

## OUR PERMANENT ADDRESS

Dr. George O. Wood

This is the Sunday before the last Sunday. I don't want to start saying good bye quite yet. I thought today I would take one of my favorite passages in the Bible and do what I've tried to do the last seventeen years. That is just take God's word and crack it open and see what it says.

Psalm 139 is going to be my text, Our Permanent Address. The title came to me this week as applied to this psalm. Right now I'm in the process of going through papers and files and bookshelves and eliminating the stuff that I don't need to carry into the new job. I've found out that there's a lot of stuff I've accumulated that I don't really need. It's a real touch of nostalgia. I've felt melancholy as I'm going through all this stuff and realize that when I destroy a file there's a lot of memories associated with everything I've tossed out. Some good memories, some painful memories. But they've been there.

I thought about moving and I kept thinking about one of my very favorite illustrations, which I have shared in a number of memorial services over the years about our permanent address. How we have a larger address than the one we have on earth. It's more than just street, city and state. But after the state, California, we could extend on the envelope the address, North America, Western Hemisphere, Planet Earth, Solar System, Milky Way Galaxy, Universe, in God. And God should be the last word. Not the zip code but God should be the last word of our address.

All the lines between our name and God's name are all temporary addresses. They're going to change during our lifetime. My address change is not going to be all that big. The home is staying the same. A hairline change but it's really a very big change for us as you know.

But some things aren't changing. That is the tag line of the address in God.

This psalm today, Psalm 139, talks to us about our being in God and the permanency of that and the blessing of that. And the comfort of knowing that God knows us.

Sometimes we don't know ourselves. Bug God always knows us. Because of God's word we do have the capacity to know ourselves.

As you know we have two dogs in our family. One has been with us I think nine years, going on ninety, called Sunshine. He's an apricot poodle. Infirm somewhat with a bad back and various other untidy habits and cluttered disposition of mind. Surly nature. He has graced our home for a number of years. I would have gassed him but Jewel has mercy on him and has sympathy for suffering things. And he is. He's dimwitted. But he remains as our constant loyal pet.

Then two years ago we got another dog. Puppies are so cute when you get them. There's nothing more adorable than a puppy. Just remember: puppies grow up. This dog however is adorable. He is a black cocker spaniel. Evangeline got him on the promise that it would be her dog. She would faithfully water, feed, walk and care for him. Guess who does that.

I'm just complaining today. An hour out of everyday of my life is devoted to those two dogs. Half hour in the morning, half hour in the evening. I think of all the good things I could be doing

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with life and God has placed this instrument of suffering in my experience so that I could develop character.

I absolutely love those dogs. But they don't really know a whole lot. In fact they don't even know their own identity. You could switch tags on them and they would not know. Sunshine doesn't know he's Sunshine and Calvin doesn't know he's Calvin. All they respond to is food and a loving voice. That's about it.

But we can respond more than that. We know who we are. And God knows who we are. And this psalm tells us about that. The psalm really answers these questions: Does God know me? If he does, how well? The second question the psalm looks at is, Is God present with me in life? And if he is, how present is he? And a third question, Is God involved in my life? If so, how involved?

How well does God know me? "Oh Lord you have searched me," David says. Searched me. I understand that the Hebrew verb can also in the Hebrew mean or carry the connotation "to dig." It is the idea of something that is more than on the surface level. Not simply scan. But it's turning over the spade and seeing what's underneath the soil. And digging and digging until you get to the bottom of whatever you're for.

The Lord's knowingness of us is not taken by him by means of casual observation. It is one that is a result of his thorough examination in our lives. We can therefore say in modern parlance, "Oh, Lord, you dig me." And understand correctly what the scripture is saying.

He digs into us. And as a result of his digging into us he knows. What does he know? He knows on an elementary level. He knows our routines. He knows when we set down and when we rise up. The locomotion of our body. He is aware of that.

I had the brilliant idea one day that I was going to count all the times during the day when I rose up and when I sat down. I forgot during the course of the day to keep an accurate log. Still this day I have never any single day of my life counted the number of times I stood up and sat down.

Yet this psalmist is saying to us God knows us so infinitely well that he's aware of the non-exciting things about our life. About the locomotion aspects of our body. He has studied us rather thoroughly.

He not only knows our routines but he knows our thoughts. "You perceive our thoughts from afar." People who know me/know you will sometimes say, I can tell what you're thinking. My wife tells me she can read the expression on my face. Other times she'll say, I can't tell what you're thinking at all. Isn't that paradoxical? God is able to take one look at us and know what we're up to. He knows our thoughts.

