

Devotions – November 29 – December 5, 2020
By Susan Anderson
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Sunday, November 29, 2020

Text: Psalm 104:24-29

How many are your works, O Lord!

**In wisdom you made them all:
the earth is full of your creatures.**

**There is the sea, vast and spacious,
teeming with creatures beyond number—
living things both large and small.**

**There the ships go to and fro,
and the leviathan, which you formed to frolic there.**

How long can a pelican soar on a wind current without moving her wings? How long can a clump of sea oats remain rooted in the breeze? How long will the ocean swells break on the sand?

God is like the waves, coming to us, one after another. Jesus is like the sea oats, keeping us grounded and secure. The Holy Spirit is like the wind, bearing us up on the currents of life. All this is interminable, eternal, all ours for the asking.

Let us pray: *Thank you, Great Three in One, for the serenity your created world offers us. Amen.*



Monday, November 30, 2020

Text: Psalm 139:1-4

**O Lord, you have searched me
and you know me.**

**You know when I sit 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, O Lord.**

Psalm 139 tells us about God's complete knowledge of us and constant presence with us. It begins, "O Lord,...", asking God to listen, like we begin "Our Father in heaven..." or "Gracious Spirit, heed our pleading...", asking God to hear what we have to say (WOV 687). How do we approach God - as we do family, friends, work associates? Or is there something different about talking to God?

Our relationships with our mortal companions are ones of equality. Not so with God! Knowledge is power. And this psalm emphasizes how fully God knows us. "You have searched me and you know me...when I sit down and when I rise." "Before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely, O Lord."

There are parts of ourselves we know and parts we don't, our blind spots. But God sees EVERYTHING about us; God knows all the nooks and crannies of our soul. There is nothing hidden from God. So we do not approach God as an equal; rather we come to God humbly, coming to One who knows all our secrets. And even knowing ALL, still desires to be with us.

Let us pray: *Gracious and loving God, thank you, that knowing the good, the bad, and the ugly about us, you still desire a relationship with us, want to be with us, and fully accept us without reservation. Amen.*



Tuesday, December 1, 2020

Text: Psalm 139:7-10

Where can I go from your Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to heaven, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

**If I rise on the wings of dawn, or settle on the far side
of the sea,**

your hand is there to guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

There is no escape from God. Such surveillance can be intrusive like all those annoying pop up ads on computers, phones, and streaming devices. Constant watching can feel like being in prison, guards looking for a way to find fault and punish. Or we can carry around in our heads the criticisms we heard in our growing years, repeating them almost unconsciously to ourselves. We may feel like running away like Adam and Eve in the garden, fearful of God.

People at the time the Psalm was written did not know that the earth was round, so the far side of the sea was a place of the unknown. And the sea itself was viewed as a powerful instrument of

the uncertain, calm and easy at one moment, a raging torrent at another, like today's lashing hurricanes with unpredictable paths. Societal powers can all make us afraid: as Jews in Nazi Germany, black and brown people in encounters with authorities, or asylum seekers fleeing drug lords, extortion, death threats, as they experience being watched.

The Psalmist has a more trusting view of constant presence and observation. God is the Watcher and Constant Presence, there to reassure us as Jesus did for the frightened disciples in a Galilean sea squall, saying, "Take heart; it is I; do not be afraid" (Matthew 14:27b). God is there to reassure us as the angel said to Mary, who shortly will be an unwed teenage mother, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God" (Luke 1:30). God is there to reassure us as Jesus, knowing death was imminent, reassured his disciples, "I will not leave you orphaned" (John 14:18).

Whatever storm is part of our life, whatever frightening power we face, whatever loss comes to us, whatever unknown looms, God is with us to help us, guide us, comfort us, hold us close in love. From waking in the morning, "rising on the wings of dawn," to closing our eyes at night, "settling on the far side of the sea" where the sun sets, God's reassuring presence travels with us each day of our lives, as the psalmist so poetically describes.

Let us pray: Dear Lord, how can we thank you for the solace, comfort, courage, hope, and perseverance you provide for us whenever we need it. Unlike our earthly companions who, being human, disappoint, you alone know us completely, accept us fully, and are ever present with us. From morning until night, you are there for us, always ready to embrace us, love us, sustain us. Amen.



Wednesday, December 2, 2020

Text: Ephesians 3:18-21

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

My son and his wife, Helen, have two 17-year old seniors and a 9th grader. They are active fundamentalist Christians, attending church, Bible studies, and educational groups with their children. Although we experience our faith differently, we are all people of faith.

When my husband, a retired Pastor, was diagnosed with oral cancer, Helen asked what she could do to be supportive. Having seen many inspirational verses tacked on mirrors, walls, and plaques in their house by her hand, I asked her to send us some encouraging words occasionally.

She had the family sit down together, and each of the five of them wrote five notes they would send to us during chemotherapy and radiation treatments.

This note came from one of the 17-year old's:

*Dear Grandma and Grandpa,
I understand that Grandpa might be in a great deal of pain and that I could never understand what it must feel like. I've been praying for healing for his mouth and body and for strength for his spirit! I love you Grandpa and Grandma and I really want Grandpa to feel better.*

At the moment, I am reading through the Book of James. Chapter 2 talks a lot about "faith in action". I believe that one who keep their faith through something as painful and unfair as what Grandpa is going through, has proven their faith even when tested. I am so proud of you Grandpa! and I fully believe that the Lord is too!

