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“Well Known” GPPC 9-8-19
Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18, Luke 14:25-33

Four years ago, Beth and I went to the Guilford County Animal Shelter, ostensibly “just to look” at cats to replace our beloved and departed Oreo. We went right about the time the shelter was under increased scrutiny and staffing transition because of some inadequate treatment of the animals. Well, a lot of other good-hearted people had the same idea and the place was packed. Goodness has a way of responding to suffering, you know.

As you can imagine, there were probably twenty cats to choose from—various colors, sizes, dispositions. I simply said to the volunteer, “Please show us the friendliest cat you’ve got.” She showed us two or three, before we finally settled on a tortoiseshell-colored cat we later named Shelly.

Well, the first trick was to get Shelly home. The shelter sold us a cardboard cat carrier box. I put Shelly in it. She jumped out. I put her in it again. She jumped out again. Finally, one of the other customers helped close the top before Shelly could jump out a third time. We paid

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the adoption fees, and headed home with our new cat, of course, meowing all the way.

Once we got home, Shelly strutted about the house, and with a swish of her tail, established dominance over our 80-pound dog. All seemed to be going well.

But one day when Beth and I were in another room, we noticed a strange sound. It sounded like a person saying, over and over, “Hello? Hello?” Except, the person couldn’t make an L sound. So it came out as “Heh-roh? Heh-roh?” Eventually we figured out this was Shelly and she had some sort of separation anxiety, and apparently short-term memory loss too. Over time, Shelly’s condition has improved a bit. But sometimes, especially if she’s in a room by herself, we’ll still hear, “Heh-roh? Heh-roh?” Our cat needs help. Should we read the Psalms to her?

Along the same lines, you may be aware that the Guilford Park Presbyterian Church Preschool has started another new year. You see some of the teachers pushing these little ones around in regular strollers or, my favorite, the big stroller that holds about six kids at one time, like

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an open-air London city bus. In one of the seats, there's little Cindy Lou Who with hair sprouting from a single spot on her head. She's poking at the kid beside her and in front of her. Some of the kids fall asleep. Other look around and smile. But some are scared and crying. Where did mom and dad go? Are they coming back? The challenge for the preschool teachers is to make these little ones feel as safe and loved as they can. And it's something they have to do over and over, because the kids forget. And I suppose feeling safe and loved is a challenge we face no matter how old we get.

As one scholar says the 139th Psalm "...is best understood as the lament of one who feels unduly and falsely accused of infidelity to God...Psalm 139 was probably originally used by persons affirming their innocence in a religious trial at the sanctuary after being charged with or accused of some form of religious apostasy or malpractice." (John H. Hayes in *Preaching The New Common Lectionary*, Fred B. Craddock, et. al, 81 and 90.)

People, (we don't know exactly who), people are making false accusations about the Psalmist.

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Have you ever been unfairly accused of something? Had your name dragged through the mud? It's one of the more painful experiences in life, isn't it?

Yet the Psalmist here is less focused on the charges against him and more focused on God and what God has done. As he says, "O Lord, you have searched me and known me." In other words, God has conducted the inquiry, and the Psalmist has been absolved of guilt by God. In fact, the Psalmist moves well beyond simply being absolved. He moves to something deeper and richer.

He says of God, "You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You know the path I'm taking and my lying down. You're aware of all my ways. Even before I say something, you know what I'm going to say."

Notice what the Psalmist is doing. He's not just declaring that God knows everything (omniscience--impressive and true as that is). Instead, the Psalmist is saying that God knows everything about the *Psalmist*. Imagine the universe (a universe vast beyond any of the biblical writers imagining). Our galaxy, the Milky Way, is a speck in the universe. The

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earth is a speck in the galaxy. And you and I are a speck on the earth. Yet the Psalmist says God knows everything about the Psalmist. And God knows everything about you and me. God cares enough to know everything about you and me.

So how does that feel? Good but daunting, right? In fact, when we have said or done or thought something especially shabby, we may want to get away from God, or at least get away from our conscience which may be God speaking to us, convicting us of our sin, calling us to repentance, tugging us back to what is right. Like Adam and Eve in the garden, we may want to hide from God.

But the Psalmist says of God, “You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.” This Hebrew word translated as “hem” not only means to confine or bind but it also means to “besiege.”

Have you ever felt besieged by God? A man in one of John Updike’s novels thinks, “His day had been bothered by God...” Have you ever had your day bothered by God? Maybe you wanted to get away from God for a spell. Do as you pleased, not as God pleased. But you could feel the presence of God bugging you, surrounding you, not only

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with love but also with the call to say and do what is right. Maybe that's what the Psalmist means by "You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me." God simply will not leave us alone.

The lectionary then skips to a fascinating image in the Psalm. As one professor says, "...God is portrayed as a knitter! ...[He continues] I watched a Norwegian American mother-in-law knit a series of six Norwegian sweaters for our family. The process appears unbelievably complex, controlling the threads, getting the colors right, developing the patterns. If it is complicated to knit a Norwegian sweater, how much more complicated must it be (one feels certain) to knit a Norwegian! Or an African, a Russian, or a Korean! On reflection, the psalmist can only say, 'I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made' (v.14)."

(James Limburg, *Psalms*, Westminster Bible Companion Series, 473.)

God, the Divine Knitter, knits each of us together, knows us through and through, and hems us in, behind and before. God is the all-knowing creator from whom we cannot escape, even if we wanted to. And there is something deeply powerful about that.

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A little over a week ago, someone I know well awoke in the night. It was about 3:00 in the morning, and if you are like many people, you know that you may not think happy thoughts when awakened then. In fact this person was going to launch into some serious worrying, but suddenly, without warning, he heard a voice in his head, a voice so loud and clear it seemed practically audible. And the voice said, “Do not be afraid.” The person started to argue with the voice, but it came again, even louder, “Do not be afraid.” And so this person simply accepted the message and eventually went back to sleep.

I do not know how your life is going right now. Whether you are filled with joy or trepidation or some combination of those two. Whether you are excited about what lies ahead or you are bored or irritated. Whether you are feeling at peace or overwhelmed. Maybe you are feeling some combination of many things. I do not know.

But I leave you with the promises we find in the Bible. You and I and all people are precious to God who knit us together, knows us completely (the good and the bad), and who will never let us be

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separated from God. So do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. Amen. ©Jeff

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