

Order of Service –April 10, 2016
Praise What Comes: The Inescapable God

Musical Prelude

Greeting -- Catch A Glimpse of the Holy

1st Hymn: Be Thou Our Vision, G154

Readings -- Mark 3:25; Matthew 5:44; Psalm 139

2nd Hymn: Thou Hast Searched Me, Green 210

Joys and Concerns

Musical interlude

Prayer -- Search Us and Know Us, Inescapable God.

3rd Hymn: The Lone Wild Bird, Green 240

Pastoral reflection or message

Silent worship

4th Hymn: Holy, Holy, Holy, Green 5

Closing -- Praise What Comes..Be Always Watching God.

Introductions/Announcements/Afterthoughts

Postlude

Greeting

Good morning Friends. Every Sunday, we come here together again as a community of faith, in part because we sense that God is with us, wherever we are, here among us. And yet in our lives and the life of the world it is

sometimes also difficult to reconcile the reality of the Holy with reality of the Horror.

In her poem *Praise What Comes*, Poet Jeane Lohmann suggests that the daily work of seeking out the Sacred in the ordinary is practice for the much more difficult task of glimpsing the holy amongst the horror. In the end she says, perhaps there are no answers, but only a few simple questions:

Did I love? Did I learn at least one of the many names of God? at the ragged edges of pain, did I catch the smallest glimpse of the holy?

Those are the questions for us, together again today.

Our first hymn is about how God might guide our sight. ***Be Thou Our Vision, Green 154.***

Readings

Mark 3:25 *And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.*

Matthew 5:44 *But I tell you: Love your enemies.*

Psalm 139

¹O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

²You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. ³You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. ⁴Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. ⁵You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

⁷Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁸If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

⁹If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

¹¹If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," ¹²even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you. ¹³For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. ¹⁴I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

¹⁵My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. ¹⁶Your 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. ¹⁷How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! ¹⁸I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.

¹⁹O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me—²⁰those who speak of you maliciously, and lift themselves up against you for evil! ²¹Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? ²²I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies. ²³Search me, O God, and know my heart;

test me and know my thoughts. ²⁴See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Second Hymn: Thou Hast Searched Me, Green 210

Joys and Concerns, Interlude

Prayer *O Love of Our Heart, heart of our own hearts, Be Thou Our Vision. God from Whom we cannot escape, You have searched us. You do Know us. And so we cannot hide that In our rising up and in our lying down, we are a confusion of contradictions. God Who is Everywhere at once, it can feel like sometimes we are always seeking you, and always running away. Always longing to know you as you know us, yet always fearing that there is that which cannot possibly be acceptable in thy sight. We can feel beset by enemies, by angry hounds and hoards, the beasts who populate our hearts and minds, the hearts and minds of our people, all people, everywhere. It feels as if the world strains toward you and away from you.... Our own thoughts and feelings, our brothers and sisters on this planet, can feel like villains inside and out, over which we have no control. So for this moment, for this time together this morning, o god of wondrous knowledge, awful might, unfathomed depth, unmeasured height please find us in Silence. cause us only to be still, only to wait, to look, to listen, to see. As you gaze upon us today let us for this hour stop the endless straining, toward and away from you and for this time together, only turn our gaze toward you. Be thou our vision, o love of our hearts. and give us to rest now in thee.*

Benediction *So, Friends, Unite your divided houses, and Praise What Comes. Catch the Smallest Glimpse of the Holy. Be Searched, and Found, and Known by the Inescapable God. Love. Love the Wicked, the hateful, the enemies you would wish for God to destroy. God is Always Watching, faithful, waiting. Waiting for us to turn toward the Holy and the Horror, the fearful and the wonderful. Waiting that we may be always watching, too.*

Message

In one of our family's favorite animated movies, *Monsters, Inc.*, there is a bureaucratic monster who looks like a giant dour middle-aged female slug. She wears horn-rimmed glasses on a chain, and a rumpled cardigan. Her name is Roz. She is a paper pusher who -- spoiler alert -- turns out to be in charge of the entire *Monsters, Inc.* enterprise. Her famous line to the main character, who is a large walking eyeball named Mike Wazowski, is "I'm watching you, Wazowski. Always Watching You. Always." Wazowski can't escape the ever present gaze of Roz. It's a creepy, oppressive omniscience.

When I was growing up Roman Catholic in Auburn, that's kind of how God seemed to me. Not the giant dour slug part -- but the always watching you part. God was somewhere up above looking down, and I could never escape His all-seeing eye. 20 years later, reading Psalm 139 again, I am reminded of the Always-Watching-You-Wazowski kind of God. Over and over again the writer of this psalm says, in awe and consternation: "There is Nowhere that God is Not." God is Present in the Time Before Time, in the Self Before Self, in the Thought before Thought, the hands before our hands. Before there is an I, there is I AM, calling us by the name we don't even have yet, knitting together our inmost parts, forming us in the depths of the earth. God uncovers every secret, sees every step before it is taken, casts a web that is both snare and safety net. For 18 verses we are bound by God, hemmed in before and behind. His hand is upon us; we are searched out and known. From the realm of the dead to the farthest limits of the sea, there is nowhere to flee from God's presence; every turn of the maze leads back to God. We try to fathom a way out and we cannot, try to discern the parameters of God's reach and thoughts and influence and we cannot because there are no parameters. There is no outside of God; it is all inside. We come to the end, as far as we can imagine, and we are still with God. The title of these verses in the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible is "The Inescapable God." And throughout it there is both exhaustion and relief, both praise and almost exasperation. There seems to be an underlying

ambivalence -- a question about whether or not the inescapable God is always a good thing.

