

Intimacy and Immensity May 10, 2020

Rev. Karen McArthur, Rev. Kate Layzer, Sarah Higginbotham

Texts: Psalm 139

Psalm 139 is full of beautiful imagery for our relationship with God—such vastness in God’s reach and such closeness in God’s bond with each of us. On Mothers’ Day, it’s not a stretch to make comparisons between the Psalmist’s imagery and our experiences of mothering relationships. On this particular Mothers’ Day, as our worlds have shrunk to the footprint of our home while growing exponentially through our electronic connections across the globe, there may be new ways for us to consider what God is teaching us in the singing of this Psalm.

Sarah

When schools closed and we all found ourselves home 24/7, it was a bit of a whirlwind in our household. How would we be together all the time? How would we meet everyone’s needs for work-time, play-time, freak-out time, connection-time, and alone-time? Mothers of school-aged kids around the country had to pivot on a dime to set up schedules, read school emails, access online learning sites, and support “school at home.” All this while continuing to do everything else a mother does: cook, clean, shop, plan, and work at a job outside the home, either remotely or maybe by leaving the family at home to figure it out without us. Sadly, many mothers soon learned they needed to figure out filing for unemployment.

There was an initial explosion of productivity; my proudest moments included coming up with a block schedule for weekdays that kept a routine while being flexible with timing, as well as setting up over a dozen shortcuts on my old laptop for Leo to access learning sites with one click. But after that first push, the exhaustion and despair started to creep in. Big feelings and old behaviors that felt like a return to an earlier developmental stage took all my energy and focus.

Articles on self-care, responses to trauma, and the burden of emotional labor that mothers bear were everywhere. I found myself bouncing between the intimate mothering tasks required of a needy child trying to make sense of his world and the enormity of a pandemic that was spreading faster than my brain could process, laying bare the inequities in our society. Talk about overload!

Karen

Linda and I have also experienced the overload, but in a different way, since our kids are older. Last fall, we settled into our empty nest routine, with Abby away at the University of Pittsburgh and Drew working up in Boston. We planned a family spring break trip in early March to celebrate my 60th birthday. Little did we imagine that our one-week family vacation would now be stretching into its third month back together with our young adult children. And so, we’ve settled into new routines – four adults with four computers, eight monitors, five phone lines -- structured weekdays of zoom staff meetings, calls with advisees and prospective students, finishing up coursework, and final exams. We are trying to focus on our calls and tasks, attempting to balance work and family, with new concerns about health and safety. After several weeks, we had settled into a new rhythm, working somewhat efficiently in our altered world.

That is, until the fox came, two weeks ago on Saturday morning, napping in the warm sunlight, tucked under our hedge. We watched for an hour or so before she ran back across the street to the den somewhere behind our neighbors’ shed. A few days later, I awoke to the sound of Linda’s hurried

footsteps and pull of the window shade, followed by rapidly repeating clicks of her camera shutter. “The fox is back ... with a baby.” And so we watched them in that same sunny spot under the hedge, snuggling and grooming, as we ran from window to window to get the best views. About 9am, the mama fox dashed back across the street, leaving the six-week old fox, who hung out and napped, and stretched, and rolled around, just 15 or 20 feet from our window, staying until well after lunch.

Then this past Wednesday, as if we hadn’t had enough delight, there were two young foxes, playing on the back stone wall, in the sunlight and shadows before disappearing over the wall, near the place where their fox ancestors had a den a decade or so ago. After lunch, I looked up from my laptop and out the window to see mama fox just six feet away, coming right up over our breezeway, headed into our backyard, clearly on a mission. She stopped and looked to her left to the spot under the hedge where she had snuggled with her young one the week before. Not there. She ran to the back wall where her two kits had played earlier in the day. Up over the wall, clearly searching for them, with that look in her eyes that said, “you know you were supposed to be home by now.” Just like young tweens, old enough to be on their own for a bit, but not quite responsible enough to be back on time. I totally expected them to look up from their play and say, “Mom!?! What are you doing here?”

On Friday, the two kits were back on their own, playing and exploring, curling up for a nap on one of our patio cushions, running around our house when the neighbor started his lawnmower, sitting together in the middle of our front lawn as people walked by, then taking another nap together in the bushes next to our front step, clearly claiming our yard as their territory. A third young one joined them late in the day. Young, growing foxes, eager and on the move. Google tells us that by next mothers’ day, they’ll quite possibly have babies of their own.

What’s intriguing to me is how they and we learn, from generation to generation, how to live and learn and play, how to find food, and stay safe, and find our way back home. We learned from the parents and grandparents in our lives, and we’ve passed on what we’ve learned to younger generations. I’ve been thinking of how my great grandfather’s 22-year-old newly married sister Stella died in the second wave of the 1918 epidemic. I wonder how much of my mother’s focus on cleaning and germs came from what she learned from her family.

