

February 25, 2024 Second Sunday in Lent

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Psalm 42 and Psalm 139

"The Art of Seeing: Ourselves"

Douglas T. King



It was late. She was tired, bone tired. The kind of tired that makes you wonder if you will ever not feel tired again. She sat and peered into the remains of her tea. In a flight of fancy she looked for tea leaves in the bottom of her cup, as if they could offer portents of a better future. But there were no leaves to be found and no sign of a better future. She knew she should drink the last few sips and head out into the dark, back to her apartment. But she also knew that the darkness would follow her in. There would be no one there to listen to her troubles and worries. No one to comfort her or buoy her up. No one to even acknowledge her existence. At least sitting here she was seen by the impatient staff waiting to close up the restaurant.

The painting, entitled "Automat" on the cover of our bulletin this morning was done by Edward Hopper. One scholar noted that he "painted short isolated moments of configuration, saturated with suggestion". Another wrote that his paintings often "touch us where we are most vulnerable." A third stated that they offered a suggestion of melancholy, that melancholy being enacted." I would express it in this way, Hopper was a keen observer of the shadow side of our human condition and displayed it brilliantly in his art.

This painting of a woman, head downturned, tucked under her hat, back turned to the looming darkness, and completely alone, captures something essential about you and I and our predicament. It provides a window visualizing the darkness that can lurk in our lives. We may be surrounded by family and friends every day. But we all find ourselves alone on an existential level. I call them the three AM moments, but they can come at any time. We all have times when we recognize that each of our life's journeys is ours and ours alone. Only we

know every twist and turn of our path, every joy and sorrow, every hidden part of ourselves, we keep to ourselves. Only we live in our own heads and hearts at three AM when we cannot sleep and are staring up at the ceiling pondering the meaning of life and the worries of our life.

The writer of psalm forty-two is having a three AM moment. "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?" "My tears have been my food day and night..." They remember times when they felt embraced in community, when they, "went with the throng and led the procession..." But those days are past. Now their adversaries taunt them and their enemies oppress them. Now they are struggling, alone and isolated. They are begging to be freed from their intense, all-consuming loneliness.

I will grant you some of this may sound a bit dramatic in terms of our own lives. But the loved ones and friendships of our lives do not inoculate us from the reality that on the deepest levels of existence we do stand alone in this life. Our beloved relationships carry us through in many cases. And in other times we distract ourselves from this reality with the busyness of our lives. But we all have 3 AM moments. The question is how we proceed when we find ourselves in those times when we feel utterly alone.

The writer of Psalm forty-two turns toward the divine. In that turning there is no magic instant cure for three AM. They still feel isolated, but they call upon God. They still have worries and fears, but they call upon God. They still have enemies and oppressors, but they call upon God. The forty-second psalm ends with words of hope, "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God."

It is important to note that their exterior situation has not changed. Their hope is just that. It is not that they have been delivered from their predicament. They have solely communicated their predicament to God.

And this leads us to our second reading and our second psalm of the day, psalm one hundred and thirty-nine. This is one of my favorite psalms. It too speaks to our three AM moments but from a different perspective. It names the darkness that surrounds the psalmist. And further in the psalm, past what we read this morning, it too speaks of enemies and the strife of life. And this psalm too brings no news of solving the problems of the psalmist's life.

What the one hundred and thirty-ninth psalm does offer is complete comprehension and complete presence. "O Lord you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up...you search out my path..." In psalm forty-two we receive a plea of utter isolation. Psalm one hundred and thirty nine promises that God knows us completely, and I would say, knows us even better than we know ourselves.

Now being fully known is a bit of a double-edged sword. We long to be fully known but we worry what that will reveal about us. There is a reason there are parts of ourselves that we keep to ourselves. We do our best to tuck away our missteps and failings, our selfishness and immaturity, and all of our embarrassing shortcomings. Learning that God knows every inch of our lives and our psyches could be terrifying. At least I hope it is not just me.

But no hammer of judgment arrives. Rather we receive news that God will never leave our side no matter where we go or what we do. "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."

And then we get this fascinating line, "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 a light to you." We are not told that we will not experience darkness. We will still have three AM moments. The woman in the painting still has the darkness looming behind her. We will still have times of worries and fears. What we are being told is that the divine has a greater field of vision than do we. God can see past the uncertainties and moments of isolation that threaten to consume us. God knows that we are never truly alone because the divine is ever as close as the air that we breathe. God knows that whatever present turmoil and trouble we are facing or fear we may face, our destination is always secure. We always have a home in God's ever-present, everlasting embrace.

When I look at this painting of this woman closed in upon herself, alone, surrounded only by her worries and fears, with the darkness behind her, threatening to envelop her, I see myself at three AM in the morning. I think about those times when my uncertainties and concerns have left me feeling utterly alone. We all have our own list. Is this lump cancerous? How am I going to pay the mortgage this month? Does my daughter have a drinking problem?

When I hear the words of these psalmists I do not hear of any promise that a magic wand is being waved over my life

removing every possible unfortunate outcome. What I do hear is three distinct and critical things about my life and about all of our lives. The first is that three AM moments are an intrinsic element of our human condition. We will all have times when our fears and uncertainties will isolate us. The second is that, in the midst of those moments, we are wise to place our steadfast hope in our God. And the third is that however isolated we may feel, there is never any possible context where God is not deeply present with us, understanding all of our uncertainties, and seeing the wider picture of the only certainty we truly need, that God is always with us in the moment and in our destination.

Thanks be to God. Amen.