“Know: I’m Never Alone”
(Psalm 139:7-12)

On January 20, David Brooks wrote about “the art of presence” during tragedy in the New York Times. He based his piece on a blog post by Catherine Woodiwiss, whose daughter and a sister encountered separate tragedies. Brooks discussed how suffering teaches us certain lessons “…about how those of us outside the zone of trauma might better communicate with those inside the zone.” He highlighted some lessons learned by Woodiwiss in her own suffering, one of which was, “Do be there. Some people think that those who experience trauma need space to sort things through. Assume the opposite. Most people need presence.” (Adapted from “The Art of Presence”, 843 Acres, 2/3/14) “Do be there… Most people need presence…” especially when we feel most alone.

This morning we continue our series called “Know” based on Psalm 139. This series connects us with realities David knew about God during a time of trauma, problem or pain. As we said in our first message this Psalm is not the result of David’s quiet reflection on God’s character but things David knew about God when he was accused of some wrong. As David declares his innocence to God, he recalls all God knew about him, using that to find strength to face those seeking to harm him. In verses 1-6 he declares he knows God does not forget him and now in verses 7-12 he knows he is not alone because God is always with him. These words tell us (I know this is incorrect grammar) there is never a place God is not.

Have you ever felt alone? To be alone means to be without someone or something. Sometimes we want to be alone and times we dread being alone. We may feel alone without someone’s presence, alone with someone present, alone in a decision or alone in a relationship we believed would meet our need to never be alone. We need people with us to live life, particularly when we face trouble, problems or pain because God created us with a need to be with other people for us to be complete. When God created people, he said it was not good for them to be alone (Gen. 2:18) so he created other people. This was not only true of people needing the presence of other people but people needing the presence of God. The Bible describes God coming to be with the first people he created, Adam and Eve, “…walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze…” (Gen. 3:8, HCSB) What about us? How does a Christian know they are not alone regardless of the circumstances? How can we especially know God is with us? Is it because of what we feel or see? No, it is because of the very things David knew about God. We can know when we feel alone: Wherever I am, God is with me, cares for me and waits for me.

One thing we can know when we feel alone is: Wherever I am, God is with me. (Psalm 139:7-9) David says, “I can never escape from your Spirit! I can never get away from your presence!” (v.7) David didn’t want to run from God’s presence but confesses even if he tried it was impossible. The word “presence” is the word “face” meaning we are always before God’s face. David continues his awareness of God’s presence by pointing out there are no limits to God’s presence in life spiritually, in heaven or the grave, and no limits to his presence physically, which is what he means by “wings of the morning” and “the farthest oceans”. In the morning, the sun rises in the east and the only oceans David knew were in the west (Mediterranean Sea), he is saying God’s presence is unlimited. David is always before God’s face.

As a pastor, there are times when a person is going through difficult times, I will say, “I need to see your face.” It means I want to be near them so they know they are not alone and seeing their face is a way to let them know. I can’t be everywhere nor can anyone whose face you need to see when you are alone. When you feel alone maybe you need to be reminded wherever you are God is with you. You are always before his face and if we are before his face then all of God is with us. This can make us anxious because it means he sees us wherever we are and whatever we are doing. Yet more it is a spiritual and physical assurance, wherever we are in life or death, God is with us. Does it feel like God doesn’t know where you are? Then confess with David, “Wherever I am, God is with me.”
David knew wherever he was God was with him but he could also say, “Wherever I am, God cares for me.” (Psalm 139:10) While David defines all the places God is present he also describes what his presence can do “…even there your hand will guide me, and your strength will support me.” David needed direction and strength and both of those are fulfilled by God’s presence. In another Psalm David felt alone and was afraid God abandoned him, “In my alarm I said, ‘I am cut off from your sight!’ Yet you heard my cry for mercy when I called to you for help.” (Psalm 31:22) Wherever he was, whatever he felt, he knows God is there to care for him.

When we feel alone we can feel no one cares about us or for us and even more we feel that about God. Our emotions distort our thinking so whatever we thought we believed about someone or God becomes what we doubt. If God cared then I wouldn’t be in this mess, without a job, without a future or without confidence I know the direction for my life and have strength to get there. Do you feel cut off from God’s sight and God’s care? Will you have the courage to say as David, “Wherever I am, God cares for me”?

