



"The Eye of God"
Scripture – Psalm 139:1-18
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, March 14, 2021

Around the year 1500, Hieronymus Bosch completed his painting known as "The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things." The seven deadly sins – pride, greed, wrath, envy and so on, are depicted in scenes that form a circle. At the center of the circle is the all-seeing eye of God with Christ as the pupil. The painting communicates the Medieval Church's warning: Beware. God sees everything. No sin goes unnoticed. So, sinners, clean up your act before it's too late!

While you might not have seen this painting, no doubt you have seen depictions of the eye of God. In fact, many of us carry one around with us. Look on the back of a one-dollar bill and you will see a triangle with the eye of God. All you young people who only carry plastic and are unfamiliar with cash, ask one of us old fogeys to show you what a bill looks like. Better yet, just google it.

I don't remember when I first recognized this, but all of us have become increasingly aware of the *cyber version* of God's eye. You may have received in the mail a ticket for speeding or running a red light. A camouflaged camera caught you in the act and the photo was accurate enough to clearly display your license plate. Of course, we are not only on camera when we are on the roads, but also in stores, museums, restaurants, and walking down the sidewalk. Even in church!

I remember the moment when the extent of the far-reaching cyber eye was driven home to me. I was standing on our patio, just outside of our kitchen. As I was pulling the cover off of our grill I noticed that it had taken a beating over the winter. I said to Camilla, who was standing in the kitchen, "Looks like we need to get a new grill cover."

Over the next week, every time I got on the internet, an ad would pop up for grill covers. The listening ears of Alexa had tipped off the vendors.

Whether the secular version or the religious one, many have a sense that an unseen presence is watching our every move. Three thousand years ago, a writer expressed this feeling in what became the 139th Psalm.

He wrote: O 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, O LORD, you know it completely. (vs. 1-4)

Tom Long visited a pastor friend at his church. They chatted for a while, and then the pastor gave Long a tour of his building. "He showed him the well-equipped church school classrooms, the nicely appointed kitchen and fellowship hall, the beautiful and reverent sanctuary. For the *coup de gras*, he escorted Long to the front lawn to survey the whole edifice. It was an impressive, neo-gothic gem, but as Long's eye climbed the prominent tower that soared toward the heavens, he noticed something odd. At the top of the tower on all four sides, there were openings, apparently designed to accommodate stained-glass windows, but all four openings were boarded over. Nothing would lead you to think that this congregation had run out of money before finishing the tower, and it was far too high for vandals to throw rocks and break the windows. So, Long asked, 'What happened up there?'"

The pastor replied, "The people in town asked us to do that." Long had a quizzical look, so the pastor continued. "There used to be stained-glass windows in those openings. They were depictions of the Eye of God, like on the back of the dollar bill. The windows were illuminated at night, and you could see them all over town. You could see them from the mall, the high school, everywhere. A lot of people complained. They told us that they believed in God, but they didn't want God watching them all the time."¹

I suspect this is how many people hear this Psalm. God's eye is on you like a laser. God watches you wherever you are and observes everything you do. And going Alexa one better, God not only hears what you say, but even discerns what you are thinking.

Like Bosch's medieval painting, the Psalm can appear harsh and threatening. Yet, that was never the intent. The psalmist does not imagine God to be a stern judge cataloguing our every misstep. Rather, God is like a loving mother or father looking out for their child. God knows us thoroughly, yet still loves us thoroughly.

The psalmist says, "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." This God who is present everywhere and cannot be given the slip, this God who sees it all and doesn't miss a thing, pursues us. Pursues us not to chastise or reprimand, but to guide and comfort. The psalmist says, "If I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast."

Psychologist, Haim Ginott, "tells the story of a ten-year-old boy named Andy who asked his father, 'What is the number of abandoned children in Harlem?' Andy's father, an attorney, was pleased that his son was interested in social issues, and gave his son a talk on the topic, then looked up the number. Andy had another question. What is the number of abandoned children in New York City? His father smiled and looked it up. What is the number of abandoned children in the United States? In Europe? In the world? Finally, it dawned on Andy's father that his son's concern was not a social one, but a personal one. Andy's questions stemmed not so much from sympathy for abandoned children as from fear of being abandoned. He was looking not for a figure representing the number of deserted children, but for reassurance that he would not be deserted. So his father said, "You're worried that your parents may someday abandon you the way some parents abandon their children. Let me reassure you that we will never desert you. And if this ever bothers you again, please tell me so that I can help you stop worrying."²

The overall sense of this psalm is that its writer is wonderstruck. He realizes that the more he attempts to grasp the essence of God, the more he realizes the ridiculous nature of his endeavor. Like throwing darts attempting

to hit a moving bull's eye, humans toss out words to name God, but all fall woefully short of their target. Rather than using a stiff philosophical term like omniscience to describe God as all-knowing, the psalmist is far more poetic. He speaks of God's wisdom and knowledge by saying, "How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them—they are more than the sand."

