

## **“Hide and Seek” based on Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24**

**Delivered by Rev. Carol Ann Hoard on Sunday, July 30, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

When Lavery, my oldest son, was little, he loved to play the game Hide and Seek. You all have played it before. I would turn my head as he ran off (loudly) to find a great hiding spot. As with most small children, his hiding spot was fairly predictable, and he would not be very hidden at all. But I played the game anyway. I would look all over the room, saying, “Where’s Lavery? I just wonder where he could be!” I would walk all around, asking the same question, while knowing full well exactly where he was hiding.

After some time, Lavery would shout from his hiding place, “Here I am!” He would jump out from his hiding spot. We would run together for a big hug and then the game would start all over again. When Lavery would hide behind the sofa or in his closet, or even under his bed, I would always know where he was hidden. But he loved the act of being found. The whole premise of the game presumes that he wanted to be found. He wanted to be seen.

Isn’t that the way it is with all of us? We all want to be seen. We want to be found. We all want to be known. And we all want to be loved for who we are. Our desire to be loved is integrated with our desire to be known. If someone loves our image but doesn’t really know us, deep inside we know they don’t really love us, and we wonder if they would really love us if they really knew us.

Several weeks ago, Don Bridges came over to my house and Joel was getting him all set up to go on the Wilderness Trail with me and the youth. As we were packing, Joel was going over all the tools he was going to need and I looked at him, and said, “Don, after we spend this week together, you’re going to love me more or you’re not going to be able to stand me at all.” He looked at me and said, “Carol Ann, I already love you and I don’t think I could love you any more.” Oh, lawd, just wait.

So, we walked together, hiked together, ate together out of the same little pot all week long. We told stories. The youth would have trouble and he would hang back and encourage them, while I tried to make it up the hill myself. Don and I would share stories. He talked. I would listen. I talked. He would listen.

Now, I would say that now Don knows me personally even more, and I would venture to say he loves me more now, or maybe he might not. I would almost say that the fact that he knows me better would make him say he loves me more. And when you go on a trip like that, you get to know people in a way you don’t get to know them by seeing each other for an hour on Sunday.

The Psalmist who we say is David - reminds us in today’s passage that we have exactly that. We have a loving God who knows us intimately and loves us unconditionally. God really sees us. To love someone personally takes knowing them personally.

David writes that the Lord has searched him and knows him. The Lord knows everything we do. Even the smallest thing can’t escape God’s notice.

On one hand, we all have a deep desire to be known and loved, but on the other hand, we fear being looked at too closely. We fear being exposed. We want some things about us to remain unknown.

I think it's with that in mind that David asks the question, "Where can I go to escape God's presence?" If I wanted to hide from God, where would I go? The answer is nowhere. The Psalmist reminds us that there is nowhere we can go that will take us away from God's presence, but also, we shouldn't want to be away from the presence of God. We have nothing to fear knowing God is close.

Last week, Tabatha and I were sharing a room at Passport Camp and it was going to be the same way – She was either going to love me more or not be able to stand me. Tabatha got to see my room after an hour of moving in and she said she was moving Joel to the top of her prayer list.

The first night we go to bed and this is a college dorm. Tabatha got in there first and she got the bed closest to the ground. I got the bed that was higher up. It wasn't a bunk bed, but it was higher off the ground with a dresser underneath. She cuts the light off and I had moved a chair next to the bed so I could step up into the bed. I wake up at about 4 am to go to the bathroom and when I did, every light in the room came on and I screamed. Tabatha jumped up and screamed. I said I didn't know what happened. It was a hall bath, so I had to walk a mile down the hall to go to the bathroom.

On the next day, I said, "Ok Carol Ann, don't drink as much water so you don't have to get up and go to the bathroom." I told Tabatha we were really going to cut the lights off and so it was a whole thing with a master switch and then little switches with 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and so we turned them all off. I'm sleeping and my leg starts to cramp because I didn't have enough water. So, I put my leg up in the air to stretch it and all of a sudden, the lights came on. I screamed again. Tabatha jumped up.

I asked, "What is it with these lights? I can't even stretch. I just want to sleep and not have them come on." So, the next night Tabatha said she was going to take care of the lights. She cuts the lights off, and I had drank more water to avoid leg cramps, and I get up at 3 a.m. to make the mile trek down to the bathroom, and as soon as I sat up the lights came on. She said, "I give up. We're being watched." I don't know what kind of fancy dorm we were staying in, but the lights would come on. We could not get away from the light.

This is just like the Psalmist reminds us that nothing about us is hidden from God. We cannot get away from God. As long as humans have walked this earth, they have longed to be known and to be reminded that God loves them. And we live in a culture in which it's easy to be critical of ourselves. It's easy to think we are lacking some key component to life. It's easy to believe that we are less than or inadequate or unlovable.

Wednesday night, Will and I went to see the Barbie movie. In the movie, there is "Perfect Barbie," the normal Barbie. Perfect Barbie was comparing herself to the other Barbie's, the astronaut, surgeon, president, scientist and she felt like she was not good enough. If Barbie feels that way, you know some of us feel that way at times, that we are not good enough.

God knows the best parts of us, and God knows the things that are hard for us. So, who are we to believe that God can't love all the parts of us? The Psalmist knew that being seen and known by God is the core truth of our existence. God has been aware to every part of what has created you and me. God has been present for each shift that is still making you who you are intended to be.

What trap do you find yourself in? Out of your own self-rejection, do you find yourself drawn toward being successful? Do you need to be well thought of among your peers and friends? Is it

important to you to feel powerful? Or is there some other trap that compels you to find solace in something other than simply resting in knowing you are a beloved child of God?