This idea of God knows my thoughts from afar can mean one of two things. And probably it means both. One that God can be a distance away and still know what's going on intimately within me and you. And secondly of the idea that God has access to us from afar means that God has access to the far places in us. The places that are out of reach to others and the places that may even be out of reach to us so that he has access to our conscious and subconscious thoughts. To our repressed feelings and to our inaccessible areas of mentality living.

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He knows our thoughts.

He knows our directions and choices. “You discern my going out and my lying down. You’re familiar with all my ways.” He knows what I’m deciding and why. It doesn’t catch him by surprise. When we get to heaven the Lord isn’t going to need an introduction to us. God isn’t going to have those problems. He knows us.

He knows our speech. Before we can get a word out he knows the idea of where our sentence, where our paragraph, where our intentionality is going.

Finally David gives up and says, God you just know everything about me. You’ve got me hemmed in. “You hem me in behind and before. You’ve laid your hand upon me.” How do you respond to that kind of knowledge? If God knows everything about you and you can’t hide anything from him.

I respond in two ways, quite frankly. One is that’s awful. God you have access to my confidential files? You really know everything about me? You feel kind of like Adam and Eve did in the garden when you realize that God knows you when you failed. You just want to get away from him and you can’t. How awesome is that? Sometimes we feel that way when we think God knows everything about us.

But the psalmist chooses to look at it from another perspective. “God, that’s not awful. It’s wonderful that you know me. How marvelous it is. It’s too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.”

Why should it be wonderful? It’s wonderful that somehow we’re important to God. He’s a personal God and he’s aware of us. We have to lay aside the falseness we have in respect to our identity. We’re not simply some name buried away on a computer print out sheet in God’s roll call. We’re a person who is very much alive to him and he’s very much aware of us. And although he has a large family he hasn’t forgotten the name of any one of his kids. And not only that he’s aware of everything we do. It’s wonderful to be known by somebody.

In sermons on a few occasions I have dropped the name of John Ashcroft, my friend, governor of Missouri. Notice I said “my friend.” There’s somebody important out there that not only do I know but he knows me. We set down together periodically and have a good time. I know President Reagan. But he doesn’t know me. But believe me. If I knew him, I’d drop his name too!

But I know God. And you know God. We don’t just know him; he knows us. That’s important to us. It gives us meaning as people. It gives us identity. It gives us a hope in our life that we are not nameless people who as Bertram Russell are “an accidental collocation of atoms doomed for extinction.” The human body was created in the image of God. And the creator who made it is aware of his product. So it’s wonderful.

How well does God know me? He knows me and real well. Lots better than you do. If I have any regrets as pastor it’s that I do not know everyone. I do not know everyone in this sanctuary. However if we had a context I think I’d know more names than anyone else. And I know some of you better than other because some of our circumstances in life have thrust us together. Some of those circumstances have been in very extreme and painful moments of your life. I thank God

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for the privilege of being with you in those times. But God knows each one of us better than we know each other. God knows us.

That brings to rise the question is God present with us in life. And if he is, how present is he to us?

Verses 7 & 12 answer that. “Lord, is there any way I can get away from you? Is there any place I can go?” David looks at these possibilities. “Can I go up? Can I go down? Can I go out? Where can I get away from you? If I go up you’re there. If I ascend to the heights you’re there.” Remember David lived in a pre-scientific age and the highest man could go is what he could jump. And in those days they couldn’t even jump six feet. So that was the highest he got. Now with spaceships and rocket fuel, people can get a long way out there.

The Russian cosmonaut said as he circled the earth in one of the early space missions “I went up there and I looked for God and I didn’t see him out there in space.” To which Billy Graham replied, “If he had stepped out of his spaceship he would have seen him.”

The young airman killed at the age of nineteen, John Gillespie McGee wrote this beautiful poem that described meeting God in the heights. “I have slipped the surly bonds of earth and danced the skies on laughter’s silver wing. Sunward I’ve climbed and joined the tumbling mirth of sun-split clouds and done a hundred things you have not dreamed of. Reeled and soared and swung higher in the sunlit silence, hovering there I’ve chased the shouting wind along and flung my eager craft through footless halls of air. Up, up the long delirious burning blue I’ve topped the windswept heights with easy grace where never lark or even eagle flew and while with silent lifting mind I’ve trod the high un-trespassed sanctity of space. Put out my hand and touched the face of God.”

Is he up there? Yeah.

