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 Text: Psalm 139: 1-10; 23-24; Luke 19: 10
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A Firm Foundation for a World on the Brink

*For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.
 -Luke 19: 10*

Large colonial era parsonages are useful for a good many things, but none more so than for hide and seek. In our seven years across the street, that game has sustained our kids and their friends or cousins through many an evening, when the adults were too preoccupied with conversation to bother herding them to bed. There are lots of rooms in the parsonage, and thus, lots of hiding places. In truth, a few of those hiding places are too good, so good in fact that the one hiding can't be found. The sequence of events usually goes like this: first, an initial rush – they'll never find me here! – which quickly becomes a sinking realization that, wait - they'll never find me here! As the hunt for the hidden child goes on, the one in hiding will frequently emit a loud rustle, or a knock, or a whistle, as if to say, "Over here! Come find me, I'm here!" Sometimes, they actually emerge from hiding and speak it: "I'm in here," and then promptly go back to hiding. Not long after that the seekers will find their way toward the sound, where the one who is hiding will be discovered, often accompanied by a squeal of delight. To judge by the sound of their voices, there's pleasure in finding the perfect hiding place. But it sounds like there's still greater joy in being found.

Something about that parsonage game, an experience that many of us knew as children, captures what we've been going through as individuals, and as a community, during the pandemic. We have, from necessity, withdrawn from much of our public and communal life, spending more time than ever hiding in our homes, sheltering from one another. For many of us, I think, there's a small but tangible pleasure that's come from that, not unlike the child who has located the perfect hiding place, snug and secure in that enclosure. But a far more powerful emotion has also intruded, not unlike the child that is too well hidden. That part of us insists: "If I stay here like this for too long, nobody will ever find me. The game will go on, and everyone will forget that I'm even here."

That's a predicament that's been heightened by the pandemic, but it's also an existential experience shared across the ages and across cultures. There are times when it's pleasant to find oneself lost. There are times when it's just the right thing to withdrawal into one's hiding place, in order to be alone with our thoughts. Sometimes we need to retreat. For me, across the whole of my life, books have often functioned in precisely that way. They represent a place to go, "far from the madding crowd," as Thomas Hardy put it. I can remember times in high school and college, when instead of engaging with a noisy room of people, I retreated to another room to read. But I also remember a wish that accompanied that retreat: the wish that someone would notice, and would come find me, because they missed my presence. Amidst my hiding, I actually remember wanting to be seen, hoping to be found. It's a complex of emotions that I still carry with me in some respects. Maybe you do too.

Psalm 139 gives expression to that deep human yearning – to hide, yes, but more importantly, to be found.¹ “Oh Lord, you have searched me and known me,” the Psalmist writes, going on to say, “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? 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.” In the age of surveillance capitalism, it’s tempting to hear those words as somehow ominous, an ancient vision of total visibility, where all of our movements are tracked by Facebook and Amazon, Google and Apple and all the other tech giants. God forbid. That form of seeing, that form of omni-visibility, where every decision and click is registered in order to perfect the algorithm of our own personal desire, in order to become more pliant to marketing and other forms of suasion, is best met with concealment. But I don’t think that represents what the Psalmist intends.

Rather, I believe the writer of Psalm 139 is speaking to that deep need, shared by most everyone at some level of their being, to be sought out, to be noticed, to be found. And it conveys a God who does so as a loving Parent, an embracing mother or a tender-hearted father. Its images, observing one’s lying down, or being there to greet the day, are reminiscent of the ways a parent will tuck a child in at night, or gently coax that same child into wakefulness at the start of a new day. Its images of observation are those of a mother or father waiting up at night for the car to turn into the driveway, and doing their best to discern the child’s thoughts as she changes and grows. It suggests a benevolent guide seeking to illuminate the paths of wisdom for that child, however murky those paths might be. It presents a loving spiritual presence who accompanies us along the many twists and turns of our life, no matter the lengths we might go, or the places we might find ourselves. It bespeaks an assurance that, whatever good or ill might befall us, the world is fundamentally trustworthy, because it is held by One who is worthy of our trust.