And then, all at once, that ambivalence explodes in a sudden, violent outburst with a shocking lack of political correctness. It is not peaceful. It is a dramatic and abrupt spasm of wrath and perfect hatred, and is totally, at least for me, off-putting.

And maybe that's exactly the point. Maybe this psalm is being true to the human experience, true to the push-pull of seeking the Sacred, the longing to feel that there *is* nowhere we can go where we are not accompanied by the Holy Presence...but that longing is answered by the desire for some space, some breathing room to be free of that Presence Who will not, can not leave us alone. The psalmist tries to find the place where God is not, and then, I think he maybe truthfully reflects what happens when we are cornered by something we can't escape: at some point we will expose what we would rather hide. Like the violent emotional storms that can consume us without warning, the dark thoughts that can overtake us. If there is no where and no time that is beyond the reach of God's gaze, the inner watcher is bound to see both the ugliness and the beauty, the holy and the horror.

And I can really relate. I too have chafed under the constant watch of The Always Watching You Wazowski kind of God, have wanted to escape the endless scrutiny that wouldn't let be, unobserved. I too have careened from a sense of unbreakable connection to the Sacred in one moment to rabid irritation, without warning, in the next. I too have felt at home in the corner of the Universe that Holds me, only to come upon some evidence of humanity's failing and fouling and become incensed -- "What is WRONG with people??!???" I will think, or squawk indignantly, which will prompt a quick scroll through my list of *what, exactly* is wrong with people, before I settle back down -- where was I? oh yes, that's right. God. Inescapable. Holy Presence. Everywhere. In everything and everyone.

The God Who Is Always There *would* also be there when the enemies -- wherever they reside -- rise up to overtake us. The Presence that Lives in

and through all things *would* also be present in and to all those thoughts and feelings that we can't hide from ourselves: the twisting and twisted hate, the fear, the jealousy, the ways we feel not good enough to be seen by God. The psalmist prays, Oh God Whose Gaze I cannot escape, You Who search me out and find me, find also my enemies, and destroy them. and what torment it is to stand in the Light of God's gaze, to turn toward that piercing searchlight from which nothing can hide, and meet the enemy and see that he is us, wicked and bloodthirsty, speaking maliciously against our own precious wavering inner light, battling it out there in the darkness.

Sometimes it *can* feel as if our own souls are houses divided, and it's so hard to know what to do with all the mucky parts, the basement always flooding and blooming black mold, the monsters who lurk behind the furnace. Inside our own souls and inside the soul of the human race, it's a mess, the foundation is cracked, the attic is leaking, and it's all somebody's fault, surely: the regulatory agencies, maybe, or the corrupt politicians, the lazy masses or the greedy rich, the terrorists, the people not like us. Do we pray like the psalmist for God to kill the wicked? To send out a search and destroy mission to rid ourselves and the race of these demons? When anger erupts, when passions are inflamed, when patience wears thin, when we overgeneralize and underlove, we want deliverance, redemption, safe haven and our enemies smited, and we want it all now.

On the other hand, what if we can turn the lens around? What if rather than watching and waiting and standing ready at our command to sear and smite, God is gazing patiently, and faithfully, and waiting for us to turn our gaze toward Him? What if He's abiding, standing by, hoping that when She says she's always watching us, that we'll someday surprise ourselves and answer "We're always watching You, too," and mean that we're looking, really looking, for the Inescapable Holy, even when we feel overtaken by the monsters, those wicked enemies we are begging for God to kill, once and for all.

Psalm 139 is often read without the part that comes out of left field, but I think that part is being really truthful. I think the psalmist, like Jean Lohmann, with whose poem we opened our worship, labors to understand

how to *praise what comes*. Because when the malicious and the bloodthirsty overtake us, it is very hard to love, as Jesus commands, as if it is very simple and straightforward. When the wicked lifts itself up against the good, it is very hard to catch a glimpse of the holy that a moment before was as close as our inmost parts, as deep as the land of the dead, and as far as the farthest reaches of the sea. The Psalmist asks: where are you God when the enemies rise up? Are you what would kill them? Are you with my wrath and loathing? The Psalmist asks these questions and doesn't learn the answers. Exhausted, he comes back to where he started. And so do we. To God -- everywhere, inescapable holy mystery, always watching.

We try to be always watching too. We try to locate the true in the presence of terror, the holy in the horror. We too try to praise a world that is both fearfully and wonderfully made.

¹⁶Your 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. ¹⁷How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! ¹⁸I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.