

Too Wonderful for Me?
Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Luke 14:27
Holy Communion

Psalm 139

¹O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

²You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

³You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD,
you know it completely.

⁵You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

¹³For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

¹⁵My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

¹⁶Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.

In your book were written all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.

¹⁷How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!

¹⁸I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end—I am still with you.

The second scripture reading is only one verse, a statement Jesus made to the large crowds who were following him:

Luke 14:27

“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

The Sermon

Jody Rosen, in a story for the New York Times this past June,ⁱ reported that:

At 3:00 in the morning on June 1, 2008, some maintenance workers at Universal Studios Hollywood had finished some roof repairs on a film set using blowtorches to heat the shingles. Procedure called for them to stay for an hour after they finished, to make sure the shingles had cooled by the time they left. They did that, and left the set around 4:00 A.M.

Half an hour later, a hot spot that the workers hadn't been able to see ignited, and within a few minutes, the Universal lot was up in flames. Eventually the fire came to Building 6197, a 22,000-square-foot warehouse called “the video vault.”

It's called the video vault, but most of the items stored in it were actually sound recordings. And they included some of the most important original sound recordings of all time. The fire was eventually brought under control, but not before a great deal of material was lost.

Although Universal Music Group downplayed it at the time and told everyone outside the company that it wasn't very significant, there was a confidential internal memo that estimated they had lost about 500,000 songs.ⁱⁱ

One reason for the uncertainty about what and how much was lost is that the vault was about as well organized as my sock drawer, if I had 500,000 socks. Apparently there were countless thousands of priceless recordings—seminal moments in music history—mislabelled or put in the wrong boxes or just lying around unmarked.

Among the losses that are just now coming to light ten years later are priceless original recordings by Ray Charles, Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell, Cat Stevens, Elton John, the Eagles, Tupac Shakur;ⁱⁱⁱ

Billie Holiday, Duke Ellington, Al Jolson, Bing Crosby, Ella Fitzgerald, Judy Garland, Chuck Berry, Aretha Franklin;^{iv}

Buddy Holly, John Coltrane, B.B. King, Neil Diamond, Al Green, Eric Clapton, Aerosmith, Barry White, Tom Petty, the Police, Sting, R.E.M., Nirvana, Beck, Louis Armstrong, the Andrews Sisters;^v

Bill Haley singing “Rock Around the Clock,” the Kingsmen singing “Louie, Louie,” Etta James singing “At Last,”^{vi} and it just gets more depressing from there.

The good news is: the reason we even know to mourn those recordings is that we’ve heard them; there are copies of them all over the place; they’ve been distributed for decades to as many people as have been willing to pay for them, and in many cases that’s in the tens of thousands if not millions. With the advent of the internet, now we can hear pretty much any recording from any era, anywhere at any time.

The unhappy news is that when you lose the original, you lose something that is pristine like no copy ever could be. The master tape is the one onto which the sound was first recorded, and as one writer mentioned in writing about this tragedy, the quality of recording equipment going as far back as the early 20th century has always been much greater than the quality we’re able to produce in playback equipment.

You’ll find that out if you convert your old cassette tapes to digital files: with basic sound editing equipment you can download for free on the internet, you can peel away layers of tape hiss and you’ll be astonished at the clarity that’s still on those tapes you made 50 years ago, details of

sound that you never heard on your tape player but were embedded in the recording the instant it was made.

So the sound embedded in a master tape from, say, 1959, sits in a vault awaiting technological advances that let later generations hear it with more clarity and immediacy than anyone ever heard it before, other than the people who were in the room when Aretha sang “Respect” or Elvis sang “Love Me Tender.”

That’s what’s special about those thousands and thousands of precious original recordings that are now, apparently, gone.

And for all of us whose lives and whose understanding of the universe are built around the preservation and accurate transmission of a message we inherited from someone else and of which we are the appointed stewards in our time,

and who recognize the content of that message to be that at the center of all Creation there is a cross, and in that cross is the salvation and redemption of everything,

it raises some thought provoking analogies about how we care for the message that’s entrusted to our stewardship, and what our responsibility is to the world and to our descendants to make sure it isn’t lost,

and whether or not our idea of ownership is to stow away priceless treasures in a great, disorganized, locked warehouse,

and whether and to what extent the message we spread to the world and pass on to our children is only a smudgy or noisy copy of the pristine original that was handed to us.

When Jesus turned to the crowds who were following him and said, “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple,” he was, according to Luke, in the midst of a long passage of

difficult and baffling and challenging statements, some of which have been wrestled with by two millennia of disciples and thinkers and preachers, and they're as flummoxing today as they were when Luke scrawled them onto a parchment or whatever medium and recording process he was using.

All of which seemed a very long way from the compassionate, forgiving, nurturing parental love we sang about all those centuries before Jesus was born:

O LORD, you have searched me and known me...
It was you who formed my inward parts;
knit me together before I was born.

Your eyes beheld the substance of me
before I was even formed.

