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Searched Out and Known (Psalm 139: 1-16)

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I must confess to being surprised how challenging it has been to prepare for tonight. After all, the theme of call and response is central to the way I understand life – my own life and the lives of those I sit with in spiritual direction and pastoral supervision.

But therein lies the problem. I see call and response as an ongoing theme embedded in a person's life narrative. This theme is at the heart of our spiritual journey. It isn't just about what paths we choose to take in life, although it includes those. For me it is primarily about who we are, our relationship to ourselves, to God and to the world. It is about what we most truly love; it is about longing. How do I find words to speak about such things – especially as they relate to my own life? There is also a deep sense that our lives 'are hidden with Christ in God' (Col 3: 3). There is a surface life, the daily soap opera if you like, but the real story needs to be excavated. Perhaps it is the treasure buried in the field.

I have decided to follow Emily Dickinson's advice to 'Tell all the truth but tell it slant'. This might mean, among other things, that I don't always stick to a chronological narrative.

Going through the uncertainty of wondering whether tonight's reflection would all come together in time, I remembered a series of dreams I had in mid-life when I was still exploring what I wanted to do when I grew up. In these dreams I would be in the sanctuary of the cathedral in Armidale and it would be my big opportunity to preach, read, or lead the service (the actual role varied). Then I would blow it. If I were reading, I wouldn't be able to find the spot in the prayer book or bible. If I were to preach, I would have left my script at home, or not have prepared it, or if I had brought it, I was unable to read it. To dismiss these dreams simply as stage fright would be to underestimate them. There was one that stood out. In this

dream when it came to reading the lesson, I found that the text from which I was to read was a beautiful illuminated script illustrated with flowers and leaves in a display case, under a distorting perspex cover or lid. Even if I had been able to access the text, I would not have been able to read what it was saying at that time.

I would like to turn to Ps 139: 1-16 that we listened to earlier. Somehow these words provide a holding space for what I want to say. Besides they include the image of our life as a sacred text. The psalmist begins by affirming God's presence in every part of his life:

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...

For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb ...
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unborn substance.
In your book were written all the days that were formed for me,
When none of them as yet existed.

Some people might recoil from the image in those last two lines, seeing them as robbing us of free will. That we are somehow being trapped in a plot where someone else has written the script and we don't even get a chance to learn the lines.

Admittedly, sometimes life feels like that. Admittedly too, we don't choose into which family or culture, or time in history we are born – and this undoubtedly limits the opportunities that are open to us. But there is a place for a creative, even redemptive response to what life hands out. I see these lines as an invitation to co-author with God the text that is my life, my own story of call and response, which is a small but essential part of that larger story referred to here as God's 'book'. Is that the illuminated text of my dream?

This passage reminds me that I am meant to be here. My birth is no accident and I have a mission to fulfil. We each have a life that is ours to live, a song that is ours to sing, a story to tell, and a work to do, and our job is to find it in partnership with the one who knows us better than we know ourselves.

Nothing that happens in life is wasted or beyond God's power to redeem. All in the end is harvest, as Dame Edith Sitwell and others have said. Even our failures. Or as I read more recently in Martin Laird's *Into the Silent Land*: 'Thorns are as much part of a rose as the flower. What gardener condemns the compost for being full of rubbish?' (p.126)

Compost contributes to fruitfulness. Over the years, during tough times I have felt drawn to, and comforted by those words of Joseph when he was exiled from his family in Egypt: 'God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.' (Gen 41: 52.) We all need to know that our suffering is not meaningless.

Perhaps it is time for me to ground these reflections in a bit of biography.

My early years were spent in the Parkes district, in the central west of NSW where I grew up on a farm. Each year we would go to Manly for a family holiday at the beach. I remember thinking that heaven would be to live near the beach and on the farm with my horse. I was youngest in a family of four and during my early years my sister and two brothers were away at boarding school, leaving me to my own devices much of the time; but I don't remember being lonely. There were lots of books, including Bible stories, my pony, and an active imagination that contrived all

sort of exciting adventures, particularly on the hill behind the farm house. To start school, I needed to board Monday to Friday with the principal. I don't remember this as too traumatic because I was more than ready for school and loved school. But it is young to be separated from family.

At 16 and a half I left home to go to university in Armidale. This was to prove a life-changing experience in so many ways. For the first time, I met a group of people for whom faith was central, and surprisingly I felt drawn to them. I say surprisingly, because previously I would have shared my father's suspicion that religious zeal might go hand in hand with hypocrisy. And hypocrisy was something to be avoided at all costs in our family. At any rate, I made a faith commitment. I am grateful for the close friendships I made and the foundation I received in scripture and cultivating some prayer practice. But there was a limited understanding of the way transformation happens – of the significant psychological and spiritual healing most of us need.

