

# The ST FIVE

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## The Daily First Five

Monday, July 24, 2023

### The Weeds and the Wheat

**Matthew 13:24-30**

He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

#### **Digging In**

**Garry Solmonson**

Garry has been a member of First Nac since 2007 and teaches the Gather Sunday School class, is a VBS volunteer, and helps out behind the scenes frequently. He loves studying theology. He is married to Le’Ann, the father of two amazing adult daughters, and Pop Pops Extraordinaire.



Today's reading is yet another parable from Jesus, and like previously with the parable of the Sower, Jesus will explain the meaning of the story to the disciples later in the chapter. He says the one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, the field is the world, the good seed are the children of the kingdom, the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. He doesn't say who the slaves represent but many scholars suggest they might be the disciples. (In Romans, the apostle Paul calls himself a slave of Jesus.)

Several commentaries on this story detail what weeds look like wheat, and how it might be difficult to tell them apart. I have a fancy app on my phone where I can take a picture of something in my flower bed, and it will tell me what it is, and if it is desirable. One plant in our butterfly garden is goldenrod. The software tells me many people consider it a weed, but the butterflies like it. Coming to a consensus on what is a weed is tricky. Martin Luther used this parable to condemn heretics in the church, at a time when the catholic church considered Martin Luther a heretic.

The garden in the parable is a wheat field. Anything not wheat is to be seen as undesirable, still, Jesus tells the laborers to hold off on the weeding, somebody else will take care of that. Funny how we are quick to want to do justice, but slower to love mercy and almost timid to walk humbly with God.



## Reflection

### Gary LaFour

Gary is the Lay Leader of First United Methodist Church – Nacogdoches. While he has served the church in many lay capacities, he is most excited about his role on The First Forward Team. He is married to Jana, the real brains of the outfit, has three married sons of whom he is most proud, and two granddaughters, Lilly and Hope, who make everything worthwhile.

Weeds... they are the bane of existence for all farmers, gardeners, lawn growers and just about anyone who has ever tried to grow something good, or pretty, or in any way useful or desirable.

And in almost all cases, our initial reaction is to either yank the weed out of the ground, or if we are feeling really mad at the weed, we go grab that hand sprayer full of Round-Up, and go to war with the demon weed.

The problem is that we seldom take a step back, and ask the question, "What might be the unintended consequence of eradicating the "weed" in any of the aforementioned methods?" Well, if we grab the Round-Up, it is very likely that our spray will attack the plants that are near the weed, thus denying us the enjoyment of the of the surrounding plants when they reach maturity. And if we reach down and begin yanking weeds out of the ground, one of two things will likely happen. Either we will leave the weed roots in the ground allowing them to spring right back up, or more likely, we will mistake the seedling we are trying to grow for a weed, and pull it up by mistake, again denying us the benefit of the plant we are trying to grow.

The parable that Jesus told in today's scripture really hits home to me. Growing up, I could have easily been mistaken for a weed. I was too short, too skinny, and had an overbite my parents couldn't afford to have fixed. We were dirt poor, lived in an area that could have been described as on the wrong side of the tracks, and if not for my grandparents on my mother's side, would have had a hard time keeping shoes that fit on my ever growing feet.

But because my parents were respected as honorable people, because I was a pretty good athlete, and because I made nearly perfect grades, I was fortunate to have never been plucked, discarded, and/or ostracized by my peers or the people of the small town I grew up in.

I didn't realize it at the time, but I was a slowly developing stalk of wheat who could have easily been mistaken for a weed and cast aside.

I am pretty sure I am still often mistaken for a weed, but at least I now understand that God has a plan for me, and that given time to mature, may someday become a glorious, fully ripened stalk of wheat, capable of sustaining other immature, struggling plants

Please be careful which "weeds" you pull.

## Prayer

Dear God, help us to recognize that You, and You alone, can truly judge the weeds from the wheat. Help us to love like You love...even the weeds.

