

Three musings on Psalm 139 (Psalm 139:1-12,23-24)

It is important to consider how others may hear these beloved words.

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1. I once heard someone refer to Psalm 139 as “the stalker psalm,” perhaps in an effort to shock us out of the sentimentality this psalm can provoke.

It stuck with me because I have been a lover of this psalm for as long as I can remember. It has comforted me in times of despair. It has assured me of God’s close and abiding presence from the heights of heaven to the depths of Sheol.

In times of overwhelming shame, when the impulse is to hide from everyone, it has made me sure that God never needs or wants me to hide. She is always with me in self-imposed prisons, persisting with the truth that, made in her image, knit together in my mother’s womb, who I am has always been intentional and worthy of her steadfast love. God’s relentless attention to all my details signals not just knowledge of me but unwavering delight.

2. How difficult it was to hear someone refer to my beloved psalm in such a violent and negative way! But beyond my initial difficulty, it was important to hear how others may hear these words. To some, God’s ever-present knowledge of every aspect of our lives is not a comfort but a threat.

People who have ingrained images of a mean and punishing God may never find comfort in hearing that God is as close to them as their every breath at every moment of every day. In that case, God's promised absence would be sweet relief—as it offers a respite from the anxiety of always being watched and judged.

Even if one has a more neutral understanding of God, the closeness of God in Psalm 139 could be felt as unnecessary, claustrophobic, or pestering, like a non-consensual breach of one's personal space. Has God ever heard of needing some alone time, to be not with God but away from God? And is that even possible?

3. From a critical perspective, Psalm 139 should be heard in a way most of us never hear it. It is a song by David in which he is crying out for vindication from his enemies. But apart from verses 13-22—which are not included in our lectionary reading—this meaning is lost. But David's description of God's closeness is to build a case against his enemies who are perpetrating falsehoods about him.

“Imagin[e] David running for his life from the mad King Saul,” [writes Stan Mast](#). “He had been nothing but loyal to Saul, but Saul harbored demented suspicions of David. Saul's persecution may have been the Sitz im Leben for Psalm 139.”

David pleads with God to see the truth about him. In a way typical of Old Testament conversations with God, he is reminding God of what God has done and what God has promised. In these moments full of bitterness and frustration with the injustice of his circumstances, David is finding his way back to himself as God has made him—and his way back into the comfort and abiding presence of the One who will never leave or forsake him.