The other night, I heard Augie, our eight year old, pad into our bedroom. He said he had been awoken by a bad dream. And so Rachael went with him back into his bedroom, tucked him back in, and laid with him for a little while, assuring him by her presence that all would be well. She was, in the words of one writer, creating a world in that moment, holding back the darkness, keeping the chaos at bay.² She was instilling in him a sense that all would be well, that he would be all right, and that he was safe.

There is, of course, a limit to that safety. No matter the assurances of any good parent, no matter the power of any benevolent presence to calm or assuage those fears, it’s also true that sometimes the world is dangerous. Each of our worlds do sometimes slip into chaos, and no mother or father can finally protect or ward off the basic, biological, fact of death. The pandemic has reinforced that truth all the more clearly, as we’ve each of us grappled with our ultimate frailty, our vulnerability before a capricious airborne disease.

Even so, I don’t believe the mother who pushes back the darkness for her child is lying. I don’t believe the father who creates a world in which that child feels steady and secure, is playing a trick or fabricating an illusion. If brute, animal conditions, the “natural” world as such, was the entirety of existence, then perhaps it would be a lie. But in those circumstances, the parent is making a wider claim about reality – that, despite the sorrow of yesterday and the worry of tomorrow, the world is fundamentally trustworthy, the foundations upon which we stand are truly steady, and that we are, even while under conditions of existential threat, secured by

¹ This development of the themes of Psalm 139 was inspired by Thomas Long, “Psalm 139 and the Eye of God,” *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2020.

² Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, as quoted in Long, “Psalm 139 and the Eye of God.”

something outside of ourselves alone. There are all sorts of ways of explaining that deep assurance. But for those of us inclined toward religion, inclined toward faith, it becomes even more specific. It has to do with the conviction that, while at any moment the very being of the world in all of its terrible splendor could be revoked, it is somehow sustained, preserved and upheld. It has to do with the even deeper conviction, born from Psalm 139, that there is a loving and benevolent Presence within the world from whom we are not hidden, a God who is trustworthy, who means us well, who knows us, who seeks us out, and who will travel to the ends of the earth to find us.

God does it for each of us. But we're given to do it for each other. That's why, throughout the pandemic (but really always) our work as a church community has been to search out as many people as we can, in order to say, "We haven't forgotten you. We're still looking for you. We know you're out there, and we want to make sure you have what you need to get through this thing." There are a few people on our membership list, we've discovered, who really do prefer to stay hidden, at least from us. That's ok. But for a great many more of us, there's been a deep need, hidden away as we are, to be remembered, to be searched out, to be found. That's why in the earliest months of the pandemic, we called every single person on our membership list, in hopes of finding each of you. It's why we're finding ways even now to create small support groups among all the members of our church who wish to be a part of such things, in order to get us through the colder months that will soon arrive. It's why Laura and Lisa Doggart have worked tirelessly to keep our children and our families connected through the pandemic. It's why we've recorded our virtual services, and sent them to your inbox every Sunday. They're a note dropped in a virtual bottle, cast out upon the infinite sea of the digital world, with the hope that it will find you, assuring you somehow that you're not alone, and that someone out there loves you.

We've done that among ourselves, but we've done it beyond ourselves too. Even as the world has gone into an extended period of hiding, our Tree of Life ministry has sent out countless messages and donations to our allies in Palestine and Israel, to let them know that they're not invisible. Our Green Grass committee has sent care packages, filled with Personal Protective Equipment to all the families we know and love out on the Cheyenne River Reservation, a way of saying that we haven't forgotten them. The same has been true of Haiti – I know the Crosbys and their team have worked tirelessly to ensure that those in Deschappelles aren't lost or overlooked. And let's give a shout out to the Ladies Who Stitch, who still find a safe way to gather weekly, and who have sewed hundreds, probably thousands, of masks for anybody and everybody who needs one. The Food Pantry continues to serve nearly a hundred families every week, who line up in cars up Ferry Road to receive bags of groceries. Our Board of Missions has been insuring that in this time of economic devastation, the organizations that depend upon our support are still receiving it, so that they can continue to help the individuals and families who need it. That's all a way of demonstrating and enacting what we believe to be true: that God seeks us out, finds us, and sustains us through loving care; that, even for a world on the brink, there remains a strong, secure, and stable foundation upon which to build a life; that there are ways of remaining human even in a time of deepening inhumanity. In this moment of universal withdrawal, we insist that Someone out there is still searching out what has been lost.

