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Say It With Psalms

1. Know Me

Psalm 139:1‑14a, 23‑24

O Lord, 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 Lord, 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.... 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.

The title of my new sermon series, Say It With Psalms, reflects the fact that for countless generations, Jews and Christians have used these 150 poems to help express what they were thinking and feeling, have used them to pray to God when their own words wouldnt quite come, have used them to learn more of God. Although the Psalms are attributed to King David, scholars now believe that they were actually first composed and sung over several centuries time, only much later being written down. Many of them reflect the time that the Hebrew people spent 70 years in forced exile in Babylon and the honest anger and despair in those Psalms pull no punches. Others were composed by folks who were experiencing great joy and wanted to give thanks for something wonderful about their lives. Some of them confidently assert declarations of faith, others come before God with questions in the face of lifes hardest things.

You can find many stories about how folks on the frontier in the early days of the United States often carried with them only one book: a combined New Testament and Psalms. The Psalms helped young children learn to read and they were sung by mothers and fathers in log cabins and prairie sod houses as lullabies for little ones. We have mostly lost touch with the fact that the Psalms really are meant to be sung, but they are. There are, in fact, at least two American Protestant denominations which in their worship services sing nothing but Psalms set to music.[[1]](#footnote-1) And while some of you may balk at this comparison, they are the peoples music and the peoples theology in the same way that country music in our day so often functions in that way for so many. Country music songwriter David Alan Coe says that the perfect country song has to talk about trains, pickup trucks, prison, love and mother,[[2]](#footnote-2) and while there are no trains or pickup trucks in the Psalms, you can find all of those other things plus so many more in the Psalms love and hate, jealousy and graciousness, anger and joy. It is no wonder that they are the most read part of the Bible, even by non-believers, for the words of the Psalms can both help us understand our lives and give expression to our sometimes stumbling thoughts. Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling says Ah, music.... A magic beyond all we do here! and the incomparable cellist Pablo Cassals once said Music is the divine way to tell beautiful, poetic things to the heart.... So let in these next few weeks let us dive into these poems, this magic, this music, and see what our hearts and minds can know more deeply about ourselves, our faith, and our God.

Psalm 139 is a fitting one to begin this journey with, for it addresses what is, in many ways, the most crucial spiritual and emotional need that people have: to know that they are not alone. Studies of prisoners kept in solitary confinement for decades show that their brains physiology actually changes for the worse. The profusion of online dating sites attests to the deep desire not to be alone. The extraordinary success of the Tinder app shows that in the face of aloneness, even a fleeting one-night stand seems better than yet another night alone. Senior citizens who have lost spouses and who do not have a community of faith have markedly higher rate of depression and suicide, and do not live as long even when they dont take their own lives. The need not to be alone, the need to be truly and deeply known by someone else is simply a primal human need. And in the face of that need, the Psalmist assures us that we are never alone and that God is always with us, wherever we are, wherever we go, whatever we do.

But I have to confess those opening lines of the Psalm can almost sound a little creepy, a little stalkerish! They sometimes put me in the mind of that [classic rock and roll song by The Police](http://tinyurl.com/jov7e39) [click to play]. It can indeed feel off-putting to be so very known in every moment in every way. The phrase the Psalmist uses You hem me in is a word which elsewhere means to besiege. You besiege me with your unremitting closeness, God! Its an introverts nightmare! Moreover, as one pastor says, The truth is, we do not want to be known through and through ‑‑ by anybody. We want to maintain strict control over who knows what about us and how much they know and when they know it.[[3]](#footnote-3) And its even worse when we feel like we are failing, when we are ashamed of something weve done, when we are thinking thoughts we wish we didnt have. We want to run away. We want to hide in abstractions. We want to God to look somewhere else for awhile so we can escape or deny the things that are bedeviling us and which we really dont want to share. We worry that there are certain thoughts that we have that are so far beyond the pale, so awful, that even God might not forgive us. Again, as one pastor puts it: I pull down the shade, I turn out the lights, I hide under the bed or beneath the shade of my self‑deception...[[4]](#footnote-4) Do you have any of those moments? Heres what one blogger says about God knowing all these things about us:

When someone knows you intimately, there is nowhere to hide. You cant pretend you didnt know that thing that he hates. He knows that you know it, so every time you do it its a willful act of aggression. You cant pretend you didnt know when her birthday was, or what her favorite flavor is, or that she wanted you to rent An Affair to Remember and you came home with The Guns of Navaronne. You cant pretend. She knows that you know. It can be a terrible thing....[[5]](#footnote-5)

It can be terrible precisely because we cling to the desire to always be in charge, always be in control, always be seen as doing only laudable and worthy things. But that just isnt possible, is it?, and so we find ourselves foundering, flailing, falling.