He is down there? If I go down, down to the grave, down to death, down to what the biblical writers called *Sheol* in the Old Testament. Can I escape him? If I die, if I commit suicide, can I get away from God? Is there any place I can be down there away from him? And the answer again David finds is if he descends to the depths God is there.

In fact all of us, if the Lord doesn’t come, face the prospect of two deaths. The one death is separation from human beings. The second death is separation from God. Jesus came into life to help us avoid the second death. Separation from God.

Is he with me in the distance? If I don’t go down or up but go out, is he with me there? Yes. If I take the wings of the morning and jet away to Japan or Europe he’s there on the far distant parts of the horizon I will find God. Time zones away he’s there. He’s present.

Then the psalmist for a moment doesn’t think any more geographically – above, down or out – he thinks emotionally, psychologically, spatially. Spiritually. He thinks in those terms. He says, God, are you with me in the darkness? Because there are times in life when we don’t change geographical locations but there’s a light that goes out in our souls. We experience tragedy or sin or loss or grief or suffering of any kind. We wonder when we’re in the midst of it, God are you aware of the long night that I am in. Will you be there for me?

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I talked with a couple this week who are going through a very difficult time in their life. I said to them, in the coming weeks and perhaps months you're going to experience a roller coaster of emotions. There are going to be days that are as black as black can be. You're going to wonder if God is there and if there is any help for you. And whether or not you can make it. There will be days when it looks like you're going to come out of the pit and then that will alternate and you'll fall back in. But as those flood of emotions come and go know that although your feelings about God's presence with you are varying God's feelings towards you are not varying. God remains constant and steady for you.

We need to keep that in mind as we walk through the dark places of life. God is with us.

How involved is God with me, if at all? Verses 13-18 answer that. What has been happening as David thinks about fleeing from God his mind goes back to who he is and how he got to be there. It all started when he was conceived in the mother's womb. He reckons that that was not some accidental event but God at that moment was involved in his life and as been involved with all the unfolding days since then. "You created my inmost being."

Isn't it funny when you're growing up you have a lot of crazy thoughts like am I really a part of this family. My mother was 43 when I was born. When I got old enough to understand these kinds of thing I had several questions. I learned that children who are born to mothers who are elderly in life either are very smart or are mentally retarded. Since I was neither I wondered if I was adopted. That was especially reinforced when I looked at my brother and my sister and they didn't look anything like me. Later I came to understand that adoption is ok too. But at that time it was a scary thought to me. I wondered, with my mother 43, I wondered if I was planned. I never had the guts to ask her that and she never volunteered.

Maybe you've wondered the same thing about you. But from God's point of view you were planned. God wanted you. Your birth may have occurred under the most extreme and outrageous conditions imaginable.

Ethel Waters was the child of a 12-year-old that gave birth as a result of a rape. This wonderful black woman sang for the glory of God and although she's now with the Lord, her song, "His Eye is on the Sparrow" has been a great help in my life.

Was God there when I was formed? The answer is yes, he was.

In fact I/you were knit together in the womb. The word "knit" is the word that is also used in the Hebrew to describe someone who is doing delicate embroidery. How intricate is this knitting?

Carl Olsen in an article in *Faith at Work* magazine several years ago put scientifically before us the facts of our conception when he said, "In conception a human sperm and human ovum unite and in that union the payload is a data system containing the entire program of possibilities for the physical, intellectual, psychological and spiritual life of a human being. According to the best estimates that data system has no less than ten billion pieces of information. Ten billion separate entries. If printed out this information would need at least one thousand volumes of five hundred pages each to give access to the data bank that is in the fertilized egg. You'd get a thousand books, five hundred pages each which on a book shelf would come to eighteen feet across and seven feet high. That whole data system, that whole library of information with its billions of complexly interrelated messages is contained in so minute a space that it is invisible to

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any but the most sensitive of electron microscopes. The naked eye can detect an object one tenth of a millimeter in diameter. But the space I'm speaking of is only one-fiftieth millimeter in diameter from this infinitely small data system the mystery of human existence is spelled out second after second and day after day until a person's destiny is fulfilled."

These verses are saying God has been back of us and behind us in time assuring our identity. He has allowed to stream into us from our past generations and millennia capacities, traits, characterizes such as blue eyes, red hair, left handedness, drooping shoulders, balding head – those kind of things are in the gene bank. He was there when the moment of creation happened. God wrought me in the womb or the depths of the earth. Let there fore no one think they're unwanted. Let no one think that they are not special. God's eyes, the psalmist says, beheld your unformed substance when you were still an impersonal collection of cells rolled up in an embryonic state. God saw you and thought you wonderful.

