as yet there was none of them. (Psalm 139:15, LBW)

My wife, Carol, as many of you know, is Chaplain and Director of Pastoral Care at a Lutheran retirement village called The Warburg. As she makes the rounds of her visits at The Wartburg it is her privilege to hear the words of elderly folks -- of people who have lived many a year and seen many things. Sometimes what she hears tends to break the heart. Let me share one of them.

Carol tells the story of an elderly couple at the Wartburg, beautifully devoted to one another. The old woman said that Psalm 139 was her favorite Psalm. Carol said that it was hers too. Carol asked the old woman why she loved it so much. She answered that her mother had told her that she was "her father's mistake," and she took it to heart. That was a terrible pain for a child to bear. But then the old woman read Psalm 139 and suddenly she was able to answer, "No. I am not my father's mistake." God bless her for that declaration: I am not my father's mistake!

My! What burdens we can place upon one another. For a child, mother and father are the world. If *they* rock you, you are rocked indeed! If they discourage you, it is a heavy discouragement. There might have been affection in the heart of the mother; there might have been a twinkle of good humor in her eyes. But when she told her child that she was her father's mistake, she thereby gave the child reason to wonder about the meaning of her life. And that is a depressing thing for anyone, let alone a child.

So the child labored onwards. Maybe she forced the saying out of mind. Maybe she was surrounded by enough love that she did not really doubt her own worth. Let us hope so. Still, it was a good day when that child grew up, read Psalm 139, and took it to heart. It gave her some peace. It gave her some healing. "I am not my father's mistake."

Indeed that is so! Let each one of us take it to heart that there is nothing accidental about our existence. Rather, we *are* -- because the Triune God would not be without us. Amazing thought! The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit felt

a hole, as it were, in their heart, and only *you* could fill it. You! Speak your name quietly to yourself. Only you could satisfy the mighty heart of God.

BEAUTIFUL IN THE EYES OF YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER

You are beautiful in the eyes of God almighty. You have seen new mothers and fathers look with delight upon their newborn child. Never have they seen anything so lovely as this little one. Why, his eyes are the biggest and brownest ever! Her smile will conquer this world. Can there be anything more adorable than her little toes, than his little hand that even now seeks to embrace a finger or anything near it?

Well, whatever earthly delight we humans can take in our little ones, even more delight does the Triune God take in you, in me. There is nothing but innocence and good will in the mighty heart of God. When he beheld us in the womb, he looked on with pure and magnificent delight as we formed, as our nerves and blood vessels and little limbs took shape and we moved on toward birth into this world that needs us so:

¹³For thou didst form my inward parts, thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb. ¹⁴I praise thee, for thou art fearful and wonderful. Wonderful are thy works! Thou knowest me right well; ¹⁵my frame was not hidden from thee, when I was being made in secret, intricately wrought... (Psalm 139:13-15, RSV)

Intricately wrought indeed! Every medical doctor, every sculptor, every one who has loved someone else knows how beautiful and intricately wrought human beings are.

OUR FAITH IS AUDACIOUS!

Our Christian faith is an audacious faith. We make mighty claims about our God. The Bible teaches us to do so. Atheists and some scientists might claim that, in the end, we are simply cosmic dust, but that is an awful rocky pillow to try to sleep on, giving very little comfort. And in any case, that is not what we believe. We believe something much grander. We believe that you and I and all that is, are by the deliberate will and creation of our Maker. We bow our heads with gratitude before the awesome judgment of the Lord at the end of his six days of creation:

And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day. (Genesis 1:31, KJV)

Sin, and wickedness, and meanness are not good, and the Bible testifies to their ultimate expulsion from reality. But *you* are here because God wants you to be.

You are precious in his sight, and never forget it. The true God cherishes you and has very high plans for you.

THE WONDERS OF DIVINE KNOWLEDGE

If we settle down and try to take in the wonders of God's creation -- all the whirling planets and drifting tides and the magnificent movements of atoms and photons and such -- we are led inevitably to the conclusion that we have a great God. For it would take a great God to create and to sustain this wonderful world of ours.

But if you ask me, this morning's Psalm carries the praise of God's virtues to the maximum degree. It speaks of a kind of knowledge that dwarfs such things as physics and mathematics and the motions of planets. Indeed, it speaks of our God's knowledge of that most complex of creations: the human soul.

Admire the first two verses of our Psalm 139. In the King James Version, they read thus:

¹O LORD, thou hast searched me, and known me. ²Thou knowest my
downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off.
(Psalm 139, KJV)

The Lord knows us when we are sitting and pondering: he knows our "downsitting." And then he knows when we have resolved upon a course of action and spring up to it: he knows our "uprising." He reads out thoughts. Though we should hide them from everyone else, he understands our thoughts "afar off."

Consider the next couple verses. They speak of a knowledge of us that speeds ahead of our own knowing:

³Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with
all my ways. ⁴For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O LORD,
thou knowest it altogether. (Psalm 139:3-4, KJV)

Our God knows about our good impulses that do not quite break forth into action, perhaps because we just don't have strength enough to put them into action. But the Lord sees them anyway, before they even find expression in word or deed. Likewise, he perceives those sinful impulses that we somehow manage to wrestle under control. No one else might perceive them, but our Maker does and gives us credit for mastering them. Altogether, we are speaking of a knowledge that is without limit, for our God knows us minutely, continually, and accurately. Aye, and he knows *everyone else* in the same way at the same time, all simultaneously. He has knowledge without end, without fatigue, without limit.

LOVE IS AT WORK

And why? Why does our Maker care to have such immense knowledge of our human race? The answer is love -- entirely love. Just as love moves parents to know their children, such that mother and father become uneasy if they do not know what is going on in the lives of their little ones, so our Maker will not rest content with not knowing about us, continually.

He notes the good and he notes the bad, not so much because he is a determined administrator of justice, but rather because he has some straightening out to do with those he loves: with you and with me. Let us pray and work that it is not too much! Let us pray that on Judgment Day, our Lord's intimate knowledge of us doesn't weigh down major portions of eternity getting us back on track.

And how do I know that it is divine love at work in our Lord's profound knowledge of us? Because of Jesus Christ: his death on the cross is the reliable measure of the love of God toward you and me. It is a love that is so deep that our God can hold nothing back from us, not even his own life.

Altogether, we are known through and through, up and down, continually and accurately. And for all that the Lord knows us, he loves us still.

SAMUEL

It occurs to me that this Sunday could well be called "Children's Sunday," because we want all children to grow up knowing the central theme of today's Bible readings: that they are precious, beloved of God, and of use to him in the building of his kingdom.

That is the theme of this morning's story about Samuel. He was a boy like other boys. He was but a boy, but the Lord had need of him. He had a message for the boy to deliver to the old priest, Eli. And beyond that, the Lord had need of Samuel for many ministries over course of that lad's life. The Lord created Samuel, delighted in Samuel as his little limbs were coming together in the womb, had good work for Samuel to do, and meant to be with that boy, from childhood on into old age:

¹⁹And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. ²⁰And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the LORD. (1 Samuel 3:19, RSV)

YOU AND ME

As for you and me, o ye Children of God, it is entirely the same: we are created and sustained by the Triune God. He has delighted in us before we were even born. He knows us through and through, even the impulses of our heart before we

know them ourselves. Everyone of you has the right to say to reality: do not tamper with me, for I know someone Big, I know God, and I am known of him! He has some good work for us to do in the days and decades ahead of us, and he raised up Jesus Christ to accompany us in this work, to be our Saviour in this life and in the world to come, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.