

Happy July 4th Weekend!

Psalm 139:1-18, the Scripture reading for today, illuminates how our Father is always near. “Where can I go from your Spirit?.. If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.” And then, in verse 16, “all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.” Psalm 56:8 affirms this documenting of our lives thus, “Record my misery; list my tears on your scroll – are they not in your record?” God knows us intimately: numbering our tears and, as Christ teaches in Matthew 10:30, “Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.”

But doesn't the Bible also teach that He is separated from us by sin? Isaiah 59:1&2 says this, “Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor His ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear” (NIV).

Doesn't this only apply to the ancient Jews since it is found in the Old Testament? No, it does not, since we know that “all have sinned”, and this is found in Romans 3:23 and 5:12. In fact, Romans 2:12 tells us, “All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law.” How then can we sit here on this wonderful day that God has made with joy and hope in our hearts?

It is because of the words spoken and fulfilled long ago, in Isaiah 7:14, which is then affirmed in Matthew 1:23, “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” And what does “Immanuel” mean? “God with us.” Some may say, “But His name isn't Immanuel, it's Jesus.” That is a stumbling stone set before those who need reasons not to believe. His birth name was the ancient form of Jesus, pronounced Yeah-Shoowah. By living for the Father's will, Jesus atoned for our sins, and built a way for us to live in intimacy with Him. Hebrews 5:7-9 declares:

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, He offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the One who could save Him from death, and He was heard because of His reverent submission. Son though He was, He learned obedience from what He suffered and, once made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek. (NIV)

And so, because of who He is and what He did, we are truthful when we declare Him Immanuel, “God with us”.

When I was a teenager, I was called to preach, but I ran. I joined the army to avoid doing what God wanted me to do. I suffered much for that decision, much more than I can share today. I came to regret many of my choices, but I still did not completely submit to Christ. That didn't come until much later.

The day after I got out of the army, I went to visit some friends I dearly missed. I always, I repeat, always wore my seatbelt, but not that day. For whatever reason, I simply did not, though I knew better. I was driving around 48 mph, when a car suddenly pulled out in front of me. I barely had time to react. My truck struck his car about the driver's side door. I remember seeing the back of his head disappear below the hood of my Ford Ranger. He wasn't even looking in my direction.

In the moment of impact, I should've been severely injured or killed; however, a shining golden hand reached through the windshield and pressed down on my chest. Not shiny, but shining, as in "I saw the light," because I literally did. I walked away without a scratch. As you can see from the pictures on the screen, I stand there in disbelief, without a cast, bruise, or cut. None of the windows so much as cracked. Though I thought I was alone in that truck that day, I clearly was not.

Please wear your seatbelts. The army trained me for mortuary affairs before I worked at the Wayne County Medical Examiner's Office in Detroit in the mid-90's, and I know what usually happens to those who do not wear theirs. As Jesus says in Luke 4:12, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." As you can see, there were no airbags, and the steering wheel was bent forward from my holding it during the wreck. God showed mercy to me that day.

I stand here today as a witness that God is near us always. I also know that it takes far less force than I experienced to break bones. And yet, all that kept me in that truck was my hands on the steering wheel, my legs pressed up against the bottom of the steering wheel, and that golden hand on my chest. The photo evidence corroborates my account. One can either believe or not, but it's the truth. I cannot imagine any scenario in which I would have been wearing a seatbelt and the steering wheel could have been bent forward like that; however, my wrists did not break, as wrists often do when braced during an impact of such force.

Remember the words of the psalmist in 139: 7 – 10: No matter where I go, up to the heavens or down to the depths, whether I rise up like the sun or settle on distant shores, "You are there... Your hand will guide me." One moment I was driving along, business as usual. The next moment, reality as I knew it tore asunder and allowed me a glimpse behind the curtains, so to speak. Before, I thought of God as being distant like the stars, the miracles of Scripture not for today. After, I knew with certainty that I did not know, that what we perceive does not encompass all that surrounds us.

What did Paul say to the Greeks? "He is not far from any one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being'" (Acts 17:27 & 28). God is with us, always, through Christ Jesus. God loves the whole world, but in Christ we can actually know Him who gave us life and hope and joy and avoid the wrath that is to come. God is near us when we suffer and when we rejoice. God is near us when we disobey and when we follow Christ.

I am not saying you can do as you please and God's just fine with that. I am saying what Scripture says, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13), and that "... everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life" (John 6:40). Psalm 103:8 tells us, "The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love."

Jesus taught His disciples this: "For where two or three gather in My name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20). Though we do not always sense His presence, much less see or hear Him, He is right here in this room with us. You can read those words as a promise: Even when it seems we are alone, especially if we are His children, we are not.

When I was in college, I studied literature and became fascinated with archetypal studies, which is an uncommon way of speaking about a very common thing. Some believe that all stories share a common root, a pattern that repeats, over and over again. We know the way that the story is supposed to go, don't we? Even young children have a good sense about it. But have we ever stopped and asked why that is?

