

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Inescapable God”

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“Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?” (Ps. 139:7)

“Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!” Dr. Martin Luther King said those words in 1963 in front of the Lincoln Memorial. That was also the message in the frenzied eyes of many of those who were being dropped off at the lakeshore dorms in Madison in 1983. I was one of them. We were free and we were done. We were done with the small towns from which we came, and narrow high schools from which we graduated. We were mostly done with our parents, except for their money. And we were mostly done with God and especially his church. God could come along for the ride if he wanted, so long as he knew his place. But as for his church, we were done.

I walked into my dorm room for the first time and my roommate wasn't there. His stuff was, including an ROTC uniform hanging on his closet door. And a hand grenade, on his desk, with the pin still in it! Later, after the niceties, I asked him about it: “That, that thing on your desk . . . what's that about?” “Oh that? That's a hand grenade” he said, rather nonchalantly. “Is it live?” I asked. “You know, I'm not really sure” he said. “Why don't you pull the pin and let's find out.” I did some dumb things in college; that wasn't one of them.

Most of the dumb things I did had something to do with the marching band. My older brothers, Andy and Paul also enlisted. They were trumpets, I was low brass. We were usually on different parts of the field but once we converged and it didn't go well. The director, Mike Leckrone, he doesn't walk anywhere. He stomps. And his voice as like a circular saw going through aluminum siding. Well the circular saw stomps over to where the Groth boys are and says, “I don't know which Groth I'm hollering at but I'm hollering at one of them.” (Just for the record it was brother Andy.)

The band was fun and memorable and miserable and exciting all wrapped up in one. I wore the uniform and marched in synch but never really felt like an insider. And in some ways, that's how the whole freshman year was. Classes were huge. I didn't know a soul. Crowded loneliness.

Dad told me about Calvary Lutheran chapel. He really wanted me to go there. In the beginning I did, mostly because I knew he'd be asking about it. But my heart wasn't in it, because I was “free at last.” So I started skipping and that's when I received a note from Jeanette Riegert. She was/is everybody's grandmother at Calvary, and her little note with shaky penmanship landed in my brass mail box at Bradley Hall. “Where have you been? I'm worried about you” it said. It was no booming voice from heaven, no burning bush, just a note with shaky penmanship . . . and it was enough.

I went back to Calvary, and to my surprise, it became a lifeline, a lifeline of faith, a life

line of good Christian friends. We didn't wear the same uniform or march in synch or slam a beer whenever the whistle blew. We were much closer than that. Some from Calvary remain friends today. One of them is my wife.

As freshmen moving into the lake shore dorms, we thought we were finally free of the old constraints, free to launch our new lives dedicated to the pursuit of happiness. But that's not freedom at all. That's just another kind of slavery. We thought we were mostly done with God and his church. What we did not know was that God and his church were not done with us!

Ps. 139, "Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?" This psalm reveals a startling truth: we have a God who pursues us. We have a God who tracks us down. We usually think of God being far removed from us, up there in splendid heavenly isolation. He sits in a remote corner of heaven, waiting for us to seek and pursue and find him. And indeed, there are a lot of people running around talking about when they found God. But that's not how it works. It may feel like it is, but it is not. If anything, we are the ones who hide from him, and he's always the one who finds us. He takes the initiative and tracks us down. One poet even gave God a new name: "The Hound of Heaven." She wasn't being irreverent; she was rejoicing that God gives chase, even as we flee from Him.

That theme appears throughout the Bible. Right from the beginning, Adam and Eve tried to hide "themselves from the presence of the Lord among the trees of the garden". But God will have none of it. God takes the initiative, the initiative Adam couldn't take and graciously flushes them out. "Adam, where art thou?" I chuckle inside when I read that. He knew exactly where Adam was. Adam was a poor, miserable, lost and condemned creature, but God was not going to let Adam stay that way. He was going to force the relationship forward.

He is the God of pursuit. Remember how God ran Jonah down? To avoid God's call, Jonah was going to flee all the way to Tarshish, what he considered the far side of the world. But God pursued Jonah, all the way to the deepest, darkest depths of the sea.

Contrary to popular assumption, God is not passive. In Luke, Jesus talks about the Good Shepherd who leaves the 99 in order to go find that one who is lost. The shepherd finds the lost sheep, not the other way around. Jesus tells the story of an old woman who loses one of her ten coins. She lights a lamp and turns her house upside down and inside out and does not stop looking until she finds her coin. That coin is you and me. Dead in our trespasses and sin, we are no more able to find God than a coin is able to find its owner.