As if David has not said enough to assure him he was not alone, he goes on to say there is no part of life where God is absent but instead is waiting for him. Whenever we feel alone we can say the same: Wherever I am, God waits for me. (Psalm 139:11-12) David says, “I could ask the darkness to hide me and the light around me to become night—but even in darkness I cannot hide from you. To you the night shines as bright as day. Darkness and light are the same to you.” In Hebrew the phrase “hide me” is a picture word describing clouds sweeping close over the earth. If David had the power to grab darkness like a blanket, pull it over his head, completely covered by it, still God would be there. Why? Because day and night or darkness and light don’t exist with God, they are impossible to resist his presence. Ancient people feared darkness thinking it brought evil but David knows darkness is nothing to God because, “Darkness and light are the same to you”.

These are words of desperation and distress because they push the limits of despair for a person. We feel alone in the darkness of depression, grief, confusion, hopelessness, sinful choices, sickness and death. We don’t want to talk about that kind of darkness but it describes exactly how we feel. We might even be afraid to admit the darkness of despair. As Jesus was dying on the cross, the light of midday became like the darkness of midnight, he cried out to his Heavenly Father, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mk. 15:33-34) Jesus knew feeling alone in the darkness at a level we can’t begin to understand. Yet he knew even there, as he bore the darkness of the sin of all people for all time, he was not alone. He shouted for all to hear, “Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands.” (Luke 23:46) He knew even in his darkness his Heavenly Father was waiting for him.

Jesus experience on the cross reminds us, as Tim Keller says, “God has wounds." (Walking with God through Pain and Suffering, p. 120) Because “God has wounds” he is not distant or has abandoned us in our darkness but is instead waiting for us. No matter the cause or reason for our darkness God is there, waiting, waiting with arms open wide to welcome us, hold us; wrap us in his loving presence. Wherever you are God is waiting for you but not because you were away from him and needed to find him. No, what we discover is what David knew—he is already there, waiting just for you. Wherever I am, God is waiting for me.

Where are you today? You know where you are physically but where are you in your mind, your feelings, your heart? Do you feel alone? You may want to be alone with your problem or struggle and the last thing you feel you need is God because you blame him for the way things are. You can’t run from him, he is wherever you are. You can’t try to make it through by yourself because wherever you are he cares for you. You can’t hide in your darkness, no matter how black, because wherever you are he waits for you. As Jesus was facing his death on the cross he knew the disciples would struggle to understand how they
would face the future without his presence, assuring them, “...You will always be with me where I am...I will not leave you as orphans; I am coming to you.” (John 14:18) He sent Holy Spirit not only to be with them but in them, to make it known they were not alone. (John 14:17) As Christians, because of Jesus promise, we have Holy Spirit not only with us but in us—we are not alone.

So what can you do to recognizes you are not alone? Let me suggest to first, own being alone. I mean be honest with yourself and with God, “I feel alone!” There’s freedom in our recognizing what God already knows. Next, declare you are not alone. There’s power in saying out loud what God says is true. Finally, receive his presence. God is the master of “the art of presence” because there is never a place we can be where God is not. Own how you feel, shout what is true and let yourself be wrapped in his waiting presence.

There was another time in David’s life when he didn’t feel alone, even though he knew darkness, fear, with enemies against him. That time said words, words that have become a lifeline for us whenever we have felt most alone and I want you to say them aloud:

“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. 
2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. 
3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 
4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. 
5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. 
6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.”

Wherever you are you are not alone because there is never a place God is not.

[Late Worship Word of Worship: Bono, the lead singer of the rock group U2, said, “What kind of hole exists in the heart of a person when they need to have 70,000 people scream, ‘I love you’, in order to feel fulfilled?” Today we are going to talk about that hole in our heart because it is there, deep inside, we can feel most alone. Yet because of the Psalmist David’s words declaring God is always with us we can know we are never alone. He is there in the hole with us to fill the hole of loneliness for us.]

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