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**Our Journey**  
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# The ST FIVE

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## The Daily First Five

Tuesday, July 25, 2023

### Let Anyone with Ears Listen!

**Matthew 13:36-43**

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

### Digging In

**Garry Solmonson**

Garry has been a member of First Nac since 2007 and teaches the Gather Sunday School class, is a VBS volunteer, and helps out behind the scenes frequently. He loves studying theology. He is married to Le’Ann, the father of two amazing adult daughters, and Pop Pops Extraordinaire.



The whole 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew is a bunch of parables. Today’s reading

immediately follows parables about a mustard seed and one about yeast. As with any good parable, we are quick to try to identify who represents us (the fruitful wheat) and who doesn't represent us (the weeds.)

But looking at all the stories here, we find another common element, and that is the kingdom. In the story of the weeds and wheat, the righteous shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father. In the story of the mustard seed, the kingdom starts small but grows to be the largest of garden plants! In the story of the yeast, the Kingdom is mixed throughout the dough such that everything rises!

After today's reading, Jesus says the kingdom is like a treasure in a field and a man sells all he has to buy that field. Then the kingdom is like a pearl, and a man sells all he has and buys the pearl! The whole chapter is about the kingdom, not about who is a weed or who is wheat. So, when Jesus ends by saying "*Let anyone with ears listen!*" maybe he is saying the next time you meet somebody with ears, tell them about the Kingdom of God, and how it is right here, right now.



## Reflection

### Abbey Weaver

Abbey has been a member of First's congregation and staff since 2019. She works as the Director of Youth Ministries. In her free time, she enjoys walking and Zumba, serving as a CASA volunteer, watching British murder mysteries, and relaxing with her two cats: Ellie and Egg. Abbey loves spending time with her friends, family, and youth!

I had a systematic theology professor in seminary who was challenging to understand. She was a brilliant teacher and theologian! But she was also constantly running late - which made her out of breath from the beginning words of the lecture; she was pregnant - which made her sweat and speak with exasperation and exhaustion; and she had a thick Romanian accent with which she talked quickly - which made her stumble on her words sometimes. As first-semester theology students, everything sounded like a foreign language to us. That, in addition to our professor's unique speech patterns and quirks, meant that we had a hard time learning to understand her teaching.

Over the course of the first few weeks, we began to comprehend her lectures at a faster rate. We didn't have to interrupt to ask for repetition as often. Our brains were trained to keep up with her speed of speech and understand her accent. Not only were we able to hear what she was saying, but we were able to find real meaning in it. Her teaching changed our minds and hearts once we learned to hear.

The disciples and other followers of Jesus had a similar struggle. No one had ever talked to them like that before. This Son of Man was proclaiming messages with new intonations, patterns of speech, and emphases. He discussed things they had never heard before. Jesus was difficult for them to understand! They needed explanations and examples. His followers frequently asked clarifying questions and needed repetition because their brains were trying to learn a new language.

Throughout the book of Matthew, we see these disciples and others on their journey

to understanding the words of the Word made flesh. Just like them, it can be difficult for us to understand what Jesus is teaching us. If we are patient and diligent in our reading, study, prayer, and listening, we can begin the journey of transformation that Christ's message offers us. May we all open our ears, eyes, hearts, and minds to what the Word has for us. Let anyone with ears listen!

## **Prayer**

Holy Lord, Great Teacher of us all, thank you for your message. This good news of great love can be challenging to understand as it is foreign to our hearts and minds. Help us to learn to listen. Let us all hear your words and allow them to change us from the inside out. Let anyone with ears listen! Amen.

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# The ST FIVE

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## The Daily First Five

Wednesday, July 26, 2023

### How Awesome is this Place!

**Genesis 28:10-19a**

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." So, Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

### Digging In

**Garry Solmonson**

Garry has been a member of First Nac since 2007 and teaches the Gather Sunday School class, is a VBS volunteer, and helps out behind the scenes frequently.

He loves studying theology. He is married to Le'Ann, the father of two amazing adult daughters, and Pop Pops Extraordinaire.



To appreciate today's reading, one must go back and review Jacob's history as a brother who steals his brother's birthright and deceives his father to get a blessing. This all serves as the stage to explain why Jacob is on the run (at the urging of his mother) to escape his brother's murderous rage.

