

“Awakening to Our Purpose”
Psalm 139: 1-6; 13-18
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“O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.”

God knows us

A small-town prosecuting attorney called his first witness to the stand in a trial — a grandmotherly, elderly woman. He approached her and asked, “Mrs. Jones, do you know me?”

She responded, “Why, yes, I do know you, Mr. Williams. I’ve known you since you were a young boy. And frankly, you’ve been a big disappointment to me. You lie, you cheat, and you manipulate people and talk about them behind their backs. You think you’re a big shot, but you don’t have the brains to realize you never will amount to anything. Yes, I know you.”

The lawyer was stunned. Not knowing what else to do he pointed across the room and asked, “Mrs. Williams, do you know the defense attorney?”

She again replied, “Why, yes I do. I’ve known Mr. Bradley since he was a youngster, also. I used to baby-sit for him. And he, too, has been a real disappointment to me. He’s lazy, bigoted, and he has a drinking problem. The man can’t build a normal relationship with anyone and his law practice is one of the shoddiest in the entire state. Yes, I know him.”

At this point, the judge rapped the courtroom to silence and called both counselors to the bench. In a very quiet voice, he said, “If either of you asks her if she knows me, you’ll be jailed for contempt!”

In the 139th Psalm, David warmly praises the Lord, before whom he stands in awe. He also expresses the close personal relationship he feels with the Lord. He is astounded by how thoroughly and intimately the Lord knows him. God’s “knowing” David is prominent in the psalm; the Hebrew verb “to know” has a rich range of meanings — to have intimate knowledge of, to take care of, to understand, and to experience.

Psalm 139 is one of my favorite. It has particular meaning to me because it was one of the scriptural text's that the Rev. Coleman Brown used in his "charge" to me at my service of ordination almost 43 years ago.¹

Coleman is such a special person to me. While I was in seminary he was the pastor at Olivet Presbyterian Church on Chicago's near north side. For the summer of 1966 and the following school year he was my field work supervisor at Olivet.

That summer was such a meaningful and memorable time in my life. For it was that summer, along with members of the Olivet Church and thousands of others, that I walked with Dr. Martin Luther King on several open housing marches in Chicago. Throughout the remainder of my seminary years until I finished my course work in December of 1968. Coleman was a mentor to me and still remains a dear friend.

On the occasion of my 60th birthday, Colman sent me a copy of the sermon he preached at my ordination service. It was a wonderful gift then, it has been an even greater gift to me now. You see, I didn't remember any of his words. I of course remember that he was there; that he preached the "charge to the pastor;" his words and his presence meant so much to me, but what he said, I didn't remember.

Coleman read in Psalm 139:

'All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.'²

"I am charging you, Don, to make these words of the psalmist's your own words.

Your days are already held, already written; they're already programmed. Your job is not to decide what you will do and be.

Don't fight to hold on to an anxiety that God in His love seeks to take from your heart. That isolated, autonomous self responsible for

¹ Ordained February 16, 1969

² Psalm 139:16

deciding – ‘what you want to be when you grow up,’ that autonomous self has died. Your life is hid with Christ in God.

Your job is not to decide, but to discover. To discover; that’s what the Psalm 139 says to you;

Your job is not to decide your life, but to discover it; and how do you discover it?

By doing, Don; hear God’s word and do it.

You will discover your life by doing it.”³

To hear this “again for the first time,” was a great awakening for me. To reflect back on my life – the many years that I spent trying to decide “what I wanted to be when I grew up;” and to realize that these years were part of God’s plan, part of the discovery process. That revelation was in itself a discovery, an awaking to my purpose.

I have been doing it, that is... discovering God’s will and purpose for my life, doing it by the living out of my days realizing that it is God who is in charge and not me.

”All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”⁴

When we celebrated the sacrament of Baptism, we remembered and re-affirmed our own baptism. We realized that we have been claimed, been marked as God’s very own, now and forever more. Marked for what? Marked for service

On July 10, 1966, on a Sunday over 45 years ago, along with Coleman Brown and members of Olivet Presbyterian Church, I attended a rally at Chicago’s Soldier Field to hear Dr. Martin Luther King. After Dr. King spoke we all marched to City Hall at LaSalle and Clark Street where Dr. King presented his demands for Open Housing in Chicago.