If there is anything in my life that's changed in the 17 years that I've pastored here is probably I've come to grips with the two most difficult things I have struggled with in my life. Some days I'm not sure I'm all the way there. But the two things I have had the most difficulty with are self esteem and thinking I was adequate for whatever God has called me to do and the second thing was feeling that God loved me. I don't know what it was I got goofed up when I was a kid. But you'd think that growing up in a Christian home, a preachers home and missionaries home and in church that I would have gotten the idea strong indelibly printed on my psychological self that God loved me. But I don't know what it was. Whether it was legalism or too much hell fire and brim stone preaching or whether I was around too many nasty saints early in my childhood or what it was. But I got this idea that God really didn't love me. That he was looking for an excuse to bump me off. I think probably it was a lot of rapture preaching that if you're doing one thing wrong and the Lord comes and you're doing that thing wrong when he comes you're out. I was dead convinced when I was 10 year old that the Lord had timed his return to coincide with some sin that I was going to do. Because he really didn't want me there after all. Crazy!

I've heard people say, When you say John 3:16 "God so loved the world," put your own name there. I've said even as an adult *bah, humbug!* If it had been just George Wood that needed to be saved God would have found something else to do. He's not going to put Jesus on the cross for just me. He's got the whole world in mind. It had to have been something more significant. Not just one person.

So it's been tough for me. And maybe it's been tough for you to get a hold of the fact that God does love us. But the longer we're in scripture the more we have to be objectively persuaded that that's indeed the attitude of scripture. God values us so much that Christ came to save sinners. Of which we are.

He dearly loves us and he has the good attitude toward us. That's also been tough for me because I've not always had a good attitude toward myself. I'm not into the positive gospel that everything's pie in the sky and all that kind of stuff. But at the same time, Jesus said, "I did not come into the world to condemn the world. But to save the world."

My early years of ministry I think found me much more demanding and harsh and strident with people. As I've come to understand that God accepts me and loves me in spite of what I am and what I am not and I still struggle to learn that, surely if he does that for me he does it for all of you. God deeply cares about us. God wrought us in the womb and he has been with us.

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“How vast is the sum of your thoughts, Lord, for me. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.” That scripture has become a comfort for me. It used to be a theological riddle. It used to vex my Armenian soul as a non-Calvinist. If you’re into theology this is a great scripture for Calvinism because it says all the days were ordained. God knows, God’s sovereign. I was always emphasizing, “But we’re free. God gave us a will.” Now I’m not so much interested in theology – although I’m interested in that; we’ve got to base our belief on sound theology – but I’m interested in what that scripture does for me emotionally and spiritually. It tells me that what’s happened in my life is not an accident. As much as some things have happened that appear to be without rhyme or reason, if I continue to walk with God I will understand that the steps of a person who loves God are ordered by him and he does put things together. I don’t know yet all the mystery between God’s choice and our freedom. But as I continue to walk with the Lord I grow more and more confident that he has got a very strong grip on my life and he’s got a strong grip on you.

This knowledge is precious. God is not going to leave his work in us – you or me – to chance or to extinction. In fact David goes on to say, When I awake I’m still with you. Here the idea is if I fall asleep in the dust of death when I wake up in the resurrection you’re there. God if there are times in my life when spiritually I fall asleep when I come to myself you’ll still be there.

I can recall holding our children and rocking them to sleep when they were young and enjoying that. Now the kids are going out the front door. I’m waiting for the grandkids to come in the back door and I’m trying to nudge our children in that direction. They don’t seem to accept God’s will for their life as come through me. They’re making their own choices. But that’s what freedom is all about. I loved holding those little kids. I realized when they fell asleep in my arms that in those moments they were not aware of my thoughts or my love or my songs or my words. That’s how it is so often with God. He is our heavenly Father. There are times when we are not aware of how much God loves us. But that doesn’t mean because we’re not aware of it that he doesn’t love us. He does. The God who watches us, the scripture says, does not slumber and does not sleep. That to me means he stays up all night and he loves us and cares for us even when we’re not aware of it.

David comes to a conclusion in his psalm and it takes kind of an unusual departure where he concludes with a prayer. He asks God to do two things. He asks God to do something about the problem of evil in the world and he asks God to do something about the problem of evil in himself.

What he asks God to do about evil in verses 19-22 seems rather jarring and harsh. It essentially can be boiled down to, God kill the wicked. That’s the way I feel sometimes. People who do violence to others – rub them out! Hang them on a rack! Stretch them! We like quick answers to the problems of injustice. We’ll learn as David learned and all the other writers of scripture that God’s wheels grind slowly and the grind exceedingly fine. He may not correct all the problems of injustice right now. He will wait until that day.