Not traveling in luxury, he must use a rock for a pillow as it has gotten too dark to keep running. As he sleeps, he dreams of a ladder to heaven with angels going up and down, and he hears God speak to him reiterating to him promises made to his ancestors Abraham and Isaac regarding descendants and land. While God promises Jacob the land where he is sleeping, they both know that he must first escape to the safety of his uncle's house. As a result, God includes that in the plan by saying he will be with Jacob wherever he goes and bring him back safely to this place.

The place is what stands out to Jacob when he wakes. Unlike the tower of Babel, where people tried to build a connection to God, Jacob's ladder is God making a connection with God's chosen. In New Testament terms, Jesus is our Jacob's ladder. God connecting with us, through God's Son.

Today, we also recognize places where God connects with us. We call them liminal spaces. The Celts referred to them as thin places, where heaven and earth come close to one another. An Apache proverb says that "Wisdom sits in places." Have you ever found such a place? It could be a church, or a mountain, or forest. Thin places are not something you plan to visit, they are places you stumble upon, and when you do, you too will likely think "How awesome is this place! Surely the Lord is here."



## Reflection

### **Chris Hancock**

Chris Hancock is a Nac native and SFA grad who runs a hometown marketing firm. He and Cindy were married in First Church in 1977 and they have two adult daughters and one granddaughter. Chris serves as chairman of the First Board of Stewards.

Have you ever stood stunned and awe-struck in front of something so magnificent and overpowering that you were left speechless? Maybe it was rugged mountain peaks with the morning sun just breaking over the tops or a fall sunset over a high-



country lake? I've certainly been brought to my knees by these kinds of experiences. There are few things that can take my breath away like being out in nature, especially at dawn and dusk, when it feels like it's just me, the grandeur and God. Now, it's in these "thin places" that my small-minded, practical, questioning self occasionally wonders why something like a pile of rocks or a pool of water can bring me to tears. And then I'm reminded that God doesn't owe me explanations. I'm convinced I will never understand the innate emotional change that comes over me when I experience God's creation. What I do know is these are some of the thin places where I not only celebrate my creator, I experience His presence in a most real way. It amazes me that the God of the universe wants a relationship with me so badly that He shares his magnificent creation with me, stirs in me a reaction to it that I can never comprehend, and even hands over his Son to help me better know and understand Him and offer me the choice of life forever with Him. That is a love that is beyond my imagination. When I think of my two daughters, I cannot think of anything I wouldn't do for them, for their happiness and for their wellbeing. And yet the love God has for each one of us surpasses my fatherly love infinitely. If that thought doesn't stop me where I stand, what will? I pray you and I are able to accept God's love and to open our hearts, minds and spirits to the call He has in store for us.

## **Prayer**

God, help me to always see you all around me, in your magnificent creation and in your son Jesus. Guide me to embrace your love, to open my heart, mind, and spirit, and to show your love to those who need it most.

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## **Our Journey**

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# The ST FIVE

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## The Daily First Five

Thursday, July 27, 2023

### Blessings from God

Isaiah 44:1-8

But now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen!  
Thus says the Lord who made you, who formed you in the womb and will help you:  
Do not fear, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen.  
For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground;  
I will pour my spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring.  
They shall spring up like a green tamarisk, like willows by flowing streams.  
This one will say, 'I am the Lord's', another will be called by the name of Jacob,  
yet another will write on the hand, 'The Lord's', and adopt the name of Israel.  
Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts:  
I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.  
Who is like me? Let them proclaim it, let them declare and set it forth before me.  
Who has announced from of old the things to come? Let them tell us\* what is yet  
to be.  
Do not fear, or be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it?  
You are my witnesses! Is there any god besides me?  
There is no other rock; I know not one.

### Digging In

Garry Solmonson

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In this section of Isaiah, the prophet speaks the word of the Lord to the nation that is in exile under the command of Babylon. In the previous chapter God laments the disobedience of Israel, but now, even so, the Lord declares devotion for God's chosen. The text uses three different names for God's people: Israel, Jacob, and Jeshurun. The last one means "The upright one." It is an odd name given the fact that Israel has failed to be upright. Could it be that God is giving God's people a pep-talk? Trying to speak something into being. Calling Israel upright in hopes that they will live into that name?

