

Surrounded, Held, Seen
Psalm 139

Second Sunday after Epiphany/ 17th January 2021

Over the past week several people I know received the coronavirus vaccine. And each person, not long after they received their shot, started to cry. They were surprised by how emotional it was. They broke down and cried. Tears of joy and thanksgiving, I'm sure. Relief. Tears that seemed to come out of nowhere. But they came, of course, from somewhere, somewhere deep. I've heard of many others having similar kinds of experiences. I think it's a telling indicator of just how much we're all holding inside us these days. We're all just trying to keep it together. We trying to care for our families, care for ourselves, put a meal on the table, work from home, school our children, do homework, do the laundry, pay the bills. But it goes deeper than that.

We are holding much these days, both consciously and even more unconsciously. I don't need to remind you that these are stressful, anxious, fearful days we are living in and through. Experiencing this pandemic is a type of trauma for us, it's both an individual and collective trauma. Whether or not we know someone who died from the virus or was sick, we've all been impacted by it. We are losing nearly 4,000 citizens a day. It's impossible to fully fathom that kind of loss, to take it in, to process it, and yet at some level we try, try to maintain our capacity to be human, to honor our feelings, extend empathy and sympathy. Going through the storm of this pandemic is traumatic enough, but then we have the current political climate in the United States. We are still coming to terms with what happened at the U.S. Capitol on Epiphany. The more images and videos that we see, the more we learn, the more stories we hear about the insurrection, and realize just how brutal and violent and evil the siege was—we all know it could have been much worse. And now as we approach the inauguration on Wednesday, with more than 20,000 National Guard troops in DC, our state capitals on guard with added security, we're all hoping for peace and calm and yet we're bracing ourselves, steeling ourselves for what might happen, for the violence that could pour forth into our streets. And we worry about the future of this nation and think of our children, and find ourselves wondering, where is God in all of this? Where is God? Or are we on our own, alone?

So, yes, we're holding a lot these days. Trauma within trauma. How do you know that you're holding a lot? Maybe you're testy. Irritable. Easily annoyed these days. Listen to your body. Your body knows. Countless studies have shown that our bodies record, our bodies remember, and our bodies hold trauma and fear and stress and worry, more than we imagine.¹ Sure, a lot of it is carried in what we think and fantasize and ruminate about, especially in the middle of night when we can't sleep, when we can't shut down our thoughts. Our thoughts race and wake us in the middle of the night, or we have dreams—COVID dreams, COVID dreams that are nightmares—that erupt from within and prevent us from being calm. Some hold their stress and fear and pain in their jaws, or they clench their teeth. Some hold it in their shoulders or neck or back. Or perhaps you hold it in your stomach.

Last week's lectionary and sermon for Baptism of the Lord called us to recommit to the work of Christ in our lives and for us to renounce evil. It was more of a prophetic sermon in light

of the events in Washington from the previous week. This week, I'm grateful that the psalter reading is Psalm 139, for it moves us into a more pastoral dimension. This is not to say that the prophetic isn't pastoral, because it is. But in order for the church to be prophetic, in order for us to engage in the work of love and compassion and justice, in order for us to renounce evil and engage in kingdom work we have to remember, be reminded: *we can't do any of this if we're relying solely on whatever personal or emotional resources that we have within us.* The psalmist reminds us here that we are not alone. Even when it seems like we're alone, even when it feels like we're alone, we're not. Even if it feels like God is distant, can't be felt, the psalmist reminds us that's an illusion, that it's not the full story. What is true is that the story of your life is embedded in the story of God—embedded in the height and depth and breadth of a larger story, a larger love. Because we are in that embrace, held by that story, there's no place to hide, no reason to hide, no reason to flee.

We are known by the Living God, searched after, pursued by the Living God, who is present—here, there. When we rise up or sit down, God is there. An ever-present help and stay (Psalm 46:1). In our waking and in our sleeping, we are held by the everlasting arms (Deut. 33:27). In our steps, in our paths, even when we might wander away from God or feel like we're lost in the wilderness, God is acquainted with all our ways. “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”—a place of deep darkness, absent of life— God is there too (Ps. 139:7-8). Whether fleeing to the heavens or running away into the desert, running to a remote place where we think we're beyond the reach, the search of God, even there God's hand shall lead us, and God's right hand shall hold us fast (Ps. 139:10). Even the darkness cannot hide us from God because even the darkness can become all light. Why? Because we are hemmed in by God, surrounded by God. “You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me” (Ps. 139:5).

