

Psalm 139
July 23, 2023

The Searcher

There is an old John Wayne movie from the 1950s, with Natalie Wood called, “The Searchers,” about a frontier family that was the victim of a Comanche raid. In the raid a young girl was taken, and her uncle spent the next several years searching the American southwest to find her.

I will not reveal the conclusion, except to say that the plot was inspired by an historical situation which was well-known throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, especially in Texas and Oklahoma where the real-life story played out.

Like many movies, the biography that inspired the plot was somewhat different. The movie was close enough to the history to be recognized as inspired by it, and different enough to be called, “fiction.”

The biography is very interesting. The young girl’s name was Cynthia Ann Parker. She was actually born in Ohio, strangely enough, but her family was among the earliest homesteaders on the east Texas frontier, around where Groesbeck is now.

There were other family members taken in the raid, all of them young, and one of the uncles, in real life his name was James, spent several years searching for them and paying a ransom to bring them home. He gave up the search before he found Cynthia Ann, who ended up spending 25 years in a Comanche village

roaming the southern plains. Little is known about what happened to Uncle James, after he left the search he disappeared from the historical stage.

The 139th psalm speaks of a similar situation, and to a feature of human life that is common to us all, that of being separated from God. The separation is not mainly geographical or even cultural, as it was for Cynthia Ann, but it is real, and spiritual.

One of the long-standing images of the human situation is that of being lost. It might be said that being, “lost,” is among the most empirical of religious ideas, because people display their lostness in many ways; the pursuit of pleasure, wealth, power, under the delusion that if attained, fulfillment of life might result; or attachment to ideas that can be thought of as pseudo-religious, some kind of life philosophy to which one fully devotes themselves; or an immersion in art, literature, music, sports, health and fitness, vocation or family or politics.

The list goes on, but what is common is the searching itself, which seems universal, and often results in the attachment of ultimate significance to some feature of life that is *not* ultimate. This devotion to something that is not God is idolatry. There is no facet of life, there is no endeavor in life, even the good and important things, that can’t become the object of religious devotion, can’t be pursued religiously.

Yet the picture in the psalm offers a different narrative. Set next to the human search for the meaning of life,

which is the search for God, is the divine search for the human soul. The divine search is one way of speaking about the gospel message itself, God seeking us . . . seeking you.

“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.”

In the great theological conversation among Christians from the very beginning its history; between Paul and the so-called Judaizers; between Augustine and Pelagius, between Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, and between Protestants like Luther and Calvin and the Catholic Church, and between countless Protestants arguing back and forth with each other ever since; the central feature of the debate is to understand the connection between the human pursuit of a relationship with God and the divine pursuit of a relationship with human beings. Even in the 20th century there was the dialogue between Karl Barth and Paul Tillich which fell out along the same lines.

It is expressed as well by the confession here in the psalm. That before there is even a life around to seek God, God is searching the person in the depths of their inner being.

Sometimes, actually almost always, the theological debate becomes absurd, with both sides seeing only the worst in their opponents. Even though they often concede each other's points, they accuse one another of making false concessions and harboring residual heretical notions. Christians arguing back and forth until they can't be said to love and trust each other, even though they claim to love and trust each other. Who would deny it? But it is with God that we should keep our focus.

But, “Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.”

Perhaps we might do well to restrain the judgment against others and participate in a little wholesome self-examination. Our questing is, after all, a quest for God. Could there be an evasion as well as a searching? *Even the psalmist* catches himself on this point.

“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.”

For all our searching, or for all our arguing back and forth, we can not escape the confrontation with the one who searches us. But then later the psalmist goes on to confess his own secret attitudes . . .

“Do I not hate those who hate you, Lord,
and abhor those who are in rebellion against you?
I have nothing but hatred for them;
I count them my enemies.”

This text is not a justification for the hatred of an enemy, for even Jesus forgave those who crucified him and instructed us to love our enemies, and pray for our persecutors. Rather, it is a confession . . . that, like each of us, the psalmist bears a little darkness in the soul, and can not hide it from God.

God is the source of our lives, that is what creation means, and the source of our redemption, that is the meaning of the cross. God is the one who searches us out, of course, and from God’s searching we can not escape, if indeed we should desire it. By some grace, we are free to resist, but why should we desire to be free from God’s gaze? Do we think it is bad news?

There are two options: try to flee the truth about ourselves to the far corners of the world . . . or fess up to it, and pray the concluding prayer of this psalm, and that is my suggestion, because the one who searches is not like the uncle who gave up the search and disappeared from the historical stage. But the one who pursues us in our inmost being remains with us even to the far reaches.

God is the Searcher. The search is gospel . . . good news . . . because the one who searches, loves. And to be found is to be saved.

So let us pray it: I will say it once, then let us repeat it together;

“Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.”

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