In my curiosity, I pestered one of my professors to no end, until he finally said this to me, "The problem with archetypal studies is that, under it, all stories become the same story." All stories become one story. Whatever could it mean? So I set out to discover the answer, but that is no simple quest. Then one day, on the way home from Atlanta, GA, I had this wondrous moment. As I drove along, listening to the Bible on mp3, talking to God and thinking about these amazing things, Jesus showed me how all the stories of the world, including the ones in the Bible, reflect His story. Suddenly, I felt like those followers on the road to Emmaus.

In Luke 24, after Jesus rose from the dead, there were two of His followers walking along the road to Emmaus, discussing all that had happened, including the reports of His resurrection. Suddenly, Jesus came up and walked with them, though they were kept from recognizing Him. They were disappointed that Jesus had been crucified and puzzled about the stories they had heard of the empty tomb. Jesus responded to them in this way:

He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:25-27, NIV)

Hear again what it says: "In ALL the Scriptures." The Bible speaks of Christ in more ways than we imagine. And so I spent some years, running a website, cupofchrist.net, and writing a book, *Once Upon A Time: Tracing the Footsteps of Christ, Our Hero*. The book is free to download, as it was given to me freely by my Lord Jesus Christ. Perhaps one day I'll seek out a publisher, but not yet. The cover art was done by me as well. I don't see the Bible or our world the way that many see them. I see this great story we're all caught up in as being a fractal that repeats over and over, with Christ as its root.

At the end of the book of John, there is an interesting verse. John 21:25 says, "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written." I think most people read that verse the way that I once did, as hyperbole—an exaggerated statement used to make a point. I don't see it that way anymore. I believe that all the books that ever were, are, and will be, humans write them because they are repeating echoes and reflections of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

John 1:1-5 says this:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has

been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Our Lord is the Word and the Light. When sound and light reflect off of a surface, their qualities change. The same sound and the same light can be perceived very differently under different conditions, whether a surface is shiny or soft, hard or rough, the light and the sound will reach our senses altered by our environment. As sunlight passes through these stained-glass windows, we see many colors, but all of that light comes from the same source, the sun.

The Story of Christ has been called the greatest story ever told. Our Lord, the Cornerstone, has acted upon human history like a stone tossed into a pond, so that ripples wash outward to the farthest parts of spacetime, whether before His birth or after His ascension. Christopher Vogler, who worked at Disney, described the one story as following this pattern:

1. Heroes are introduced in the ORDINARY WORLD, where
2. they receive the CALL TO ADVENTURE.
3. They are RELUCTANT at first or REFUSE THE CALL, but
4. are encouraged by a MENTOR to
5. CROSS THE FIRST THRESHOLD and enter the Special World, where
6. they encounter TESTS, ALLIES, AND ENEMIES.
7. They APPROACH THE INMOST CAVE, crossing a second threshold
8. where they endure the SUPREME ORDEAL.
9. They take possession of their REWARD and
10. are pursued on THE ROAD BACK to the Ordinary World.
11. They cross the third threshold, experience a RESURRECTION, and are transformed by the experience.
12. They RETURN WITH THE ELIXIR, a boon or treasure to benefit the Ordinary World.

There are rules and variations, which I do not have time for today, but you can see the pattern is there.

In John 12:32, we read Jesus' words, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." John explains to us in the following verse that Christ said this, "to show the kind of death He was going to die." I will end this sermon with two quotes. The first from C. S. Lewis:

I think we are rather in this position. Supposing you had before you a manuscript of some great work, either a symphony or a novel. There then comes to you a person, saying, 'Here is a new bit of the manuscript that I found; it is the central passage of that symphony, or the central chapter of that novel. The text is incomplete without it. I have got the missing passage which is really the centre of the whole work.' The only thing you could do would be to put this new piece of the manuscript in that central position, and then see how it reacted on the whole of the rest of the work. If it constantly brought out new meanings from the whole of the rest of the work, if it made you notice things in the rest of the work which you had not noticed before, then I think you would decide that it was authentic. On the other hand, if it failed to do that, then, however attractive it was in itself, you would reject it.

The second quote is from Sally Lloyd-Jones' *The Jesus Storybook Bible*:

God wrote, "I love you" – he wrote it in the sky, and on the earth, and under the sea. He wrote this message everywhere! Because God created everything in his world to reflect him like a mirror – to show us what he is like, to help us know him, to make our hearts sing.

The way a kitten chases her tail. The way red poppies grow wild. The way a dolphin swims.

And God put it into words, too, and wrote it in a book called "the Bible."

... The Bible is most of all a Story. It's an adventure story about a young Hero who comes from a far country to win back his lost treasure. It's a love story about a brave Prince who leaves his palace, his throne – everything – to rescue the one he loves. It's like the most wonderful of fairy tales that has come true in real life!

... There are lots of stories in the Bible, but all the stories are telling one Big Story. The Story of how God loves his children and comes to rescue them.

It takes the whole Bible to tell this Story. And at the center of the Story, there is a baby. Every Story in the Bible whispers his name. He is like the missing piece in a puzzle – the piece that makes all the other pieces fit together, and suddenly you can see a beautiful picture.

I hope, after all that, you can see my point, that God is not very far from any human being ever. He is always with us. Always Immanuel.