—from Amanuel

Although we come to faith from different perspectives, we have been deeply touched by their "faith in action" and by the Holy Spirit working through them to "accomplish far more than [we asked for or imagined]. We had no way to know how much love and support we would receive when we asked for help. God is awesome!

Let us pray: *Thank you God, for parents who raise their children to be faithful Christians, for church teachers, educators, and pastors who work with young people of all ages nourishing faith and for Synod Staff that supports us all in growing into Christ-like beings. Amen.*



Thursday, December 3, 2020

Text: James 3:9-11

With the [tongue] we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

After our 17-year old grandson, Amanuel, told me he had been reading the book of James, and based in part on that, sent us words of encouragement during my husband's cancer treatment, I decided to read James. James talks about faith in action, telling us how to be godly in our everyday lives, and it's only five short chapters! Imagine reading much of what we need to know about following Jesus in five pages! You go, James!

Given how Amanuel spoke to us and the many ways we speak to one another through Facebook, Instagram, email, Twitter, USPS, and conversations with family and friends, I was struck by the possibilities of speech in the passage above. However we communicate, our words matter, make a difference in our relationships, and have power, as in the following story:

A Portland high school student, Daria Allen, saw the footage of George Floyd's death, heard about protests in Portland, and decided to check them out. As her summer job at the zoo evaporated due to Covid-19, she became a regular at the demonstrations. She participated because she was anxious about the police coming to her home and shooting her grandmother, about having children, then seeing one of them die in a traffic stop, and because "I am just a Black girl trying to live." In response to her postings on a neighborhood Facebook group, she received the most ugly, vulgar comment. "What a 16-year-old learned in three months of Portland protests". (September 3, 2020, New York Times)

Let us pray: Dear Lord, help us to use our tongue, our mouths, our words to thank, praise, and bless you; to respect all whom you have created, to encourage those who are discouraged, to comfort the broken hearted, to sustain the weary, to offer hope to the dejected. Thank you for the working of the Holy Spirit through us to use our tongues to put our faith in action and for forgiving us when we are silent. Amen.



Friday, December 4, 2020

Text: Proverbs 16:4

Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweetest to the soul and healing to the bones.

Text: Matthew 15:18

...the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart; these make [us] unclean.

A high schooler shows her father a straight A report card. He replies, "I've never seen such a boring report card; all the letters are the same."

Having practiced as a small-town lawyer for 20 years, a man tells his parents that he feels a call to ministry. His mother responds, "I always wanted you to be a corporate lawyer."

A woman tells a friend that she doesn't see any purpose to her life; that she feels like a dead tree. Her friend, after being quiet for a few minutes, says, "A dead tree provides a home for woodpeckers, owls, and chickadees."

Or consider the words of great leaders in difficult times:

Lincoln's eulogy at the dedication of the Gettysburg Cemetery:

"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and dedicated, can long endure. "

Hear Roosevelt's comments in his 1933 inaugural speech during The Great Depression: *"We have nothing to fear but fear itself."*

Let us pray: *Dear Lord, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not any from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with your free spirit." (ELW #186) Amen.*

May our words reflect the Holy Spirit working in our hearts so we can all speak Holy Words. Amen.



Saturday, December 5, 2020

Text: Romans 12:9-10

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good: love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.

Text: Ephesians 3:18-19

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

This past week's devotions have focused on God's presence around and in us, God's eternal companionship with us, the words we use talking to and about one another, and God's power to work through us. How can we allow God to direct our lives? How is it possible to trust God's presence? How is it possible for our individual, corporate, and public discourse to be civil, respectful, kind, sensitive, and even loving?

Only by the grace of God. As Americans, we value independence and freedom. As followers of Christ, we are called to use our independence to separate ourselves from the culture around us and to use our freedom to follow in Jesus's footsteps.

When we love others, speak respectfully to and about one another, and are kind, that does not mean we will be short-changed. God's love knows no limits, so we will not be loved less because we honor others. Nor does loving one another in mutual affection mean deprecating ourselves, or denial of ourselves at the expense of self-fulfillment. "It means reminding ourselves of the answer to this question: What is myself worth? The most important answer is: the death of God's Son. That is what we are worth to God. and that changes everything." (Gerald Anderson, Sermon September 6, 2020).

When we know deep within our souls with absolute certainty that we are God's beloved, then can we set ourselves aside as Christ did saying, "...not my will but Thine be done." Self-denial creates a vacuum, a void, an emptiness that God fills up with "love so broad, so high, so deep", that love for all others is genuine. The love comes from God, passes through us, and extends to others, without limits, without cost... to us.

Let us pray:

"Fill-a-me up, come-a-Holy Spirit, fill-a-me up to the top of my soul.

Fill-a-me-up, come Holy Spirit,

Fill-a-me-up now and take control." Amen.

- ("Fill-a-me up," by Pepper Choplin. Lorenz Publishing Company, 2002.)

