

Known and Loved

Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18

1 Samuel 3:1-20

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Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18

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. 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. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.

1 Samuel 3:1-20

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. The Lord called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Then the Lord said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever." Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am." Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him."

As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.

It is 1919 as the curtain rises on the Edwardian drawing room scenery of the Broadway play *Time and the Conways*. Family and friends have gathered to celebrate Kay's 21st birthday. Act One's atmosphere is one of festivity as the family celebrates the end of the Great War and they look forward to great futures of fame, prosperity and fulfilled dreams.

In a pensive moment when Kay is left alone on stage she seems to slip into a reverie and has a vision of the future which brings us to Act Two and we are plunged into the shattered lives of the Conways exactly 18 years later. Gathering in the same room where they were celebrating in Act One we see how their lives have failed in different ways. Career hopes not quite realized, romantic expectations failed, dreams only partially fulfilled, their fortune squandered, and a sister who died young. The joy and frivolity of Act One has been replaced in Act Two with resentments, tensions and grief.

It is only Alan, the quietest of the family, who seems to possess a quiet calm. In the final scene of the Act, Alan and Kay are left on stage and, as Kay expresses her misery Alan suggests to her that the secret of life is to understand its true reality – that the perception that time is linear and that we have to grab and take what we can before we die is false. If we can see Time as eternally present, that at any given moment we are seeing only 'a cross section of ourselves,' then we can transcend our suffering and find no need to hurt or have conflict with other people.

“It's hard to explain,” Alan says, “But the point is, now, at this moment, or any moment, we're only a cross-section of our real selves. What we really are is the whole stretch of ourselves, all our time, and when we come to the end of this life, all those selves, all our time, will be us — the real you, the real me.”

Alan is right. We do see ourselves in a cross section of who we really are. We see ourselves in snippets of moments, slivers of our future, and in the shadows of memories. Who we are in this moment, this stage of our life, is the unfolding of the person we were at birth and who we will be at our last breath. The child who scribbled in a coloring book, the teen who wrote school essays, the adult who writes in a journal or a checkbook, the senior who drafts their final will is all the same person. The child who dreamed of being a baseball player, rock star or super hero became the adult with most likely a less glorious career but one that made a difference in the world and who then becomes the retiree who thinks back on the years of work and pleasures, of successes and struggles is all the same person.

The God who created us has intimately known us each and every moment of our life, life that began in the hidden cradle of the womb. Long before our parents knew we were on our way, God had already known us, loved us, blessed us and called us to our particular life. As we move, live, and grow through all the cross-sections of our lives we live out all the days destined for us. Knit together with the genes of our parents, and our generations of ancestors, each of those connections and relationships add a different dimension to the total of who we each are as a person; yet they do not entirely define us as an individual. It is only when the mystery of God's presence within us is added, that the uniqueness of me – the uniqueness of you-and every other human being --- is established and realized. There is a comfort and a peace in being so known by God. Known and loved into being, into calling, into purpose.

Known and loved into being, into calling, into purpose, and oddly enough, these calls often come at night. Perhaps it is because we are less resistant to hearing the voice of God, we are not overwhelmed or distracted by all that happens in the daytime. Daniel Schutte certainly knew this truth in his beautiful hymn of calling, "...Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night..." It was at deepest night that God brought Israel out of Egypt. It was at night that God wrestled with Jacob, and when Paul heard the call to go to Macedonia. Solomon, Nathan, Daniel, Joseph and Ananias all had visions and calls from God in their dreams. It was in the middle of the night that God called Samuel to serve.

Samuel was about 12 years old and serving Eli, a high priest and father of two corrupt and unscrupulous sons, when God called him. Three times Samuel heard his name called and thought that it was Eli that he was to get up and serve, but it was God calling him to serve. God, who had knit Samuel together in his mother Hannah's womb, and had written all the days that were formed for him, when none of them as yet existed. Samuel knew himself to be a child, a very young man, a servant of the high priest and not yet as the one called by God to become the last judge of Israel, the first prophet after Moses, and the one who would choose and anoint Saul and David as the first kings over Israel. He did not know that God was calling him to be a prophet who would rally people's spirits when they faced oppression, and that he would forever be known as a trustworthy prophet of the Lord. Samuel's call came with his first prophetic task, and that was to tell Eli that his family, his legacy, would be rightly punished for all of their iniquities.

When have you felt God calling you by name?

Was it easy or hard to listen to God?

Very few people receive a call as profound as Samuel, but we all have a call from God for our lives in one way or another, a call that was written in God's book of our days even before we had lived a single one. How we hear, listen and respond to God's creative presence in our lives is a reflection of our awareness of God in our lives. Theologian, minister and author Bruce Epperly wrote that "to be known by God is to discover oneself as loved by God." The God who searches us and knows us, also calls us to the fulfillment of who we were created to be. God sees us from the womb and through our last breath, not in the moment by moment cross-section of our selves. God has already seen the whole stretch of who we are, what we will be, in all our time.

As we honor the life, ministry and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr this time of year, and especially in a time when racism is a viral pandemic of its own, I want to share with you what became the closing words of his final speech, words that tell us of a man of profound faith and comfort in being known by God, and who embraced his call from God.

"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. Like anybody I would like to live a long life, longevity has its place, but I'm not concerned about that now ... 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." He ended the speech with: "I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

Whatever path we take in our lives—or whichever path takes us---we begin in a womb of divine love and image. This is where and when our life's time, purpose is given, and destiny's doors open for us. The raw materials of our skills, gifts and talents are knit together in the silent mystery of the womb, waiting for time and the experiences to bring them to fullness, waiting for

us to learn to know ourselves and our God given gifts. We can achieve no success, learn no new lessons, nor experience any joys that God is not with us. We can bear no struggle, face no loss, fear no concern that God is not already with us. Amen.