³ Rev. Coleman Brown, Charged to the Pastor, Ordination and Installation Service for Rev. Don Dempsey, Feb. 16, 1969, Old First Presbyterian Church, Huntington, NY

⁴ Psalm 139: 1

In the weeks after that rally I attended other rallies where Dr. King was present and one Sunday I marched with Martin Luther King for open housing in Chicago's Belmont Craigen neighborhood.

In the course of his life, Martin Luther King walked through many dangers, toils and snares, but through it all he knew that God was walking with him. The Lord was his divine companion in the Civil Rights struggle, giving him the strength and the courage to face any disaster that came his way. He had the very same faith as the writer of Psalm 139:

“You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is too lofty for me to attain”⁵

Although life is fragile and full of danger, we can draw comfort from the knowledge that God is with us, in all that we do. In the midst of external tension, God can give an inner peace. This peace gives us courage and confidence, inspiration and insight, serenity and strength.

Most of all, this peace frees us to do God's will.

This is important, because peace doesn't necessarily protect us from pain and suffering - it doesn't shield us from the hardship that comes from taking bold stands for the Lord in a world that so often resists his reign.

In fact, in the short life of Martin Luther King, death by an assassin's bullet came just one day after his speech at the rally in Memphis. God's peace didn't give Martin Luther King a long life, but it was **life long**.

It never failed him. This peace enabled him to say to the Lord, along with Psalm 139: “I come to the end - I am still with you”⁶

And it made all the difference in his work for racial justice.

- If Martin Luther King had not felt inner peace, he would not have been able to organize the Montgomery bus boycott.

⁵ Psalm 139: 5-6

⁶ Psalm 139: 18

- If he had not felt God’s inspiration and insight, he would not have been able to give his “I Have a Dream” speech in Washington in August of 1963.
- If he had not felt God’s courage and confidence, he would not have been able to launch the major voter registration drive “Crusade for Citizenship.”
- If he had not felt God’s courage and confidence, he would not have been able to defy death threats, march in Chicago’s Gage Park, and stand with the Memphis sanitation workers.

The Lord’s peace always frees us ... frees us to do his will. It awakens us to his purpose. It also frees us to die for what we believe in. King knew this all too well on the night before his own death.

“Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn’t matter with me now; because I’ve been to the mountaintop, and I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And he’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the Promised Land. And I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

As we awakening to our purpose – we realize we are marked as God’s very own, “we are searched and we are known.”

How precious are those thoughts – “we are known” – we are God’s special people who are called to be together in this time and place – we are not called to decide “who we are” – we are already claimed,

We are called to discover – to re-discover **A-NEW** our meaning and purpose and we are called to do that together.

This is an exciting and crucial time in the life of this congregation, a time of awakening, a time to begin anew that discovery process; to explore God’s leading, as we claim our high calling as God’s people.

Awakening to our purpose is here and now – it is not something we need to decide, it is something we need to do, to discover and do together.

Today is Martin Luther King's birthday, and tomorrow is Martin Luther King Day, the national holiday when we celebrate Dr. King's life and legacy.

Dr. King had a dream and that dream continues to be realized and discovered. Listen to these words of Dr. King:

“If you want to be important, **wonderful**,
If you want to be recognized, **wonderful**,
If you want to be great, **wonderful**,

But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be a **servant**. That's a new definition of **greatness** and what I like about it is that by giving that definition of **greatness** it means that **everybody** can be **great**, because everybody can **serve**.

- You don't have to have a college degree to **serve**.
- You don't have to have to make your subject and your verb agree to **serve**.
- You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to **serve**.
- You don't have to know Einstein's "Theory of Relativity" to **serve**.

You only need a **heart** full of **grace**, a **soul** generated by **love**, and **you** can be that **servant**."

God does not free us from troubles and toils; struggles and pain. He knows that we're bound to hit potholes along the road to the Promised Land, and that we'll need his presence and his power to stay on the right path as we seek to discover what God has in mind for us and for this His church.

Like Martin Luther King, we are never going to be free from adversity. But we are always free to serve God in every time, every place, and in every situation.

As we continue to awaken and to discover our purpose as God's people, may our freedom be used to do the will of the one who is our King, our heavenly King, Jesus, the Christ, in whose name we live, and move, and have our being. **Amen!**