In Revelation, Jesus says "I stand at the door and knock." He will not break the door down and never come back. Periodically, he be knocking again. Writer Anne Lamott speaks of her conversion as one day standing outside a little church, looking in, listening to the singing, and finally stepping through the door and acknowledging that God all along had been pushing, nudging, prodding. She wrote, "I took a long breath and said out loud, "All right, you can come in now. I quit." Actually, she punctuated it with an earthy phrase that is not "pulpit friendly."

We do not pursue God mostly because, as lowly sinners, we don't want to have anything to do with a holy, righteous God. Remember Peter, and the miraculous catch of fish? After a long night without so much as a nibble, Jesus comes along and tells Peter to put out into deeper water and let his nets down there. Peter knows it isn't going to work but he dutifully obliges because its Jesus. He lets the net down and so many fish swim into it that it begins to become undone under the stress and the weight. That's when it dawns on Peter: he's a sinner in the

presence of a holy and righteous God. He's chaff that's too close to the sun. "Stay away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man." Graciously, Jesus ignores that request. He does not stay away. He does not abandon Peter, but stays with him through thick and thin . . . also when Peter shamefully denies even knowing Jesus. Still, Jesus does not give up on Peter. You recall after the resurrection, the first person Jesus wants to see is Peter – not to scold or punish, but to forgive and restore.

You begin to think if Jesus does not give up on Adam, or Jonah, or Peter, or the rest of them, maybe he won't give up on me.

And so, just on the outside chance that one or more of you is actually trying to hold God at arm's length, please reconsider this ancient psalm written thousands of years ago: "Where can I go from your spirit?" On the outside chance you are thinking of doing the Jonah thing and fleeing from God, from his calling, his laws, his responsibilities, consider again the words of this psalm, "Where can I flee from your presence?"

On the outside chance that your life is full, with tight schedules and the bosses' expectations, with the kids homework and piano and basketball practice . . . on the outside chance you are so distracted that you can hardly even think about God let alone pray to him or study his Word, you might find this ancient psalm to be intriguing because he thinks about you. He has not forgotten you. "You know when I sit down and when I rise, you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely."

Or if you're contemplating a move, perhaps to another part of the country . . . or just across town into assisted living then hear this, "if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me." Or the next time you fly, and you feel the thrust of those powerful engines and you get up to cruising altitude and you know it's silly but you can't help but think about 9/11 and Al Queda and all that. It might help to think also of this psalm: "If I ascend to the heavens, you are there. . . If I rise on the wings of the dawn . . . even there your right hand will hold me fast."

And if your life can only be described as hellish: your relationships unfulfilling, your work meaningless – then please know you are not alone. "If I make my bed in the depths, in Sheol, you are there."

Or if you're pregnant . . . and worried: "You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together. . . Your eyes saw my unformed body . . . I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (v. 13ff).

And if you find yourself thinking a lot about death, this psalm also has something for you. "If I say, 'Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me, even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. . . All the days ordained for me were written in *your* book before one of them came to be.'"

There is no where you can go that is beyond his reach. You cannot fall so far down that God cannot reach out and grasp you with his strong and saving hand. God pursues relentlessly, all the way to the cross, in fact, where out of love he died for you, so that you can hide from those three bullies: sin and death and the devil. You can really hide from them now, not behind

some pathetic bushes, but behind him, Jesus.. You can hide behind him because you are baptized. You belong to Jesus. He will not forget it.

Remember the book, *Runaway Bunny*? “Once there was a little bunny, who wanted to run away. So he said to his mother, ‘I am running away.’ ‘If you run away,’ said his mother, ‘I will run after you, for you are *my* little bunny.’ ‘If you run after me,’ said the little bunny, ‘I will become a fish in a trout stream and I will swim away from you.’ ‘If you become a fish in a trout stream,’ said his mother, ‘I will become a fisherman and I will fish for you.’ ‘If you become a fisherman,’ said the little bunny, ‘I will become a rock on the mountain high above you.’ ‘If you become a rock on the mountain’ said his mother ‘I will become a mountain climber and I will climb to where you are.’ ‘I will become a bird [then] and fly away from you.’ ‘If you become a bird and fly away from me,’ said his mother, ‘I will be a tree that you come home to.’” (By Margaret Wise Brown).

“Where can I go from Your Spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence?” Amen.