**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church**

**Watertown, WI**

**“Hound of Heaven”**

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*“Where can I go from Your Spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence?”* (Ps. 139:7)

How much does personal privacy matter to you? For example, what do you think of the surveillance cameras popping up all around us. Opinions differ. Some like the deterrent they serve on crime. We feel better about leaving our cars in a parking lot where there are cameras, or Amazon leaving packages near the door cam.

Others, however, do not like that someone – anyone can be allowed to know where their location is at any given time. They do not like the apps that track their location. They do not like the sophisticated data analytics that track their web searches. They do not like others knowing anything about their health, or how they spend their money, or where they went for vacation.

How much do you really want others to know about you? After all, we have secrets. And we have sins. We would rather not have our secret sins made known to the world. So, we put a high premium on privacy. We may even try to hide our guilt from God as Adam and Eve tried to hide their sin and shame from Him. Our text, however, reminds us there is no hiding from God. There is no confusing God with lies or disinformation. There is no red herring that will throw Him off our path. There is no “privacy setting” we can put on our lives that will make God blind to our thoughts, words, and actions.

The psalmist knew this already three thousand years ago. “Where can I go from Your spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence?” This psalm reveals a startling truth: we may try to hide from God. But we have a God who doesn’t respect our desire for privacy. We have a God who knows where we are and what we are doing at all times. We have a God who pursues us.

Usually, we think of God being far removed from us, up there in splendid heavenly isolation. He sits in a remote corner of heaven, waiting for us to seek and pursue and find Him. And indeed, many people talk about when they found God. But that’s not how it works. It may feel like it is, but it is not. We are the ones who hide from Him, and He is the one who must seek and find us. He takes the initiative, the initiative we wouldn’t take, and tracks us down. One poet even called Him, “the Hound of Heaven,” rejoicing that God gives chase, even as we try to flee.

That theme appears throughout the Bible. In the beginning, Adam and Eve tried to hide “themselves from the presence of the Lord among the trees of the garden.” But God will have none of it. He flushes them out. “Adam, where art thou?” He knew exactly where Adam was. Adam was a lost and condemned creature, but God was not going to let him stay that way. He was going to force the relationship forward. It’s sort of like when there’s an angry or hurt silence between a husband and wife. Someone needs to step up and start talking again.

Our God is not a sitting Buddha. He is the God of pursuit. Remember how God ran Jonah down? To avoid God’s calling, Jonah was going to flee all the way to Tarshish–what he considered the far side of the world. But God pursued Jonah, even to the deepest, darkest depths of the sea.

Contrary to popular assumption, God is not passively waiting for us to find Him. In Luke, Jesus talks about the Good Shepherd who leaves the 99 to go find that one who is lost. The shepherd finds the lost sheep, not the other way around. Jesus tells the story of an old woman who loses one of her ten coins. She lights a lamp and searches all the dark corners of the house and does not stop looking until she finds her coin. That coin is you and me. Inert. Dead in our trespasses and sin. Not able to find God any better than a coin is able to find its owner.

Jesus says, “I stand at the door and knock.” Many choose not to let Him in because He might tell you there are things about you He wants to change, things you don’t want to change.

We do not pursue God because as sinners, we don’t want to have anything to do with a holy, righteous God. Remember Peter, and the miraculous catch of fish? After a long night without so much as a nibble, Jesus comes along and tells Peter to put out into deeper water and let his nets down there. Peter knows it isn’t going to work but he dutifully obliges because its Jesus. He lets the net down and so many fish swim into it that it begins to become undone under the stress and the weight. That’s when it dawns on Peter: he’s a sinner in the presence of a holy and righteous God. He’s dry, dead wood in the path of super-heated forest fire. “Stay away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.” Of course, Jesus ignores that request. He does not stay away. He does not abandon Peter . . . even later when Peter shamefully denies even knowing Jesus. Still, Jesus does not give up on Peter. You recall after the resurrection, the first person Jesus wants to see is Peter – not to scold or punish, but to forgive and restore.

You begin to think if Jesus does not give up on Adam, or Jonah, or Peter, or any of the rest of them, maybe He won’t give up on you, or me.

And so, just on the outside chance that one or more of you is actually trying to keep God at arm’s length, please reconsider the words of this ancient psalm: “Where can I go from Your spirit?”

On the outside chance you are thinking of doing the Jonah thing and fleeing from God, from His calling, consider again this psalm, “Where can I flee from Your presence?”

On the outside chance your life is full, with greater expectations at work and fewer co-workers; with the kids’ homework and basketball practice . . . on the outside chance you are so distracted that you can hardly even think about God, let alone study His Word, you might find this ancient psalm to be intriguing because He thinks about you. . . a lot. “You know when I sit down 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.”

Or if you’re contemplating a move, perhaps to a warmer part of the country(!) . . . or just across town into senior living apartments, then hear this, “if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there Your hand will guide me.”

Or the next time you fly, and you think about doors popping off, or the guy next to you coughing and gurgling and saying, “this snack mix has no taste,” then think also about this psalm: “If I ascend to the heavens, You are there. . . If I rise on the wings of the dawn . . . even there Your right hand will hold me fast.”

And if your life can only be described as hellish: your health is failing, your relationships are unfulfilling, and it all feels purposeless – then please know you are not alone. “If I make my bed in the depths, in Sheol, You are there.”

Or if you’re sick on the inside and the docs don’t know why: “You created my inmost being; You knit me together in my mother’s womb. My frame was not hidden from You when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together. . . Your eyes saw my unformed body . . . I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (v. 13ff). Even when those most close to you don’t seem to understand you, He does. He knows every stitch of what makes you, you: your DNA, your childhood, your experiences, your quirks and foibles and fears . . . He is not surprised or shocked or repulsed by any of it. Despite all of it, He loves you, wants to spend eternity with you.

And if you find yourself thinking a lot about eternity, maybe because it feels like your days are winding down, this psalm also has something for you. “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. . . All the days ordained for me were written in *Your* book before one of them came to be.’” He must really love us if He cares enough to number our days, even the hairs on our head.

There is nowhere you can go that is beyond His reach. You cannot fall so far down that God cannot reach out and grasp you with His strong, saving hand. His pursuit is unhurried, unperturbed, and best of all . . . relentless.

God pursues us all the way to the cross, where out of love, He exchanged His blood for your sin, His innocence for your guilt, His life for your death, so you can hide not *from* Him, but *in* Him. The birds have their nests, the foxes their holes, and though He had no place to rest His head, yet He is your hiding-place, the only one where a sinner can flee, the only place where love perfectly covers over a multitude of sins, the safest place on earth from death and the devil.

One last thing. Some people think today they are mostly done with God, mostly done with His church. This psalm tells us God is not done with them. Heaven forbid that God’s church, His people, ever decide we are done with them either.

Ceasing your own flight from God is good. Better is turning in love and pursuing all who still flee, that they too might find rest. That is loving others as we are truly loved.

“Where can I go from Your Spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence?” Amen.