My mother did laundry on Mondays, cleaned the house on Tuesdays, got her hair done on Thursdays, and shopped for groceries on Fridays. Her routines provided a rhythm, and helped to differentiate the days of a young mother with two young children. I understand that better now. Pre-COVID, we would throw in a load of laundry here and there, and we probably stopped at the grocery store at least 4 or 5 times a week to pick up a few things. Now we’re planning our menus and trying to shop once a week. Drew said that until he went away to college, he didn’t know it was possible to freeze chicken. I keep thinking back to the 60s and Maurie, our milkman who brought us milk in glass bottles on Tuesdays and Fridays, or of my parents’ stories of rationing of sugar and meat in the 40s and wonder if we didn’t understand some things better about our environment and community fifty years ago.

Our 21st century way of living has been brought to a standstill by a virus that is at once microscopic and immense, a crisis magnified by our way of life and by our political divide. It is beyond overwhelming to read the news and to know that different priorities would have led to vastly different outcomes. It is so hard to know what to do, or where to focus our energy. What does the future hold for us and for future generations?

In *The Room of Ancient Keys*, Elena Mikhalkova wrote:

My grandmother once gave me a tip:

In difficult times, you move forward in small steps.

Do what you have to do, but little by little.
Don't think about the future, or what may happen tomorrow.
Wash the dishes.
Remove the dust.
Write a letter.
Make a soup.
You see?
You are advancing step by step.
Take a step and stop.
Rest a little.
Praise yourself.
Take another step.
Then another.
You won't notice, but your steps will grow more and more.
And the time will come when you can think about the future without crying.

Kate

This day, this year, is a difficult one for many of us. Even in so-called ordinary times, Mother's Day can be a challenging day, complicated by losses, or by the trauma of miscarriage, or the pain of infertility, or by parent-child relationships that don't easily fit into a greeting card. If it feels like you and the Hallmark company are out of step today, you're not alone. Some of you know that my husband Don and I are mourning the COVID-related death of his mom, who slipped away bit by bit last month while we kept vigil at a distance, unable to visit her—a story that has been multiplied around the country and the world so many times in the past several months that it simply boggles the mind.

It is mind-boggling. Yet each COVID story, like each family story, is intimately individual. We will never forget the daily conversations with my mother-in-law's hospital physicians about every detail of her illness, as they tried to make us present by describing what they were seeing and what they thought was going on medically. How did they have time? Yet they took the time. There was no hint of, "Another day, another 92-year-old COVID casualty, what are you going to do?" No. It was as if she was their only patient. Immensity, and tender intimacy. Just like our psalm.

Mothers and motherhood loom so large for most of us that it they are their own kind of immensity. Our psalmist is candid about the tension of this: Like the runaway bunny of the classic picture book, he keeps imagining creative new ways to get away from God, only to find that God is still right there with him, inescapably near. Daunting. Comforting. Like a devoted mother, God is a force you can't simply put behind you by wishing.

When you think about all that is going on in the world right now, or at any given moment... How does God find the time? And yet... for God, it is as if each one of us is her only child. It's hard to fathom a love that intimate and all-encompassing. I have a hard time wrapping my mind around the God I meet in our psalm—the one who will go with me to hell and back, and often has. I haven't always found it easy to feel the reality of God's presence. Sometimes it's like trying to reach out to someone in a

distant hospital whose hand you ache to hold, wishing, wishing you could get closer. It's so important to keep reminding ourselves that that feeling of remoteness is only a feeling. It doesn't mean that God is far away.

When you find yourself overwhelmed by the immensity of this time, and wonder where God is in it all; when you feel your life is tiny and insignificant, and you start to question if any of it matters in the grand scheme of things, open this psalm, and pray it again slowly. "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." "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."

Sarah

Like in Kate's home and in Karen's home, as each new day arrives in our home, we are finding our rhythm. Some days are better than others, and each day brings a new opportunity to see how God has not left us, nor let us hide from her. Even on the darkest days, when, as the Psalmist writes, we feel covered in darkness, and the light around us becomes night, we recognize that "even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day." In my house, we have a nighttime ritual of checking in before bed to see how we did and what we can pledge to try harder for the next day. One recent evening, Leo's eyes widened as he proclaimed, "Hey, today was a pretty okay day!" And that is my wish for you: may you find your "pretty okay" days, trusting that God has already formed them and written them especially for you.

As we enter our ninth week of this new and different time, may we keep going with small steps: taking care of what we can, mothering each other with kindness and compassion, finding a new rhythm, learning new ways to do things, and trusting that God walks with us, holding the immensity of our feelings and our experiences as close as a mother's breath. Amen!