

**“The Inescapable God”**  
**Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren**  
**Peace United Church of Christ**  
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I want to go back to the early and mid 1980s. At that time, one of the books that were on the bookshelves of many ministers, and lay people alike, was called “The Road Less Traveled”. It was a book by a Christian psychiatrist M. Scott Peck. “The Road Less Traveled” was Peck’s best known book, and it was the book that really helped build his reputation. It was a book that insightfully described the attributes that make for a fulfilled human being. During this time, many, many people read the book, and many, many other people got together in book study groups to talk about it and to share their own life journeys. M. Scott Peck was very popular and very sought out as a speaker and a retreat leader. In the summer of 1988, he led the day-long retreat in the Raleigh-Durham area of which I was privileged to be in attendance. I have to tell you that it was a glorious day! M. Scott Peck talked, lectured and took our questions. He was funny, witty, gentle, and simply overflowing with wisdom. I think it is safe to say that, for the 200 people who were in attendance that day, we were all enthralled with what he had to say. M. Scott Peck had us in the palm of his hand, but then—it happened! Just before the final break of the day, while he was still taking questions, M. Scott Peck pushed back from the podium, reached into his front shirt pocket, and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, and we could hear the gasps in the room. Dr. Peck heard the gasps in the room. He raised his eyebrows and said, while holding up a pack of cigarettes, “You thought I wasn’t human?”

Well, that moment with Dr. Peck has always stayed with me, not simply because it reminded all of us who were gathered that day that Dr. Peck was, indeed, human but, more importantly, for the realization that we don’t actually know people very well. We know people to some degree, but we do not know anybody in totality. Even regarding the people who are most centrally entwined in our lives, we do not and cannot know a human being fully. Human beings are so complex, and at our core we are fundamentally mysterious. Really discovering the foundational essence of another person is almost like a maze that constantly turns in upon itself, simply revealing deeper and deeper mysteries of the human spirit.

Isn’t it interesting that the Psalmist of Psalm 139 makes the claim that only God knows our innermost being and that there is nowhere that we can hide from this God? Let’s take a look at this. Scholars tell us that Psalm 139 comes from a Psalmist, the writer of this prayer, who has been victimized. This is a “prayer giver”, if you will, who has been mistreated and oppressed, and this Psalm most likely comes out of that period of exile from the Israelites when they lived under Babylonian control. This is after the Temple has been destroyed and the Israelites have been cast out into Babylon and now live in a foreign land and are experiencing some abuse.

Clearly, in Psalm 139, if we were to read the whole Psalm, especially verses 19 through 22, which were conveniently left out of our lectionary reading today, you would see in that Psalm real anger, real angst, and real pain; nonetheless, this Psalmist seems to understand and feel God’s presence in every aspect of his life. So, the Psalmist writes these words: “You have searched me, and you know me. You know, God, when I sit down. You know when I stand up. You know when I go to the bathroom. Even before a word is on my lips, you know what I am going to say”. This is the Psalmist praying to a God who he feels is right there with him in every moment of his life. This Psalmist is so intimate with God that his prayer reveals the depths of his relationship with The Holy One. What is this relationship like? It is like sexual intimacy. The key word in Psalm 139 is the Hebrew word for “know” or “knowledge”, like Adam knew Eve. This word for “know” is used seven times in this Psalm and seven times, of course, being the Biblical number for completion, so this seven-fold repetition of the word “know” communicates the Psalmist’s conviction that he is fully and intimately known by God. As Rosina said, “You can run, but you cannot hide”. This, of course, is a source of great joy and reassurance in the Psalmist’s life. He is pleased about this reality.

As I read that Psalm, I thought that most of us (at least speaking for myself) are not quite there. Most of us sometimes wonder “Where is God?” We have fleeting moments of encounters with God. We have fleeting moments when we feel the presence of the Spirit in our lives. We have fleeting moments of calmness and a sense of the holy in our lives, but more often than not, we are on the hunt for a deeper relationship with God. Some of us even have the audacity to ask “Where are You in my life?” So, this Psalmist is kind of unique in that his relationship with God is so intimate that it is like an intimate relationship. The challenge of the Psalmist was how do we get there, how do we, in our faith journey, get to a level of intimacy with God that is like love making, and how do we arrive there. My sense is that, like any good relationship in our lives, a deep and intimate relationship with God requires some work. We have to work at this relationship, and there are many ways to work on our relationship with God.

I want to lift up three primary ways that we can work on our relationship with God. Again, like any good relationship in our lives, we have to communicate with God. We have to have conversations with God. We converse with God through worship. What we do here on Sunday mornings is have a conversation with God through song, prayer, Word and other avenues of connection. We communicate with God through prayer, whether it is individual prayers in our private lives, or communal prayer as we gather together, and we communicate with God through study. We study God’s word. We study the wisdom of the Holy Scriptures and talk it over with our community of faith as we do on Sunday mornings and in our study groups. Communication with God is critical in finding that level of intimacy that we long for.

Secondly, if we want intimacy with God, we must listen—not simply talk, but we must find time to listen to God. We listen to God through the discipline of silence, we listen to God through the discipline of meditation, and we listen to God by clearing out sacred space for God in our lives. We scripturally call this “Sabbath time”—finding holy time for God, and not only finding holy time, but finding holy space for God. Where do we go to be with God? Where do we go to find holy solitude? I suspect that, for all of us, finding holy solitude is a very unique experience. Probably, for me, in this point in my life, I find the most holy solitude when I am running in the woods. It is a time when my mind flies free, and God enters in and I am free to simply listen because I can’t talk because I’m breathing so hard. We must all find that holy solitude somewhere in our lives so that we can listen, just simply listen, for God’s wisdom.

So, we must communicate with God—we must talk with God, we must listen to God and, thirdly, we must engage with God through service. We grow intimate with God when we live according to God’s expectations. We do this, we engage with God, by loving our neighbor, by serving those in need, by practicing forgiveness and mercy, and we give generously as we are able because, if everything we do is only for ourselves, then we don’t get anywhere near God. Engaging in service is a way of coming close to our God.

Psalm 139 concludes with a series of requests. Verses 23 and 24 say “Search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wickedness in me and lead me in the way everlasting”, so the intimacy that we all want with God takes effort, and I believe it requires discipline but, most of all, if we really want intimacy with God, we must really desire it. We must want to be in relationship with God through Jesus Christ. We must want that for our lives. God cannot make us faithful. In fact, theologians have said for so long now that God gives us the freedom not to be faithful. Faithfulness is a choice that we make—a choice that we make and then pursue and nurture in our lives. Being intimate with God requires that that’s what we want in our lives. We want that relationship with God. We want to know Christ more deeply. We want to know what God’s intent for our lives, for our world and for our church is, and it is a desire that we give ourselves over to.

So, indeed, as the Psalmist suggests, once we let God into our lives, once we have that desire and open that door of our souls so that God can enter in, we discover that God is with us, that God is with us wherever we go, and that if we continue to work on that relationship, God will never let us go. The Psalmist speaks from a deep and powerful relationship with God, and it is this prayer from the

Psalmist that reminds us that this is a relationship that is open to each and every one of us. It is a relationship of work. It is a relationship that we desire, that we must want for ourselves, and it is a relationship that we must share with others because when we are intimate with God, we discover that we are loved, and when we know that we are loved by God just exactly as we are, we cannot help but share that love with others, so we give thanks this morning for a God who seeks to be intimate with us in every aspect of our lives and calls us to share it with others. Thanks be to God for God's love. Amen.