Nor did I realise then that our wounds are doorways to transformation, not a cause for shame. Or they can be. That came much later. In mid-life, during the most profound challenge I have faced, I wrote the following poem:

Some time ago as you were speaking
A spear entered my breast.
Cruelly barbed it was –
Impossible to leave it there
But to remove it
Would remove more living flesh than I could bear.

So I left it there.

Later that night I woke,
And feeling once again the pain of the embedded spear,

I asked him who knows about such things

(Having been there long before)

What we were to do.

Quick as a flash the answer came:

The shaft was broken off;

No fear of further twists.

More recently I found a thorn near my heart's centre.

It was only as I owned its dark, sharp spike

That I became aware

Of the rich dark folds

Of the blood-red rose behind. (1985)

At the time of writing (1985) that transformation journey had a long way to go – it still does! Sometimes resurrection is a lengthy process. I was blessed in having a wise friend tell me at the time that I would blossom. Sometimes we need someone to believe for us, and in us, when we find it hard to do so for ourselves.

There is something that is central to my story of call and response that I omitted in my first draft. That is the question of a priestly vocation. I feel shy about naming this in this open space, although it is something I have shared with a few people who I thought would understand. Why haven't I pursued this? It isn't just that I was in a diocese where women were not encouraged to follow that path. It was partly a 'Who do you think you are to aspire to that?' A sort of self-doubt because I didn't think I had the sort of unquestioning faith that such a position required. I wasn't a 'true believer' in that sense, although I was very committed to the journey into God. So eventually I trained as a counsellor, first through the Anglican Counselling Service and then through the University of New England. I taught counselling at UNE, Armidale and at the University of Canberra. Therapists are sometimes described in the literature as the secular priests of the modern era.

I was to come to understand the difference between being a ‘true believer’ and having an authentic faith. Christian Wiman’s wonderful book, *My Bright Abyss*, has been described as a ‘fusion of scepticism and faith’. Those words resonated for me, as did his book. But perhaps it would be better to describe my path as a fusion of questioning and faith. Questioning is important to an authentic faith because it grounds it in reality. This morning at Heather Thomson’s wonderful Quiet Day, I was delighted to read St Augustine words: ‘my questioning was my attentive spirit’. There is a difference though between trusting, despite unanswered questions – a sort of ‘I believe, help thou my unbelief’ – and using questions to fend God off.

My path to deciding what I wanted to do when I grew up led me to complete postgraduate degrees in literature and counselling respectively about a decade apart. My choice of topics reflected my spiritual interests – or do I mean obsessions? In my Masters in English literature I researched the metaphor of wilderness in the Bible and in my doctorate I explored the role of spirituality in the personal and professional identities of a group of counsellors and psychologists. Eremos and access to the contemplative tradition through spiritual direction, together with a friendship group of fellow travellers were lifelines to me because I was in a very conservative church context.

I eventually went on to train as a spiritual director. Training in counselling and spiritual direction both require ‘inner work’ so that we can safely accompany people where they need to go. Not that we need to have had the same experiences, but we need to have explored what has shaped us, including our baggage and shadow. Richard Rohr reminds us, ‘If your pain is not transformed through union with God, it will always be transmitted to others.’ By inner work, I am not meaning a sort of spiritual self-help program, but practices that open up paths to awareness and grace. We can’t engineer our transformation.

In 2008 I left Armidale to come to Canberra to be near my grandchildren. This transition was more challenging than I had anticipated. Armidale had been my spiritual home and a rich, supportive community for many years. It was also the

place where our children grew up. But being in Canberra has opened up some wonderful opportunities for learning, growth and new relationships— not least in this Benedictus community.

We might long for an unequivocal call but our calls often come disguised as what life asks of us. And life can be messy and ambiguous at times. For me the overall call is to really inhabit my own story and its giftedness – in all its ebbs and flows – as the psalmist does. It is often easier to see God’s call retrospectively. (That is why reflective practices like the examen, where we look back over our day can be so useful.) Then we may discover that what we long for is already there. This came home to me one day when I was listening to the Seekers’ song ‘Time and Again’. I was able to take on those words: ‘You are so much a part of me/You are so at the heart of me’, as referring to my relationship with God.

Call is about manifesting what is within us, becoming what we in God’s eyes are. Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem, ‘As kingfishers catch fire’ takes what God sees in us, and what we can see in each other and the world around us, to another level:

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same: 5
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying Whát I do is me: for that I came.

Í say móre: the just man justices;
Kéeps gráce: thát keeps all his goings graces; 10
Acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is—
Christ—for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men’s faces.