

Pastor Charley:

Well, good morning, good afternoon, good evening, however you're connecting with us in remote worship here at Johns Creek United Methodist Church. We're so glad that you've joined us. It's always good to be together in this way, so thank you for tuning in and connecting and getting online with us. Of course, some of you will be headed out or already have headed out to our morning worship at 9:00 here at the church in the field, and of course you have to register for that. But again, we're trying to do our best to make worship readily available, whether it's online or outside. The Lord has been faithful to us and we appreciate your support as well as we continue to be the church that God calls us to be.

Let us be in an attitude of prayer together. Lord, we do thank you for the gift of worship. We need it so bad. In the midst of these times that can be confusing and fearful and anxious, we need the clarity of your spirit and you guiding us. We need your comfort and strength. Now, Lord, you've given me the amazing privilege and responsibility of preaching your word to these my friends and your servants, Lord, and it's a task that I don't take lightly. It's a task I cannot do on my own strength or wisdom. So Lord, I ask you to speak to me and then through me in such a way that all of us receive a word from you that will make a difference to our lives. It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Well, I know that there are many of you who are watching or listening that are going through a variety of experiences. Some of you are parents who are quite anxious because you just dropped off your kid at college for the first time. There are some of you parents that are homeschooling your kids for the very first time, doing virtual learning and all of that stuff, and you don't know what you're doing, and every day is a struggle and you're tired. There are many of you who are faced with health concerns, trips to the doctor. There are many of you who are faced with, well, just grieving for loved ones who are suffering in some way, whether it's emotionally or physically. Perhaps there's some of you who have failed in some way or have made mistakes and you're feeling down about that. Or maybe like many of us, you're just upset about the state of the world, all the political divisions, all the hate that spewed, all the difficulties surrounding COVID, on and on and on and on it goes and all that has gotten you down.

Well, I've thought a lot about that the last few days. In fact, the last week as I've thought about this message and what word I would come to you with and you know what? I think many of us are in a state of anxiety or fear or panic or frustration, whatever it may be, there's so many things that are coming down on us at once right now that I think we need a word of encouragement. I think we need to allow God to love on us and to affirm us and encourage us and give us a powerful word that stands above all the noise going on right now.

What I'd like to do is I want to share with you a passage of scripture that honestly is one of my favorites. It always encourages me and grounds me whenever I seem lost or whenever I feel like I'm chaotic inside. It's Psalm 139 and I'm going to read verses 1 through 18. You may want to get your Bibles out, iPad, phone, whatever, however you like to read scripture and read along with me. I'll be reading the New Revised Standard Version. But as I read it, and as you read it, may it be something that feeds your soul. May it be food, manna from heaven, as you seek encouragement and you seek comfort and strength. Psalm 139, we're beginning with verse 1.

"Oh 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, oh 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.

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. If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me and the light around me become night,' even the darkness is not dark to you. The night is as bright as the day for darkness is as light to you.

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 woman of 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 has yet existed. How weighty to me are your thoughts, oh God, how vast is the sum of them. I try to count them. They are more than the saying. I come to the end and I'm still with you."

May the Lord add His blessing upon the reading of this word. May we hear it and understand it and apply it to our lives.

I don't know about you, but I certainly love this Psalm. It speaks to me in so many ways when I am down or when I'm struggling or when I am afraid and I hope that these words do the same for you. What I want to do in the next few minutes is just a breakdown, a few thoughts from this great Psalm, thoughts that I get out of it and I'm inspired by and perhaps they'll inspire you.

One of the first things that I get from this Psalm when I really need it especially, is the simple fact that God knows me, that God knows my name. Verse 1 basically says it. "Oh Lord, you have searched me and known me." God knows our name. God knows my name. God knows your name.

I recall many years ago when Brandy and I were dating, and of course I was in seminary at Emory, and she actually worked at a jewelry store at Phipps Plaza. Ever been there? I think it's where God shops. Beautiful mall, nice stores, and of course we always like to have lunch there. I would meet her and pick her up at the jewelry store and we'd go to the food court and eat. One time we decided to just kind of wander in one of the stores. As we wandered into this department store, I can't remember which one it was, we were looking around and enjoying just the people watching and all that stuff, when all of a sudden we see this four year old girl with blonde hair crying and screaming for her mother, "Mommy, Mommy, Mommy." She was looking around and it was the saddest thing in the world. She had lost her mom and of course I'm God's man of power and glory. I said, "What's wrong?" and she cries all the louder. We tried to fight the manager. We tried to fight somebody to maybe over the PA system announced that this Kathy, little girl, was lost. And of course we scrounged around and everything and after probably about two minutes, it felt like 20 minutes we hear from a distance, "Kathy, Kathy, Kathy, Kathy."