How weighty are your thoughts to me, O God!
How inconceivably vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them—they are more than the endless desert sand;
and when I come to the end of them all, I find I am still with you.

You hem me in, and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

That was our relationship to God in the days when we were still anticipating the One who was to come.

And then he came.

And, according to Luke, he said and taught and did a lot of things in a short amount of time.

Some of the things he said were beautiful:

blessing the poor, and the hungry, and those who had cause to weep (6:20-21);
 saying “do not judge, and you will not be judged” (6:37);
 sending disciples out with power and authority over all demons, to cure diseases and proclaim God’s kingdom and to heal (9:1-2).

But he could also say hard things, baffling things, challenging things, and some things that if taken only at face value and out of context would be frankly unacceptable—something about hating father and mother and sibling and spouse and children and even life itself (14:26).

And I say, if that’s what you’re about—turning me against the people who are most important to me, and telling me to despise the life God gave me—

I get enough of that hate language on every kind of media blaring at me all day long, and from the appalling bluster emanating from a broken political apparatus, and in the deteriorating mood on the street.

If what you’re going to try to sell me as the good news of salvation is no different from any of that, then please go save somebody else, because I don’t want it and I can live better without it.

And then, right in the middle of what at the time sounded like his most unhinged, bizarre diatribe, Jesus said:

“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

Carry the cross.

And I remembered the original clarity of the message, in its truest, purest expression, which was when it came directly from his mouth—

before the very act of recording it necessarily reduced it from the universal, cosmic thought of God to something that mere mortal humans could easily read and digest;

before the master tape of the original Truth was transferred onto a hissy recording full of background noise; before blurry copies were made from blurry copies of blurry copies;

before marketing agents and carnival hucksters got ahold of the original message and sold it to the masses in a more easily acceptable, commercial form;

before the nuances of the once-crystal clear truth started being blared from radios and sound systems and earbuds and paraded in arena spectacles that cost 400 bucks a ticket;

when it was still the original, pure, unadulterated, uncorrupted message directly from the mouth of God:

that “God so loved the world that he gave his only son” (John 3:16);

that he was named Wonderful Counselor
and Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6);

that the coming of the Savior is good news of great joy
for *all* people (Luke 2:10-11),

that he himself bore our sins in his body on the cross,
so that, free from sins, you and I might live for righteousness;
and by his wounds, we have been healed (I Peter 2:24).

And he said, as he was on his journey to the cross in Jerusalem:
“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

In other words, those who want to be his disciples—who embrace the claim of being followers of Christ; who choose to follow Jesus into the world he came to save—do so carrying the cross.

The cross is vulnerability.

The cross is willing, clear-eyed self-sacrifice.

The cross is trust in God's strength, which allows me to surrender everything to the cause of my Creator, and frees me to live for love and to do what is right by God and my neighbor and all creation, no matter what it costs to my ego or my bank account or my life.

And I remember the beauty and clarity of that original truth, and it draws me in again.

But just before I sign on, I pause to wonder once more, as I did out in the Palestinian wilderness thee thousand years ago:

Is it too wonderful for somebody like me?

Maybe Psalm 139 was right. Maybe it is too wonderful for me.

Maybe I'm too broken mentally or physically or spiritually or emotionally; maybe I'm too jaded or debased or weak or flawed or self-centered or whatever.

And God still says: wherever you go, I am with you.

With God, nothing will be impossible (Luke 1:37).

You *can* carry the cross. You *can* follow.

Regardless of the fumbling and bumbling of generation after generation after generation who try their best—or don't—and distribute to the world a flawed and noisy version of the original message we were given,

the pristine message cannot be locked away in a warehouse, can't be lost in a fire or a flood, and doesn't deteriorate over time.

How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!

How vast is the sum of them!

I try to count them—they are more than the sand;

I come to the end—I am still with you.

Keith Grogg
 Montreat Presbyterian Church
 Montreat, NC
 September 8, 2019

ⁱ Jody Rosen, “The Day the Music Burned: It was the biggest disaster in the history of the music business — and almost nobody knew. This is the story of the 2008 Universal fire” (New York Times Magazine, June 11, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/11/magazine/universal-fire-master-recordings.html?searchResultPosition=1>)

ⁱⁱ Niraj Chokshi, “Recordings by Elton John, Nirvana and Thousands More Lost in Fire: A New York Times investigation has revealed that decades of Universal Music Group treasures burned in 2008” (New York Times, June 12, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/11/us/master-recordings-universal-fire.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article®ion=Footer>)

ⁱⁱⁱ Laura M. Holson, “Musicians Mourn the Fiery Destruction of Their Recordings: ‘I Think They Are Gone Forever’” (New York Times, June 12, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/12/us/universal-music-fire-musician-reactions.html?module=inline>)

^{iv} Chokshi, “Recordings by...”

^v Jody Rosen, “Here Are Hundreds More Artists Whose Tapes Were Destroyed in the UMG Fire.” New York Times Magazine (June 25, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/25/magazine/universal-music-fire-bands-list-umg.html>)

^{vi} Chokshi, “Recordings by...”