

**Lydia Neufeld Harder, 19 January, 2014**

**“Psalm 139”**

Psalm 139 has been a favorite one of mine since childhood. In the context of a loving family, the knowledge that God would always be there for me, no matter where I would go and what I would experience was a comforting thought to me. I read the psalm feeling safe and secure .

*“O Lord, you have searched me and know 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...”*

Today I want to invite you to move more deeply into this psalm. I want to share three different ways of reading this psalm, three readings that reflect my own pilgrimage with this text. But I must warn you. Reading this text can be risky, for its poetic expressions and imaginative language invite us to an ever deeper encounter with the One who can turn our superficial reading upside down, so that everything must be seen with new eyes.

A first reading of this psalm can be named a theological reading for we assume that the psalm is about God. We are struck with the many things that this Psalm writer knows about God. This psalm affirms the basic convictions, core beliefs that we have been taught in Sunday school, that we sing in our hymns and that we continue to teach our children. God is an all knowing, all loving, always faithful. God knows us intimately. God is a personal God who cares deeply for us individually. Psalm 139 in this reading is a poem of trust and confidence and basic faith orientation.

The author of this psalm, the poet, describes these convictions through various lenses. As I read these verses I was reminded of a movie that I saw a long time ago at the science Centre in Toronto, a movie in which we are asked to look at life from two distinct perspectives.

First of all, the macroscopic view. Picture this scene. A person sits in a chair on a beach, filling the picture frame. But the camera moves further and further away. First you see only the person in the chair. Then you see the whole beach. Then you see the whole city nestled beside a huge lake. Then you see the province, and then the whole continent and finally the larger galaxy and universe of which our

earth is only a small part. The speck which is the person gets smaller and smaller. We are impressed with the immensity of the universe and the smallness of the person whom we can now only imagine in the middle of the picture.

*“ 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...Surely darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night, even darkness is not dark to you. . .*

Then the poet takes a microscopic view. Picture the same person sitting in the same chair, but now the camera zeroes in ever closer. The picture focuses on a hand, then on the wrinkles of the hand, then on a cell, and then on an atom or whatever infinitesimal breakdown of matter there is which can be magnified.

*For it was you who formed me in my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.. . . My frame is not hidden from you when I was made in secret; intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes behold my unformed substance. ... How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast 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!*

Beautiful. Inspiring. Awesome. This theological or churchly reading of Psalm 139 flies with feelings of safety and protection and being loved and known by God.

But we have left out some verses; If we check in our Bibles we note that some verses of the Psalm did not make it into the hymnal reading. Why this censorship? Right after the comforting thought of God being still with us come these verses:

*O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me—those who speak of you maliciously, and lift themselves up against you for evil!*

*Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with a perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.*

All that stuff about enemies and hate and revenge does not fit into church, particularly not in a Mennonite church. We leave them out or ignore them, just as we often leave our everyday lives outside at the church door.

But we can stay with the initial naïve reading -- only if we suppress our questions and our doubts and our fears and our hatreds. Only if we separate our knowledge about God, from our knowledge of human nature and of the world. In fact, this kind of theological knowledge can become dangerous if it allows us to build pictures of God in which God is always on our side, always protecting us. With these images we can even justify shutting out new ideas and different people who threaten our rosy picture of our faith community.

This kind of reading can sustain us only if we ignore the critical issues raised by the world around us and if we suppress the pain and confusion and despair which is sometimes within us. It is the events at the edge of our humanness. . .the events which threaten and disrupt our convenient equilibrium which ask us to read the psalm again, this time struggling with those times when God seems absent, when there is no comforting word, when we discover that the wings that we thought were upholding us are no longer there.

And so we must go beyond the hymnal, beyond the churchly reading of our psalm and move to a reading that includes the disruptive voice filled with feelings of anger, of despair, even of hate and revenge. We must move into the disorientation that comes when we feel betrayed, when we feel life does not make theological sense anymore --- when we experience the absence of God. We move into a very human- focussed reading.

*Oh that you would kill the wicked, --that the bloodthirsty; would depart from me.--those who speak maliciously and lift themselves up against you for evil.*

This outburst seems so out of place in this psalm, in our hymnal, in our church and in our successful lives. Yet here too there is both a macroscopic and a microscopic view of harsh human reality and harsh depiction of evil. Yes, there are wicked blood thirsty, abusive, evil people out there. There are political institutions and structures that continue to support violence and oppression. We will always run into them.

We meet them—perhaps in our workplace, or on the streets of our city. We hear about them in our newspapers and see them in the TV depictions. We mourn the killing that happens in our own city and in our country. The lens focussing on the evil out there gets bigger and bigger until it includes not only our city but our country, not only Canada but the neighbouring USA, not only the Western countries but also those in the East and South. We begin to speak about our attempts to solve these problems-- bigger police forces, more prisons, more security, United Nations forces. . . or maybe Christian Peace Makers or Mennonite Central Committee. . . but then we suddenly become quiet.

For the Psalmist is not content with looking only at the evil out there.

He ends his poem with these words:

*Search me, O God, and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me. . .*

And there is. We do discover and experience that there is evil and brokenness and pain inside each of us. The microscopic lens focuses inward, clearer and sharper, penetrating all barriers and pretence. It takes courage to see the hatred and despair buried deep within ourselves and within our communities.

This second reading of the Psalm, in which the focus is on human nature is necessary. It tells us of the rawness of human life. It puts us in solidarity with all of humanity. It tells us that our lives, even lives surrounded by God's presence will know enemies and evil and pain. It tells us that though we may seem powerful to others, we often feel powerless to change the world out there or even the heart within. Gary spoke of these times last Sunday as times of disorientation, or dislocation, of dismantling of inadequate theologies. We all recognize times when we come to the end of our own resources—when our intellectual struggle or our emotional struggle takes on a wrestling with the God we thought we knew or had left behind. Like Jacob wrestling with the angel in the wilderness or Hagar in despair crying out in the desert, we come through to a new awareness of ourselves --and of our God. For we have looked outside and looked inside and lost our innocence.

Suddenly the Psalm becomes a different Psalm, now no longer primarily about nice or correct theology about God, or of our insightful knowledge of the humanity or of our deep self-awareness. The psalm transcends each of these levels. Instead the psalm is a desperate prayer: an opening up of ourselves in the deepest way we know how, to the God who knows us profoundly and intimately, the God who is mysteriously present to us even in our disorientation, in our awareness of evil without and within, our

woundedness, our pain. When we feel lost and even the answers we thought we had don't make sense any more, we are driven to prayer, not to the easy, relaxed, confident prayer of success but the more desperate prayer of overwhelming complexity and few solutions.

And then we come to that almost insane awareness that God does indeed know us and no matter what is in our hearts, God is still with us.

*"Search me, know my heart, test me, know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me and lead me in the way everlasting"*

And the future opens up again.

Throughout the ages, this psalm, though very personal, has been read primarily in community. If read as a prayer it is a very vulnerable prayer, for it also opens us up before our brothers and sisters. It admits before God and our community that we too have feelings and responses that we would rather hide. This psalm is an invitation to move deeply into our disorientation so that God can move us into a deeper understanding, where renewed hope opens up a world of possibility and promise, of joy and shalom. May this be so for all of us on this day and always.

Amen.