God paints for them a picture of the future when they will flourish like plants growing next to a stream, and that stream is the pouring out of God's spirit. Israel will be so blessed, that others not born into the nation will seek membership in it.

God reminds them that their blessing will be solely from the one true God, an important point for people living in a land that worships multiple idols. As God challenges idolaters to prove their gods before the one true God, God also reminds Israel that God has been with them from the beginning, and have no fear, God will be with them going forward.

Is this just an ancient account of God declaring favor for people surrounded by others who don't know the one true God or is it Yahweh giving us a pep talk? There is no doubt we have lots of idols clamoring for our attention, and we are surely not as upright as we should be. The text uses the word witness as a noun, but isn't it actually asking us to do it as a verb?



## Reflection

### Andrew Hodge

Andrew Hodge has been a member of First church for 4 years and has volunteered and worked at the church. He works as a reporter at The Daily Sentinel. He lives with his parents Nathan and Amy and his brothers Ian and Charlie, along with two dogs and two cats of varying dispositions.

I recently wrote in the paper about a donation of twenty-five pallets of food to HOPE Food Bank by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. While I was meeting with the volunteers at the food bank, I was struck by just how fortunate it was that the food had arrived when it did. This summer has seen huge increases in the number of people who need assistance. Now, they have an enormous amount of

## **Prayer**

Dear God, thank you for this day and for all the blessings you have given me. Help me to be the person I need to be and use me as an instrument of Your healing. Dear God, do what's best for me and ignore all my other prayers. Amen.

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## **Our Journey**

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# The ST FIVE

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## The Daily First Five

Friday, July 28, 2023

### Teach Me Your Way

Psalm 86:11-17

Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart to revere your name.

I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever.

For great is your steadfast love toward me; you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.

O God, the insolent rise up against me; a band of ruffians seeks my life, and they do not set you before them.

But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Turn to me and be gracious to me; give your strength to your servant; save the child of your serving girl.

Show me a sign of your favor, so that those who hate me may see it and be put to shame, because you, Lord, have helped me and comforted me.

### Digging In

#### Garry Solmonson

Garry has been a member of First Nac since 2007 and teaches the Gather Sunday School class, is a VBS volunteer, and helps out behind the scenes frequently. He loves studying theology. He is married to Le'Ann, the father of two amazing adult daughters, and Pop Pops Extraordinaire.



When you read today's scripture it may have seemed familiar to you, and that is not a surprise because many of the lines come from other places in the Hebrew scriptures as well as other psalms. Sometimes psalms are very positive, sometimes they are negative, but this being a compilation, has bits of both!

With specific reference to problems, the psalmist doesn't dwell on the negative but highlights the joy found in the Lord. Turning to God in the face of a predicament is, in itself, an act of faith. Personally, I want to know more about this "band of ruffians," but God already knows the details. Often my prayers ask God to eliminate what bothers me, but in the last line of the reading, the psalmist asks only that the threat may be put to shame. This psalm serves as a good example of prayer. Praising God, not taking heavenly favor for granted, and seeking a restorative form of justice, rather than retribution. When Jesus says "Love your enemies," perhaps this is what it looks like.



## Reflection

### Sharon Scifres

Sharon has been a member of First Nac for over 30 years and has served in various capacities. She is a Stephen Minister and is the Bereavement Coordinator. She and her husband, Elton, have two grown daughters, two granddaughters, and a grandson. In her spare time, she enjoys photography and painting.

For me, prayer has always been about thanking God for all that is good in my life and asking for help to get beyond myself. I'm not as successful as I'd like at being a good person and often need God's help in that area.

Praying is often a quick 'thank you' or 'uh oh, I need help' throughout the day rather than a dedicated planned out time to pray. I know I need to do more of the latter, but to be honest, I often don't. I am definitely a work in progress.