The Psalmist gives us an example what it is to freely submit to God's searching. "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me and lead me in the way everlasting." We too can long for God to see us- not because we think we are blameless or because we have everything figured out. Rather, this is exactly because we know we love a God who will love us unconditionally.

Being seen by God is not an excuse for bad behavior. It's not a reason to continue in sin. But it is a comfort. It's a comfort that we do not have to prove ourselves to anyone. It's a relief that we need not worry about pleasing the world. Instead, the knowledge that God knows and loves us should inspire us to more fully live out who God created us to be. Knowing that God is with us, we should consider our actions and whether we would do them if God was physically standing next to us?

From Adam and Eve, to Jonah and Peter, to me – and everything in between, we have a long history from trying to hide from God. As God's people, we should not look for ways to "go," "flee or hide" from God. We should look for ways to draw near to God. Even knowing our sin, God still loves us. In order to know what God sees in us, it's important for us to be honest about what we see in ourselves. What makes you uniquely you? What makes you a special child of God? What does God know about you that might be hard to admit- even to yourself?

In Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, you'll remember that Hester Prynne had to wear an A pasted on her dress for others to know the sin she has committed. She must wear that A as a warning to everyone else. She wears it so that others can mock her, feeling superior. She doesn't wear it as a badge of vulnerability and honesty, but of punishment and judgment. She doesn't get to claim her life for herself. She is not seen for who she truly is. That was decided for her. But that's not how God is. God invites us to vulnerability and honesty about who we are, not so that we can live in shame or something you struggle with or something you believe is over looked by others in you, but so that we might live boldly and confidently as children of God.

You know me. I am tempted to invite you to write down your own letter on a sticky note to paste on your shirt - not as a mark of sin or shame, but as a way that we can see you and that you can feel seen. I'm obviously not going to make you do that. But I am going to invite you to think about it. What word would you use to describe something you feel particularly insecure about? What phrase would tell others about you in a way that is vulnerable and honest. What do you wish people could see and know about you?

Even if you're not planning on wearing your letter anytime soon, I want you to remember that God knows. Nothing is hidden from God. Nothing is too much for God. Nothing turns God's face away from you. It's difficult to share the hard parts of ourselves. Vulnerability is scary. We fear rejection, judgment, or even abandonment. But God promises to never leave us or forsake us. And so, we must also make those promises to one another.

It may be tempting to go through a struggle in your life alone. You may not want to tell the whole church that you have cancer. Or that you suffer from addiction. Or that you are hurting from a broken relationship. But I can tell you this. You do not have to walk this life alone. You may not want to tell the whole church, but you may tell a trusted friend, or your Sunday School class.

While our struggles may have different names, the roots of them have been the same since humanity began. People have been in pain. People have suffered. People have felt lost. And yet, when we confess our specific types of struggles, it only helps others to know us better. It helps others to feel more confident sharing their stories. It gives us a way to know how to more diligently pray and actively care for those who are hurting.

But maybe you're not struggling or suffering. Maybe the word you would write on your nametag is simply something you don't love about yourself. Perhaps, it's an aspect of your outward appearance, an unpopular opinion, or a personality trait that doesn't seem to fit in. God sees and knows that part of you as well. It's hard to push aside the voices of this world that tell us we are not good enough, or beautiful enough, or accomplished enough. It's an easy trap to fall into that we must be the ideal version of ourselves, instead of the authentic version of ourselves.

But friends, God only calls us to be who God made us to be. God invites us to be fully human while fully seeking the divine. It is NOT God's voice telling you that you are not enough. It is NOT God's voice telling you that you need to be thinner or less gray. It is NOT God's voice telling you that you don't matter or you have nothing to contribute. It is NOT God's voice telling you that you are nothing more than the trauma you've experienced.

God's voice is saying, "I know who you are. You are my beloved. I see what you look like and you are beautiful. I hear what you say and you are valuable. I feel what makes you ache and you are whole. I see you." And if we to strive to be more like God, then we must also receive the confessions and vulnerability of others with that same level of compassion and mercy that God offers us.

Theologian Thomas Merton said, "The beginning of love is to let those we love be perfectly themselves, and not to twist them to fit our own image. Otherwise, we love only the reflection of ourselves we find in them."

We are called to love others as they are, fully and authentically themselves. We must not bring them into our folds and our hearts only with the hopes of changing them to be more like us. This is how we are called to love. This is how we are called to love God and to love others. There are people in our lives longing for us to find them and invite them in. They want to be seen. They want to know that they are loved. They want to feel embraced. They want to have a home. Steve has been so good with the youth group in helping to feel loved. One of the kids said they see God at work in Steve.

We can show God's love and God at work by being this way with others. Usually, those folks are hidden in plain sight. It could be someone sitting beside you today. It could be you. This is the way in which God loves us and how we reflect God's image to others. And so, what if we didn't hide from God or from each other, but we said, "Here I am!"? Here I am to be seen! Here I am to see you! Here we are to receive the love of God and to share that with each other!"

Are you playing hide and seek with God? Are you hiding out of shame, fear or indifference, but with a part of your heart tugging at you knowing that you want to be found, that you want to be seen and known? There is no place we can hide from God. There is no place where God cannot find us.

I challenge you to see others. I challenge you to see yourself. I challenge you to be seen. And I challenge you to be loved by a God who has searched you, knows you, and who will lead you to the way everlasting because God sees you, knows you and loves you. Amen.