But David has the wisdom to come back to balance and say, God, not only should you do something about the injustice in the world, please do something about the injustice in me. The wickedness in me. If we don’t keep that balance, we’ll get into a lot of trouble psychologically and personality wise. What will happen if we do not ask God to do something about our own life is that we will be so busy attempting to get God to do something about everyone else that we

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become mis-shaped persons, unlovely persons as a result of expending all of our energies on getting everything around us to change. The Lord through this passage of scripture is saying whatever you do, pray about yourself – the evil in you. Ask God not only to change your nemesis and your circumstance and God’s very enemies. But look within and say, God, dig me again. Search me. See if there’s anything in me. Some attitude, some action, some language, some speech that you would like to change. Search me O God and change me.

That search only comes at our invitation. God will not do that kind of searching unless we ask.

Paraphrase of this psalm: Lord, you have an enormous file on me. Your informers report all my movements and you know what armchair, what theater seat, what office stool I set on. How I respond to my alarm clock and early cup of coffee, the path I follow to work, to the swimming pool, to church. You even have bugging devices to record my thoughts. You have Photostats of all my air tickets, expense accounts, hotel bookings. You have a tape of everything I say in public and in private. You created me and you sustain me to the last detail. Lord, I don’t know how you do it. I’m astounded by your incredibly detailed knowledge. I cannot begin to compete with your efficiency. However un-recollected I may be about you and I’m often very un-recollected both in my prayers and outside them. You are always recollected about me. At first I found your knowledge about me to be paralyzing rather than liberating. Your eye, you as the divine voyeur, terrified me. How dared I speak or act when the expert was watching me. So my first reaction was a desire to escape from this surveillance. Yet I knew that your wonderful and excellent closeness to me was in my own best interest. I came to thank you for it and the way in which it brings to fruition whatever good seed you have planted in me. In any case, it is futile to want to escape because I could not do it if I tried. If I climb up into heaven in prayer, friendship, relaxation you are there in love. When I am in the hell of sin and rebellion in a place so unclean that I should not have expected to find you in it, you are there in judgment. If I take the morning jet and fly to the most distant spot in the world or to the frontiers of faith and suffering, you meet me there and hold me fast for your love has no limits. When the night closes around me and the darkness sets over me – the darkness of criticism, failure, pain and death, that darkness will become bright as day because darkness and light are both under your control and you are the light of the world. Realizing your closeness to me I turn to you in penitence certainly but also in trust. Your care of me is shown by creation for which you were personally responsible. By the miracle of my existence which began when I was conceived in your thought eons before I was conceived in my mother’s womb. Your counsels, your thoughts are precious to me although often I do not understand them. For your thoughts, divine thinker, are higher than my thoughts. You would not have created me if you had not loved me. I know that I am not an unwanted child. So I can approach you with confidence. Lord, I hate evil because it is done before your eyes and it is offensive to you. I pray that evil may be overcome and that I may take my share in overcoming it. But I do not say this, imagining that I am already perfect. I know that there is evil in me too. And I am ready to face up to your audit however painful that may be. If I’m on the wrong lines I trust that you will put me straight and renew me in such a way that I may find happiness in the integrity which you have given me. Lord, above all, lead me in the way that leads to eternal life.”

Our Father we realize when we confront your word in a manner like today that we are not temporary people. Our home is in you. This world is not my home, I’m just passing through. We’ve had wonderful years together, Lord, as pastor and congregation. Years that have been given by you as a blessing to our lives. I thank you for the way this church has sustained in love and in prayer our family. I thank you for the way that they have cared and

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demonstrated time and time again that they are your flock because they have love for one another. Lord, that's all made possible because of your love for us. You're intimately aware of our lives, Lord. You know what each of us needs and in your sovereign will you appoint our path. Sometimes the things that you lay out for us are not our own personal choice. Sometimes we get to choose. But in either case we know your hand, you're with us, you know us. You're present to us. You're deeply involved in our life. We trust you when the day is sunshiny and when the night is starless and dark. You're with us in both light and darkness and we thank you for that. Keep us to the very last person, close to you. For Lord, we'll have a chance to be together always one of these days as your people all our good byes are only temporary ones. We thank you for that. Anew we commit ourselves to your love and to your watchful care. For anyone here today who has come to this service not sure of your love or your concern for them, make them know that they are of infinite value and dearly precious to you. We ask this in your name. Amen.