I have been trying hard to pay attention to my thinking and to 'mind my own business'. As I get older, I realize that managing my own thoughts and actions is enough of a job and I don't need to be in charge of everyone around me.



food to give to those most in need right here in our community.

I think that donation was absolutely an example of God at work in our town. The question is, then, if God is able to work through others, couldn't he work through our church? I can't help but wonder what that would look like.

Here's another thing I learned while working on that story: a lot of the volunteers at HOPE have themselves been beneficiaries of the food pantry. They were the "willows," and then they were the "stream." In the same way, I think that it is important for us to think about how our church can be recipients of God's blessings and also the ones who are a blessing to others.

One last thought and I'll let you go: in this passage, the blessings of God are so great that people are called to join Israel. I like to think that we are called to do the same thing. We bring people to God by blessing others, just like we are called to God by being blessed.

## **Prayer**

For the many ways you bless, O God, we are thankful. Help us bless others.

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# The ST FIVE

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## The Daily First Five

Saturday, July 29, 2023

### I Am Not Alone

Romans 8:12-25

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope, we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

### Digging In

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class, is a VBS volunteer, and helps out behind the scenes frequently. He loves studying theology. He is married to Le'Ann, the father of two amazing adult daughters, and Pop Pops Extraordinaire.



Like it or not, the Apostle Paul is passionate. But even in his evangelism, you see that he understands that it is the Holy Spirit that is at work and not the work of preachers and teachers. Paul instead focuses his efforts on explaining the results and responsibilities that arise out of the work of the Holy Spirit.

Often in work or sports environments, you will hear leaders of those groups refer to the organization as a family. Paul goes one further to describe our lineage in the family of God, calling us children and even joint heirs with Christ. The metaphor spoke to the church in Rome which was made up of a mixture of social strata including slaves and freed persons, Jews and non-Jews all united by the common cry of Abba, Father.

The reading then moves into acknowledgment of a present struggle, and a hope for resolution. Continuing the family focus, Paul describes a creation groaning in labor and for the birth of what we do not yet see but have already been given. We have been freed, yet he says we are debtors. We suffer with Christ in order that we may be Glorified with Christ. Paul speaks of us being the children of God, and of creation longing for the revealing of the children of God. Modern theologians call this the “*already-and-not-yet*.”

Sometimes we behave as though we are *already*. Sometimes we behave as though we are *not-yet*. How can we be both, at the same time?



## Reflection

### Le'Ann Solmonson

Le'Ann serves on the First Forward Leadership and is the leader of the Community Care Team. She has been a member of First Nac since 2007 and sings in the Praise Band. She and her husband, Garry, have two adult daughters, two grandsons, and a granddaughter arriving in August.

The first absolute truth that I knew that I knew was that God loves me and Jesus is always with me and I am never alone. That truth was instilled in me by my very devout Pentecostal grandmother. That truth provided a very stable foundation of faith in me. It was simple and provided a sense of security to me as a child when I was very often left alone.

Nanny also taught me some really fundamental theology that I had to unlearn as I got older. Much of her own faith was based on the notions of sin and unworthiness. I grew up with the idea that our human nature was so bad that God had to send Jesus to be crucified so we could be cleansed of our sins so we could be in God's presence. And if you were filled with the Holy Spirit it was evident you were good enough to go to heaven. Unless, of course, you became a backslider and were a sinner again. I can remember my grandmother and my aunt referring to someone as a "Center" man. I didn't know where Center was, but it was obviously where a bunch of people lived. It wasn't until I was older that I realized she was saying someone was a sinner.

As a result, I spent much of my childhood and adolescence trying to be good enough to go to heaven. When I did things my grandmother wouldn't approve of (which was a lot of things...remember she was Pentecostal), I was ashamed and fearful for my salvation. I also carried shame and guilt with me into my early adult years because of choices I had made when I was younger.

As much as I am thankful for the foundation my Nanny gave me, I am equally thankful for some older Methodist women who came into my life and helped me understand mercy and grace. They helped me to understand that there was nothing that could ever separate me from the love of God and God's desire to be in relationship with me. And today, the truth that God is always with me, and I am never alone still brings me great comfort.

