

Judy: Lord, You have examined me. You know me. You know when I sit down and when I stand up. Even from far away, You comprehend my plans. You study my traveling and resting. You are thoroughly familiar with all my ways. There isn't a word on my tongue, Lord, that You don't already know completely.

Henry: You surround me - front and back. You put Your hand on me. That kind of knowledge is too much for me; it's so high above me that I can't fathom it.

Austin: Where could I go to get away from Your spirit? Where could I go to escape Your presence? If I went up to heaven, You would be there. If I went down to the grave, You would be there too!

Everyone: **If I could fly on the wings of dawn, stopping to rest only on the far side of the ocean - even there Your hand would guide me; even there Your strong hand would hold me tight!**

Judy: If I said, "The darkness will definitely hide me; the light will become night around me," even then the darkness isn't too dark for You, Lord! Nighttime would shine bright as day, because darkness is the same as light to You! You are the one who created my innermost parts; You knit me together while I was still in my mother's womb.

Henry: I give thanks to You that I was marvelously set apart. Your works are wonderful - I know that very well. My bones weren't hidden from You when I was being put together in a secret place, when I was being woven together in the deep parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body, and on your scroll every day was written that was being formed for me, before any one of them had yet happened.

Austin: God, your plans are incomprehensible to me! Their total number is countless! If I tried to count them - they outnumber grains of sand! If I came to the very end - I'd still be with you.

Everyone: **Examine me, God! Look at my heart! Put me to the test! Know my anxious thoughts! Look to see if there is any idolatrous way in me, then lead me on the eternal path!** Psalm 139 Vs. 1-18, 23-24

Our August memory verse is on page 3 of the bulletin... please find it and we'll say it together, including where the book, chapter, and verse, so we'll know where to find it when we need it.

August Memory Verse: *Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go. Joshua 1:9*

Let us pray. O God, when we are afraid, and discouraged, and when all hell breaks loose around us, and within us, remind us of Your presence with us. Remind us that nothing can separate us from You, and from Your love, and that You hold us - our lives, our past, our present, and our future - in Your hands. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

I recently heard a pastor use the phrase "When all hell breaks loose," and although I don't remember the context, the phrase came back to me when I heard of the recent tragic deaths of two college students in Walnut Creek, and of a little girl Santa Cruz. For several months we posted a couple of websites in the bulletin on how to pray

the news, because world news is grim, and as Christians we can't turn our heads away and pretend that these aren't our brothers and sisters living in poverty, in war, starving, denied human rights, and displaced. Sometimes I manage to push a lot of the horrific world news out of my line of vision... and then when all hell breaks loose close by, or it's personal... it hits me like a sucker-punch... and I'm grieved and ashamed that I've shielded myself from the reality of life. I realize again that I'm a citizen of the world, I'm a fellow child of God, and I can't ignore it when all hell breaks loose in God's people and God's creation.

Last week we heard Psalm 31. The psalmist said (that when all hell breaks loose) "But I trust in You, O Lord; I say, "You are my God." My times are in Your hand." Last week I preached about the spiritual resilience needed when all hell breaks loose, and I used the acronym H-I-P-S. "H" is for history (knowing who we are as the people of God); "I" is for intimacy (having a strong love-connection with God); "P" is for people (surrounding ourselves with people who believe with and for us when our hope is gone and faith feels like a hollow log); and "S" is for surrender (simply resting in God's care.) You can access that sermon on our website.

Today's scripture is from Psalm 139 and again it's a psalm of confidence and trust in God... it's a psalm about being held. Being held in God's hand. This is such a powerful and comforting image to me ~ that God holds me in God's hands. I understand this image because I have hands. I held my parents' hands when I was a child and they kept me safe. I've held my children's hands so they know I love them. Sometimes the only thing I have to offer someone who's in the throes of all hell breaking loose is to hold their hand. There's a song I like called "Held" by Natalie Grant. The chorus says, "This is what it means to be held, how it feels, when the sacred is torn from your life and you survive. This is what it is to be loved, and to know that the promise was that when everything fell... we'd be held." When all hell breaks loose around us, or inside us... the promise is that we are held. God holds us.

Psalm 139 reaffirms that. The psalmist speaks - not about God but to God - and says, "You know me." Remember that to "know" someone in a biblical sense is to be intimate with them. "Lord, You know me" means acknowledging that God knows you fully and intimately, better than you know yourself. To be fully known by God is to be completely vulnerable with God. Nothing in us is shielded or hidden... God is with us, as close as breath.

The psalmist asks, "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Where could I go to escape Your presence?" The Common English Bible says "If I went down to the grave, You would be there" but the word most commonly used instead of "grave" is "Sheol" which the ancients believed was the realm beyond God's reach... but this is a bit of poetic irony because there is no place beyond God's reach. The psalmist says, "Even there Your hand would guide me; even there Your strong hand would hold me tight!" No matter what hell breaks loose in our lives or in the world... Psalm 139 praises God that God's light is stronger than any darkness, God's love stronger than any fear or loss or grief or loneliness. Finally this psalm celebrates how God has created us; how God has "woven us together." I imagine that we are woven with gold threads throughout the cloth of our being... signs that we are created "wonderfully and marvelously" in the image of

God. God has woven some of God's self into all of us ~ that's why we are so amazingly made and carefully created.

I could make a list - and you could too - of things that outrage me and break my heart... but it's not enough to identify where all hell breaks loose. What's the Christian response? That's what's important. The Christian response has to do with hands... We remember that God holds us in God's hands and then we hold hands... to pray together, to work together, to help each other, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and vote responsibly and to remember *together* that God holds us in God's hands.

The psalmist says to God... I can't understand or fathom You... I could stay up all night and try to explain You... but at the end of it all what I know is that I am with You. Psalm 139 tells us 3 things that are important for us to know when all hell breaks loose. **God knows you.** (In a biblical sense.) God sees into you, sees through you, and loves you totally, unconditionally, intimately. **God is with you.** No matter what you go through, no matter where you go, no matter the wrong turns you take... God is with you. As close as breath. **And God holds you.**

Last week after I preached on the acronym H-I-P-S, I asked, is this a magic formula? And the answer was obviously, no. There is no magic formula. Faith is a practice. We practice believing and trusting God. And based on our experience of God (this is where we hear the psalmist's faith in God... based on his experience) she's decided to trust God with yesterday, today, and tomorrow. When all hell breaks loose, Psalm 139 reminds us (why don't you repeat this after me?) **God knows me. God is with me. God holds me.**

Each week in August I'm asking someone to give a short testimony about how their faith has and is shaping and sustaining them when all hell breaks loose. This morning Don Keeble is sharing his story, and then he's going to sing a song, "Hold Me Now" from his CD, "It's All About Love."