

10th Week after Pentecost, Proper 11 – Year A – July 23, 2008
Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:1-11, 22-23; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
Susan E. Wilmot

One of the great joys of the Episcopal and Lutheran traditions is the beautiful collection of hymns that we have been blessed with. Many of the words set to music in the Hymnal 1982, and in the Lutheran Book of Worship are taken directly from Scripture or are paraphrases of Scriptural texts. As English poet and playwright William Congreve wrote in 1697 in his play, *The Mourning Bride*, "Music hath charms to soothe a savage breast, to soften rocks, or bend a knotted oak."

Research has shown that there is a strong connection between improved learning ability, retention of material, and music. A relatively new educational tool is to play music as lessons are being given to help children and adults learn more effectively. Music impacts our energy levels and our mood. Why, for example, do you think that there even is such a thing as elevator music, or why do stores play music? Why else but to calm shoppers and put us in a buying mood! Here's another example of the power of music. I know that I can hear a song or a tune from when I was a teenager and instantly be transported back to that time and place. I can remember the strangest of details associated with the era of that the song in my life. The memories are inextricably intertwined with the music. Of course, I am not unique in that respect. I'm sure you have all experienced that déjà vu moment when you hear an old tune or hymn from when you were a child. How many of us remember particular songs we learned in Sunday School? Beethoven once said that, "Music is the mediator between the spiritual and the sensual life." That is the worldly life of the senses. Music then is one way that we pray to God, worship God, praise God, offer ourselves to God, and open our hearts and minds to God.

Based on some of the directions that have appeared throughout the Psalter, it is apparent that these prayers were often used as ceremonial hymns for liturgical use, or laments set to music. The first eleven verses of Psalm 139 is paraphrased through the words of Hymn number 702. Here are the words to the hymn:

Lord, thou hast searched me
And dost know where 'er I rest,
Where 'er I go;
Thou knowest all that I have planned
And all my ways are in thy hand.

My words from thee I cannot hide;
I feel thy power on every side;
Oh, wondrous knowledge,
Awful might,
Unfathomed depth,
Unmeasured height!

Where can I go apart from thee,
Or whither from thy presence flee?
In heaven?
It is thy dwelling fair;
In death's abode?
Lo, thou art there.

If I the wings of morning take,
And far away my dwelling make,

The hand that leadeth me is thine,
and my support thy power divine.

If deepest darkness cover me,
The darkness hideth not from thee;
To thee both night and day are bright,
The darkness shineth as the light.

This is a very challenging Psalm for us to read today. As we meditated on it in class on Sunday, several mentioned that they initially felt that sting of fear at the thought that God has searched our hearts and minds. As the prophet Jeremiah tell us, “The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse – who can understand it? I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.” In context, Jeremiah is warning the Israelites about their tendency to do their own thing, and thus reap the rewards of life choices that do not accord with God’s will and desire. Rabbi Andrew Straus has these words of wisdom for us, “Character is what we do when no one is watching.” Given the words of Psalm 139 and Jeremiah’s prophetic voice, I feel like we need to add the rider: “except God” to that quote. Do we need to be afraid of God, or to simply fear God in the way that is appropriate to honoring God as our creator? I believe it is the latter. Sadly, there are still many hearts and minds who struggle deeply with being afraid of God. They cannot hear the beautiful, soothing music at the heart of God’s symphonic presence as the maestro creator and sustainer of the universe. There is much disharmony in our world, as I’m sure you’ve noticed. But when we quiet our souls, and still our voices, we can hear God’s call to you and me to continue the mission of our Lord to bring the whole of creation into the harmony of redemption and reconciliation. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me. Like the hymn writer, it inspires in me to incredible awe of God.

Several of the verses speak of knowing: God’s knowing, and the limits of human knowledge. God’s knowledge is expressed as complete, and even more intimate than our own knowledge of ourselves. God knew all about us before we were even born, as we were growing in our mother’s wombs. Yet despite that knowledge, God’s steadfast love is immeasurable and unchanging. There is no condemnation, only the love of God that is so great that God’s Son gave His life for me, for you, and for all humanity.

Our Psalmist is praying to God in a time of trouble. Yet the words of the Psalm are full of lament, and a deep reliance and abandonment of self to God’s love and care. In verse 4, where God presses upon, behind and before the writer, we hear about the circumstances of the writer’s life. The language of being hemmed in is siege language, and so we know that our Psalmist felt under attack by their enemies. But at the same time, they are expressing a joyful faith and confidence in God’s gracious and providential care. The Psalmist is not afraid to ask God for relief from the wicked, and leaves the form of that deliverance to God. The writer considers all enemies of God to be their enemies as well.

Finally, the hope that sustains is revealed in verse 24, “lead me in the way everlasting.” Before Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection secured the way to eternal life for all who believe in Him, our Psalmist was seeking out the path to God’s gift of life everlasting. You and I are blessed to know the surety of that promise in our Lord Jesus Christ. Through the beauty of this poem, hear God’s invitation to join the chorus of all the saints in trusting God as our most intimate friend: yours and mine. Let us give our hearts, minds, bodies and souls to God as completely as the Psalmist once did. Let our ears be ever more open to the majestic harmony of God’s will, and may we be blessed with the courage to fear God, but never be afraid.

Amen.