## **Prayer**

Loving God, thank you for the faithful women who helped develop my faith. I am so grateful for your mercy and grace. Thank you for always being with me. Amen.

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# The ST FIVE

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## The Daily First Five

Sunday, July 30, 2023

### And You Still Love Me!

Psalm 139

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.  
You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.  
You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways.  
Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.  
You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.  
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.  
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.  
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 as light to you.  
Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.  
See if there is any wicked way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.

### Digging In

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two amazing adult daughters, and Pop Pops Extraordinaire.



I hope you are not as cynical as me, because when I read this psalm one of the first things I think of is George Orwell's novel Nineteen Eighty-four, where in a dystopian future everything is seen by an omnipresent government surveillance known as Big Brother. Younger readers may just think of the television show Big Brother where the inhabitants of a house are constantly observed. If you are even younger, you might be thinking about Santa Claus who "sees you when you're sleeping and knows when you're awake."

Do you feel it comforting or mildly threatening that God is EVERYWHERE? Does the line "You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me." give you comfort or suspicion? Do you retain free will, or are you being controlled? Why does the writer of the psalm even consider fleeing from God's presence if it isn't reassuring?

Must I be guilty of something to have these thoughts? Convention suggests that King David authored many of the Psalms, and Lord knows he had a few things to feel guilty about. If I am honest with myself, the last line hits home: "See if there is any wicked way in me." You bet there is.

The Apostle Paul makes it less scary by reminding me that it is Love that is ever-present: *"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."* (Romans 8:38-39)



## Reflection

### Amy Hodge

Rev. Amy Hodge is an ordained Deacon in the UMC, the spouse of Dr. Nathan Hodge, and the proud mother of Andrew, Ian, and Charlie. Amy started her ministry in the UMC as a student at SFA when she joined the staff of First UMC Nacogdoches. Amy is currently appointed to ministry with Lifetime Wellness, and enjoys being a part of ministry at FUMC Nacogdoches as well.

We recently finished a week of Music, Art and Drama Camp at the church where 21 campers learned a whole musical in just one week! The week was full of surprises and unexpected challenges. The campers weren't sure what to expect and the leadership wasn't sure how everything would go. We all showed up each morning,



as prepared as we could be, but every day we had a twist or turn we had to navigate! Moments like that help today's psalm come to life. We didn't know what was going to happen, but God knew. We all did the best we could do, and we walked in faith knowing that God would handle the rest. When we don't understand what is happening or we can't see what is coming – God's Word reminds us that God knows.

God is with us and God's love is certainly ever-present! Try rereading the beginning of the psalm adding "and You still love me"...

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. ***And You still love me!***

You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. ***And You still love me!***

You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. ***And You still love me!***

God knows you. God knows the choices you have made and the choices you will make, and God still loves you! The omniscience and omnipresence of God can be as comforting as a hug from your closest friend when you remember that **God loves you no matter what.**

I'm a planner. I've always been one. My mom likes to share about how I told my Kindergarten teacher on the first day of school that my goal was to learn my times tables, and how I would plan my next birthday a whole year in advance. I like for plans to be made and followed! But God knows better than I do that sometimes the greatest blessings come from the unexpected moments in life. Sometimes I learn the best lessons or grow in my faith the most from the events I couldn't see coming. Today's psalm reminds me that God is with me in all the moments when life doesn't go according to **my** plan.

I'd like to add an additional verse from Romans that all of our MAD Campers committed to memory, a verse I hope we all carry in our hearts: "*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*" (Romans 8:28) No matter what happens, God is working for GOOD; and there is nowhere you can go to escape God's amazing LOVE.

## Prayer

Gracious God, Thank you for loving us no matter what. Please help us, Lord, to be comforted by your presence and your knowledge. When we feel lonely or lost, remind us that you are with us. Help us be a comforting and loving presence for all of your children. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

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To read previous devotions, visit [Daily First Five Archive](#)

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**Our Journey**  
**To love, serve and grow in our relationship with God,**  
**TOGETHER.**