It is, of course, Stewardship Sunday, and it bears pointing out that we've been able to do all of that so well because so many of you have contributed to this place, ensuring that our ministries and outreach remain vital during this time. Because of you, the foundation of our church remains strong. Because of your generosity, we continue to be a place that can enact

those beautiful words from Psalm 139, seeking out what has been lost amidst the universal loneliness of a global pandemic. Thank you for that, from the bottom of my heart, from the bottom of all of our hearts. And if you can, keep it up, because we need all the help we can get, both financial and otherwise. For a world on the brink, the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme is a parable of hope, insisting to all and sundry that there remains something, Someone, trustworthy and steady into whose care we might place our lives.

I'll end with a story, one that may be hard to get through, but that captures what it is to be lost, and what it is to be found, by a steadying, loving, searching, and compassionate God. In his memoir *Once More We Saw Stars*, Jayson Greene tells about playing games of hide and seek with his two-year-old daughter Greta.³ She loved the game. They would be playing together, and then Greta would run out of the room, just out of sight. "Where's Greta?" she would call, and Jayson would pretend to look under overturned toys, saying in mock exasperation, "Oh no! We've lost her!" Then she would bound back in, announcing with laughter, "Greta came right back!"

One day the unimaginable happened. While on a walk on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, Greta and her grandmother were sitting on a bench along the sidewalk. Out of nowhere, a brick was dislodged from a balcony eight stories above. It fell and struck Greta on the head. An observer said, "It was like an evil force reached down..."

Greta was rushed to the hospital, where Jayson and his wife Stacey waited until a pediatric doctor emerged to tell them the news that no parent ever wishes to hear. "Her condition is stable," the doctor told them, "but she'll never wake up. I believe her prognosis is fatal."

Jayson and Stacey went immediately into the room, and they said goodbye to their child. With varying degrees of success, they tried to put their lives back together, though never as before. Eventually, Jayson returned to his habit of taking a daily run, but he could never will himself into Central Park. That was his and Greta's place. But one day he felt an inexplicable urge to visit the park. He writes:

"There at the park's mouth, my heart stirs, and I feel a peculiar elation. I recognize her. Greta is somewhere nearby. I feel her energy, playfully expectant. *Come find me, Daddy*, she says. Tears spring and run freely down my face. *I hear you, baby girl*, I whisper. *Daddy's coming to get you.*"

And then he sees her, sees her in all her fullness in his imagination. She comes running to him the way she always did, saying with laughter "Greta come right back." Jayson continues:

"Standing in the park, staring at her, I make a strange and primal sound, deep and rich like a belly laugh, hard and sharp like a sob. *You are here. You picked the park. Good choice, baby girl.* Oblivious to the people around me, I run to her. She wiggles in anticipatory joy. Stooping down, I scoop her up under her soft armpits, her shoulder blades meeting at the pads of my fingers, and I lift her up into the sky. She is invisible to passersby—to them, there is nothing in the spot next to the tree where she stands laughing and clapping but a patch of grass, and there is nothing in my arms but air."

And yet she is there. Jayson Greene isn't especially religious. He doesn't go to church, and he doesn't think much about God, and still less about visitations from the spiritual realm. He

³ As retold in Long, *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2020, pgs. 46-47.

knows he's on shaky ground, but he's willing to risk becoming a mystic for the love of his daughter, to hold her in his arms once again.

As for us, who can say what was happening – a hallucination, psychological compensation for loss, a mystic vision, an angelic visitation, the brush of the Holy Spirit? I'm not sure it matters. Whatever else it is, surely it's also an image lifted straight from Psalm 139, of a loving Parent, a God who searches out each and every one of us, a God who knows our very frame, a God who stitches the world together and holds us close, in life and after life as well.

It is the sure foundation upon which we stake our very lives.