The solution is not to try even harder to be in control, to think only worthy things, to do only things you are proud of. Because we will fail. As a clergy colleague friend says, You need to resign from the position of general manager of the universe. That position already taken. Yes, it is. But you know what? This is exactly why the Psalmist writes that not only does it sometimes honestly feel terrible to be known so well, so intimately, so perfectly by God, in the end it is also wonderful. You see, again in the Psalmists words, we are fearfully and wonderfully made, both. Because we are creatures, because we are mortal, because we are imperfect, the realization that all of our creaturely sinfulness, all of our mortal strivings, all of our imperfections are known so intimately by God can indeed be a fearful thing. But, in the end, the Psalmist also asserts that that is finally a wonderful thing as well. Why?

Well, there are simply those times in our lives when indeed it is a huge comfort to be known, isnt it? Again, in the words of the anonymous blogger who writes so thoughtfully on this Psalm:

There is nothing in the world that compares with the experience of being with someone who truly knows you. Think about what it is like for those of you who have a brother or a sister, or a spouse or partner, those who have a parent or a child or a dear friend of whom you can say: she knows me better than I know myself.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The friend who can finish your sentences for you, the spouse who knows and remembers that you like to eat your ice cream spoon and who doesnt make fun of the fact that the music from the Wizard of Oz still scares you, the partner who knows when you want to talk about something and when to wait. You can add to that list, cant you? I hope you have or have had someone in your life like that because as annoying as it can be sometimes when they know you so very well, in the end it is wonderful to be known and accepted and loved, flaws, foibles, failings and all.

How much more, then, is it with God whose knowledge of you is never imperfect, who never tires of you, who is there with you wherever you flee or whenever you are forced through, as the Psalmist says, the very depths of hell. There is absolutely no where one can go, as another writer puts it, to escape the persistent presence of God. Not even hell. God is present in the hell of war. The hell of cancer. The hell of broken promises and relationships.[[7]](#footnote-7) In the end, that is such a comfort, such a joy, not terrible but wonderful indeed. Let me begin to close by quoting our bloggers powerful words; listen to what she has to say:

God knows what and who it is that we love. God knows what and who it is that drives us crazy. When we are sick God knows what we need, just as when we are sad or frightened or lonely. God knows our sitting down and our rising up, and sometimes makes a wake‑up call to us. And whether we take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, or curl up in a familiar and beloved place, God is still therestill with us, still waiting for us, still calling our names.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The Psalmist is right it is a wonderful thing to be known by such a God, the God who indeed is searching for you, the God who misses you when you dont realize just how loved you are, the God who wants to find you. The rapper Puff Daddy expresses the longing of God to find you and for you to know you are found, and known, and loved everlastingly in [his much more lovely update to The Polices creepy song](https://drive.google.com/open?id=0BzaL8kZCSCDwNWhidXhHblZxUzA) [click to play]; listen to it and imagine it is the Lord singing to you.

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.... Search me, O God, and know my heart. May it be so. Amen.

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psalms#The\_Psalms\_in\_Christian\_worship [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See also Country Music and the Psalms, http://brandon‑thecontrarian.blogspot.com/2010/11/country‑music‑and‑psalms.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.faithandleadership.com/hemmed [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://magdalenesmusings.blogspot.com/2009/01/fearful‑and‑wonderful‑knowing‑sermon‑on.html [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. http://joelssermons.wordpress.com/2012/07/03/psalm‑139‑the‑inescapable‑intimacy‑of‑god‑7112/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. http://magdalenesmusings.blogspot.com/2009/01/fearful‑and‑wonderful‑knowing‑sermon‑on.html [↑](#footnote-ref-8)