

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**
Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, January 17, 2021)

Text: **Psalm 139:1-16, 22-24** (*NRSV*, adapted)

O GOD, 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 GOD, 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.
Where can I go from your spirit?
 Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
 if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
 and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
 and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
 and the light around me become night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
 the night is as bright as the day,
 for darkness is as light to you.
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.
In your book were written
 all the days that were formed for me,
 when none of them as yet existed.
Search me, O God, and know my heart;
 test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
 and lead me in the way everlasting.

Reflecting with Pastor Donald Shenk: “Fearfully and Wonderfully Made”

This is a tricky time to be alive, don't you think?

Are you, as I, tempted to think that this is the most challenging time to be living and that nobody else has had to go through what we're going through? Or maybe you're a bit wiser and more attuned with history, and know that, unfortunately, this is only one of many instances in the span of human existence where conflict has reigned, people have been sorely divided and pestilence has swept across the face of the earth.

Certainly, the one who wrote today's extraordinary psalm knew what it was like to face adversity and evil. The verses Lester did NOT read for us include these words attributed to David, “O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me...Do I not hate those who hate you, O God? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.” Not exactly the words of a pacifistic shepherd whose known only equanimity, sweetness, kindness and peace in his environment now, are they?

But how interesting that the words that follow such vitriolic ones are these that complete the Psalm, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

A couple of weeks ago, on January 3rd, I reflected with you on a passage from Jeremiah and considered the ways in which I feel the way we move towards hope is to acknowledge our despair and not try to gloss over it or move too quickly through it. I also proposed that I think denying the truth of our condition and the condition of our world only leads to more destruction and anguish, and that I believe God wants us to recognize our despair and the conditions that cause it honestly and forthrightly.

Here in Psalm 139, I also think God is showing us how we are not only to bring the truth of our despair and anguish before God, but our anger, our desire for justice, and our feelings of hopelessness as well. By so doing, I believe, we are often brought into a place of understanding our own desire for healing, our own culpability, and our own need for forgiveness as well.

As I was reading over the lectionary selections for today, I was drawn immediately to Psalm 139 and found myself welling up and then breaking down as I read those beautiful words right there at the beginning in verse 1, “O God, you have searched me and known me” followed soon by the affirmation “You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.” Sitting there with my watery eyes, God's spirit swept over me once again as I realized the powerful presence that never lets me down, never leaves me alone and has watched over me before I was born and will be with me even after I die. “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.”

Where have been the places in your life this week that you have felt bereft and alone? Where have you wondered if God was present and what possible reason there could be for what was and is happening in our country and throughout our world? Did you as the Psalmist say, “surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night?” If so, you were certainly not alone. In fact, in wondering such things and speaking such words we join the cavalcade of humanity who has wondered and spoken such things not only in these extremely fraught times, but has thought and spoken them since humanity was created.

And here’s the thing - God knows it. God knows us. For our frames have not been hidden from God who lets us know again and again that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. We are God’s children. Even if we take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, God is with us and holds us fast. God is with us in Washington, God is with us in Sacramento, God is with us in Los Angeles, God is with us everywhere and God is with us right now.

I have received and read a great deal of thoughtful writings and many different pieces of inspiration over the last couple of weeks, and I realized again that we are all facing some of the most challenging times in our lives and are living in a time that is affecting every single person on this planet in one way or another. It’s an incredible time to be alive and the way we deal with what we’re feeling and open ourselves to God’s leading through what we watch and read and hear and say is fundamental to how we will understand this time and go forward.

One writer noted the importance of taking time out for yourself to meditate, [and being aware] that there is no “right” or “wrong” way to do that. They invited each of us to enter into “a sitting meditation” in a spirit of open inquiry and a spirit of allowing, in order to encounter whatever comes up for us in the moment. I know that this can be especially helpful at a time when we may feel stressed and are having difficulty with things that are out of our control.

The noted Native American elder and author Bishop Steven Charleston encourages us to “stay steady in the Spirit [as] we knew these days would be difficult. We just did not know how difficult” he writes. “But now we do. Now we see the level to which our society has fallen. And yet, we are not afraid. We do not look away. Why? Because that level is a measuring stick to show us how much repair work we need to do [which helps us to realize] why we are here. We are called to this moment to do the work that must be done, the work of healing. We come from many different faiths. We pray in many different ways. But we are all here for the same reason. We are here to help restore our national community, and by so doing, restore hope to the world.”

And the wonderful artist and musician Carrie Newcomer acknowledges that “many of us are wrestling with grief, dismay, anger, racial double standard and discouragement... [so] let’s not candy coat anything,” she exhorts. “But let us also claim that there is a stronger force, a deeper truth and a wide and active community of good hearted, decent people. Let us remind one another of all the fine and honorable people in our own lives. Let us remind ourselves of how many people got up this morning and continue to make the world a kinder place, one

day, one person, three feet around them... Reach out and affirm what keeps saving us - goodness, kindness, faithfulness, gratitude, generosity, hospitality, justice and love...always love. Lay your hand on your heart and know that you also illuminate the lives of others around you.”

These times ARE hard, my friends. These times can produce much anxiety, anger and even guilt. I know, I’ve experienced them all myself. But within and through it all I also know that the hand of God is at work.

I encourage all of us to remember right now and in the days ahead that we are truly fearfully and wonderfully made with Christ before us, Christ behind us, Christ above us and Christ below us. Christ is within us and with Christ we shall prevail.

Amen.