Surely, we would do well to hold our labels for God loosely, and assume that the Creator of the Cosmos chuckles when we imagine our definitions to be precise.

And what about these verses of the Psalm? "Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me (vs. 4 & 5). We could hear these words as oppressive and imprisoning. However, the next verse clarifies what the psalmist intends. He says, 'Such knowledge is too wonderful for me.'"

It is too wonderful, because God is everywhere, and therefore, God is always with us. And when he says, "God, you lay your hand upon me," it is not the slap of discipline, nor the grasp of restraint, but rather the palm of comfort and reassurance.

Adela St. Johns was one of the first well-known women reporters. She was also the mother of a son who was called into service during World War II. One bleak winter morning she received a telegram that read: PILOT OFFICER WILLIAM ST. JOHNS...KILLED IN ACTION. Adela's daughter reports what happened next. She wrote, "mom retired quietly to her study to mourn the loss of her laughing, loving son. Hours later, when she emerged, she said simply, 'The rope held.'"

Years later, she explained what she meant. The rope was her faith. It was what she held onto when the bottom dropped out beneath her. She said, "When Bill died, I felt like a lone mountain climber stranded on the verge of an abyss with nothing but the rope coiled on my shoulder. When the unthinkable happens, you have to wonder (if you can survive it). Well, somehow, I threw that rope into the void, and the rope held. The inner voice we all long to hear said gently, 'All is well with your child.' And I knew it was so."³

The psalmist writes, "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."

The psalmist has reason to rejoice. For he has perceived that God is everywhere throughout the enormous expanse of the universe. God is with us wherever we are and whatever happens. Even when darkness envelops us, God is with us to shed light.

NOTES

1. Thomas G. Long, "Psalm 139 and the Eye of God," *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2020, p. 41.
2. Thomas G. Long, "The Love of God," *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2017, p.22.
3. Susan Andrews, "What Are We Worried About?" in *Lectionary Homiletics*, October, 2001, p.23.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

For your abiding presence, O God, we give thanks. You hem us in — behind, before. No matter where we are on our journeys, you go with us — our companion and our guide.

We give thanks that you draw us close and claim us as your own. Ever-present God, help us to sense your Spirit moving among us ... not only in this time we have set apart as sacred, but in every ordinary moment of life. Open our eyes to glimpse your guiding hand in our lives, and our hearts to respond to your Spirit's call. Sustain all of us in the life of faith and help us to be your faithful disciples.

The Psalmist declares that you have searched us and know us. You discern our thoughts; you are acquainted with all our ways ... Perhaps we need *not* offer you our prayers. For, even before words form on our tongues, you know them completely. And, yet, we dare to speak, O God. We dare to speak because you promise to listen. We dare to speak because the practice focuses our wandering thoughts on you. We dare to speak because it makes the burdens lighter, the pain easier to bear, knowing we do not carry any of this alone.

So search us and know us ... and hear us, O God.

Hear our prayers for those who seek your healing in body, mind, or spirit. Strengthen those who are battling disease, and draw those who mourn into your loving embrace. Give hope to those in the depths of despair, and surround those overcome by worry with your peace.

Hear our prayers for those who are treated as if they are *not* fearfully and wonderfully made. We lift before you neighbors near and far who know too well the plight of hunger, the scourge of violence, the indignity of poverty, the pall of discrimination. Whenever *our* actions demean or diminish, give us eyes to see others as *you* see them, and empower us to work for a world that affirms the dignity of all.

Hear our prayers for your creation — so weary after a year dominated by a deadly virus, yet hopeful that this virus may soon be defeated. May whatever optimism we feel *not* make us complacent. Rather, give us fortitude. Give us compassion. Give us a renewed commitment to care for the most vulnerable among us, until *all* can enjoy the dawn of a new day.

This we pray in the name of the Triune God — the Creator who formed our inward parts, the Spirit who surrounds and sustains us, and the Christ who taught us how to pray:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.