You should have seen this little girl's face. Instant bloom. Her frown turned into her smile, her tears went away, and when she saw her mother, she began to run the sound of her name being called. That was a powerful moment for me. I realized once again, and Brandy realized once again, the power of someone who loves you calling your name.

Of course there was Mary Magdalene, after Jesus had been killed, and she runs to the tomb to pay homage to her Lord. Some of you may remember this narrative, this story. She runs to the tomb to pay homage to her Lord, and as she's running there, she runs into somebody she doesn't recognize, what is said or she thinks is the gardener because she can't find the body of her Lord. Little does she know that it's Jesus. What does Jesus do at that moment? Because it was so dark, she really couldn't see. Does he give some great statement of insight? Does he perform some great miracle? No. What does he say in that moment? Do you remember? He says, "Mary, Mary." The sound of your name being called by someone who loves you.

I'll tell you that some of you who need to hear that word today. God knows your name, which means God knows you, God understands you, and there are days when that's a solid rock for me. When there

are days when I think no one understands what I'm going through and no one understands who I really am and no one really understands my life. I think to myself, "Am I the only one going through this? Does anybody know me? Does anybody truly understand me?" Then I realize, I read this Psalm and I read scripture, and I realize, yes, God knows me. God knows my name. God understands me and God loves me and that means I am never alone. That means I am never lost. This Psalm says, "You have searched me and you have known me."

But this Psalm says something else that I think is helpful to us that I really want us to receive today. Not only does this Psalm show us that God knows us, that God knows our name, but it also shows us that God knows our secrets. We read in verse 3, "You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted," some techs say, "And are familiar with all my ways."

Now, I don't know about you and your household, but I know that that growing up, we had a particular code, rule, it was just understood that we would do this particular thing when somebody important came to our house unannounced. Now, that doesn't happen too often today, but back when I was a kid, sometimes people would show up to our house unannounced, whether it be a neighbor or a friend or whatever, and knock on our door. If it was somebody like Nathan or somebody like Reverend Lori or Brittany, somebody really important, right, came up to our and knocked on our door, we were legally as a Reid family member, ethically responsible, required to yell out, "Fire drill." That meant we were supposed to grab all the dirty dishes or the dirty clothes, newspaper, magazines, whatever mess or muck was around the house, run to a back room, shove the junk in there, shut the door, and not even God was allowed to go in. If you're laughing right now, perhaps that means you have such a room.

Of course the doorbell would ring or someone would knock on the door and we would open up and we would say, "Oh, surprise. Come and see us as we really are." Many times we will do that to God. We'll say, "God, I have all these things and I don't want you to see them. I have these secrets, I have this mess, I have this problem, I have this issue, and I don't want you to see this stuff that I have." We shove the junk deep into our hearts and we don't let God see them, but we forget that God is saying to us, "I know you have the room. I'm familiar with all your ways. More than that, I know why you think you need all that stuff and I know what that stuff is doing to you and I want to set you free from it."

Of course there is Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and everything was fine until they discovered their nakedness. When they did and sin came into the world, they ran away to hide. Remember that? Scripture records that God says something very interesting. He runs after them looking for them and scripture records says, "Adam, Adam, where are you?" Now why would God, who had all knowledge in the world, ask a question that God already knew the answer to? Because I think God was trying to get across that He didn't want to possess Adam. He didn't want to shame Adam. He wanted to say, "Adam, I want to be where you are. I want to help you. I want to walk with you." Some of you need to hear that today. You need to hear that God is not a monster, that God doesn't want to expose your secrets and shame you and punish you and make you suffer because of it. No, God wants to set you free.

Jesus said, "You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free." God is saying, "Listen, I know you have the stuff. I know what you have in that room. You know what? I understand all that. I understand why you have it and what I want to do is I want to set you free. I want to make you whole. Allow my grace to forgive you. Allow my grace to empower you and help you rise above it. Surrender to me." Oh, this Psalm shows us that God, He knows our secrets, He's familiar with all our ways.

Well, there's another word I believe we need to receive from this Psalm, and that is, and I know some of you need to hear this today, God knows your potential. God knows your ability. Oh, I love what it says in verses 13 and 14. The Psalmist says, "For it was you who formed my inward parts. You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you for I'm fearfully and wonderfully made." You are created by God. God knows your potential.

I recall when I was first starting out in ministry, I was often nervous before I got up to preach. This was especially true when I was an associate at First United Methodist Church of Lakeland. I still get nervous when I get up to preach, but as someone who was wet behind the ears, I really got nervous.