Yes, we are surrounded and held and hemmed in by the arms of God that will never let us go. Arms we can fall into. As the old hymn sings, “O Love that wilt not let me go, I rest my weary soul in thee...”² Sure we are holding much, but the psalmist reminds us that we are also being held, someone is holding you – behind you, before you, under you, above you. Even in you. You—the One in whom God takes great delight. The One who formed you knows you through and through, is known by you. The One who sees you, recognizes you, understands you better than you know yourself. This is the One who holds us.

It's curious that lectionary reading skips over sections of Psalm 139, I'm not sure why. When we read Psalm 139 in worship we stop before we get verse nineteen and following, “O that you would kill the wicked, O God...” “Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them as my enemies” (Ps. 139:22). These verses might be a little too much for many Christians who want to be “nice” or at least think they're always nice. It feels like an odd shift in the psalm. Their presence in the text, the fact that they're included in scripture tells us something about the way Jewish spirituality is comfortable acknowledging negative emotions and feelings, something, I think, that makes some Christians very uncomfortable. The inclusion of these verses in the psalm also says something about the nature or quality of the relationship that the psalmist has with God. Sure of God's presence and love, the psalmist is free to be himself. It struck me this week that with the knowledge that God is holding us and there is no place to flee, when we know that we

are God's beloved, we are free to confess and acknowledge the deeply disturbing thoughts and feelings that we might have, especially during times of great stress and strain and trauma. And because of the strength of the relationship, we are also free to lament. Lament, too, is welcomed and honored in Judaism. We can cry out to God, call out, give over and express our sadness and sorrow, even our hates and fears. It's raw, honest, unfiltered, authentic. The psalmist is free to confess the depth of his hate for those who are persecuting him. And then when he's done venting, confessing, lamenting, the psalmist says, "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" (Psalm 139:23-24).

This is a good reminder that it's important to name what we're holding within us: whether it's fear or anxiety or hate or anger or resentment. We are free to name it. Name it—not act on it. We can name it without acting it out, and when we do we honor what's going on inside us.

This week and the weeks ahead could be very stormy. The words of the psalmist can become our own, as we remind ourselves who we and whose we are, and rest in the one who holds us. So take good care of yourself. Ask yourself, what am I holding? Are you taking care of yourself? Perhaps you need to pull away from the news for a while. Get outdoors, soak up some sun, even if it's cold. Move, walk, get exercise. Draw, paint, listen to music, take Epsom baths. What's going to feed your soul, feed your body right now? Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) said, "Beauty will save the world."³ When we spend time before beauty, around beautiful things, beautiful people, our souls are fed and we are changed. And we can be like Jesus who went away to a place apart to pray and be present with God (Mark 1:35-39). We all need time to return to the source, to go back to the well. Enter the silence to sense the One who surrounds us, searches us, and is always present.

On this weekend as we remember the life and witness of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), when we consider his tireless efforts to heal the racist wounds of this nation and work for reconciliation, mutual understanding, and peace, it's also important to remember that Dr. King's capacity to be a "drum major for justice" was enabled by his own deep prayer life.⁴ He had to rely on the "rock" of his salvation, who called him and sent him and equipped him to preach liberty and release for those held captive by racism, both black folk and white folk. And while we celebrate Dr. King this weekend, we need to remember that one of the "rocks" who enabled him to preach the kingdom was pastor, theologian, mystic Dr. Howard Thurman (1899-1981). A mentor and pastor to King, Thurman knew that for transformation and healing to occur in society the human heart needs to be healed and transformed. Spirituality, the inner life, our relationship with and in the Spirit are all essential ministry, for service, for activism and reform. Thurman once said, "As a Christian, I must see to it that what I condemn in society, I do not permit to grow and flower in me."⁵

Remember the One who surrounds you, holds you, sees you, loves you. Name what you're holding. Nurture your body and soul. Get some rest. Tend the garden of your heart. Then you'll be ready for whatever the Lord requires next for the facing of this hour.



View from Old Rag Mountain, Madison County, VA, Shenandoah National Park

¹ Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Penguin Books, 2015). See also Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019) and Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015).

² “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go,” written in 1881 by the Scottish Presbyterian minister George Matheson (1842-1906). The hymn tune ST. MARGARET was composed in 1884 by Albert Lister Peace (1844-1912).

³ Cf. Belden Lane, *Ravished By Beauty: The Surprising Legacy of Reformed Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁴ I’m alluding to King’s “The Drum Major Instinct” sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA, on February 4, 1968.

⁵ Cited in Paul Harvey, *Howard Thurman & the Disinherited: A Religious Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 98.