I remember it was early on in my ministry and I was in my office and I was sweating over my notes and I was just poring over them, trying to remember everything that I'd thought about and wanted it to be perfect, when I noticed there was a little envelope on my desk and I hadn't noticed it before for some reason, I was so nervous. I opened it up and took it out and it was just a stationary card about yea big, and it simply said, "I believe in you." It was signed Riley Short, who was my senior pastor. "I believe in you."

Now, those are very few simple words, but at that moment I realized that there was someone who believed in me, who understood my potential. Although that morning was still nerve-wracking a bit, there was some comfort that came upon me because I knew that the senior pastor, my boss, my mentor believed in me, and that meant more to me than you can imagine.

As an aside, I think there are many of us who need to say that to other people that are around us, to loved ones, to friends. There are people who need to hear that we believe in them, that we love them, who need to be encouraged. In the midst of this world of hate and criticism and negativity, people need to be encouraged. I know some of you need to hear that word today, that God believes in you. God created you after all. The Psalm says, "You knit me together and my mother's womb. I am fearfully and wonderfully made." That means God has given you gifts, God has given you ability, God has given you talent, God has given you skill, and I believe that. I believe every human being on this earth has been gifted by God in some way, to use those gifts in the world. Because one day God will ask us, "I gave you the gift of music. What did you do with it? I gave you the gift of teaching. What did you do with it? I gave you the gift of preaching. What did you do with it? I gave you the gift of knowledge. I gave you these gifts. What did you do with them?" We are fearfully and wonderfully made.

So what if you failed in the past? It doesn't matter. We always learn more from failure than we do success. You're not a failure if you get back up again and you try again. You only fail if you never get back up. I'll tell you, in my ministry, in my life, I have failed more often than I have succeeded. But because of God's power and because I know God believes in me, I keep getting back up and it makes all the difference.

One of my favorite favorite books and movies is The Help. I know many of you have read that book and seen that movie. I just love it. I think there are many lessons that we can take from it. Of course, the author is Kathryn Stockett. There's a lesson to be learned here. Some of you probably don't know this, but did you know that that manuscript, when she first wrote that manuscript and she submitted it to publishers, it was rejected 60 times six zero, that's right. Her manuscript was rejected by publishers 60 times, rejection after rejection after rejection after rejection. Her husband and her kids thought she was nuts. She kept submitting it and Kathryn said she would lie about what she was doing on the weekends to her friends and family when she was really getting the manuscript better to submit it again. Of course, finally when she submitted, I think it was the 61st time or something like that, well, it was accepted and we know the rest is history.

But I want to read to you a quote by Stockett. She says this. "I can't tell you how to succeed, but I can't tell you how not to. Give in to the shame of being rejected and puts your manuscript or your painting or your song or your voice or your dance moves, insert passion there, in a coffin and close it for good. I guarantee you that it won't take you anywhere."

Listen, God believes in you, and I don't know what challenge is ahead of you. I don't know what dream you're attempting. I don't know what project that you have before you or deadline or whatever it may

be. But I do know that you are fearfully and wonderfully made and God has gifted you and God has given you skill and ability and God has promised to never leave us alone. Replace your fear with faith because God knows your potential.

Quite honestly, I think if I was to sum up this wonderful Psalm, I think it basically tells us this. We are God's children. You are God's child. At the very end in verse 18 it says, "I come to the end and I'm still with you." We are God's children and nothing can ever change that.

One of the things I'll always remember about my father and I played a lot of tennis growing up, I played a lot of sports, but tennis was my main sport for many, many years. My dad would often drive me to the tournaments and the matches and that kind of thing. Sometimes I tell him not to watch my match because my dad was more into it than I was. I could hear him huff and puff and say, "Get it, get it, get the ball." I was like, "Dad, you're driving me crazy." Eventually he'd sneak in behind a Busch or something and watch the match, but every time he dropped me off to a match, he'd say these words to me, they've always stuck with me. "Charlie, remember, you're my boy and I love you." Wow. I can't tell you the power of those words. "You're my child. You're my boy and I love you." I knew that whether I won or lost the match, it didn't matter. That was my daddy and he loved me. No matter what I would face, no matter what life would bring, that would never change.

I think all of us in the midst of this difficult time that we're faced with need to hear those words from God because He's saying these words to us through this psalm. He's saying to you, "Remember, you're my child and I love you. I know you. I know your name. I know your potential. I'm familiar with you. I created you and I'm for you."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, let's pray. Oh Lord, thank you for the gift of your word, especially today that reminds us that we are your children, that we are wonderfully made by you, that we've been gifted by you, and we are encouraged by you. We need that today, Lord, now more than ever. May these words and these messages and these lessons ground us today and refresh us and renew us to face the day unafraid, knowing you walk with us and that you love us. It's in Christ's name we pray, amen.

We're going to sing a song or a hymn, whatever you'd like to call it, we always do, so why don't you join us.