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Psalm 139: 1-17
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Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California

Long-Time Friends:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Have you noticed how long-time friends greet one another after an absence?

Often the greeting begins with an embrace. Usually they have their eyes shut. Maybe that's because they are remembering times they've spent together, conversations they've had. Maybe they shut their eyes because they're remembering hard times shared with one another. Maybe they shut their eyes because they're remembering times when the friendship seemed frayed, times when they really did not want to see one another. Maybe they shut their eyes because they are so grateful to be reconciled to one another, so grateful to be together once again.

Have you noticed how, when they break the embrace, they often hold one another at arm's length, and look one another over, almost as if they are searching for something. I love to watch that look – it's a look of really seeing someone else, seeing them to and at their very core. It's a look of seeing and remembering – seeing them in their strengths and weaknesses, remembering that which delights them and that which annoys them

I wonder if there have been some of those greetings today – it is after all Welcome Back Sunday. People have returned from vacation. Folks are beginning to settle into their school-year routine. I wonder if some people here have met one another in a warm embrace and then pulled back just a little to take a long look at a good friend.

I've found myself thinking a lot about friendship this week. Wondering what is it that makes for a deep and enduring friendship? The kind of friendship that goes the distance, the kind of friendship that survives hard times, the kind of friendship that continues through separations and endures ruptures. What do you suppose are the marks of such a friendship?

I suspect we all have our own lists, but I bet there would be some overlap.

On my list would be openness to one another and a willingness to be changed, maybe transformed is a better word. A sense of genuine mutuality. Delight in one another. Sharing of passions – not that both hold the same passions but that each is willing share their passion with the other. A sense of being drawn to one

another. Tolerance – that’s a mark of deep friendship as is respect. I think there are elements of sacrifice in deep friendships and surely there’s a sharing of suffering.

How do we know such friendships? Through experience, I imagine. This week, as I’ve been thinking about friendship, I’ve been remembering my deep and enduring friendships. Friends who have searched me out and known me. Friends who know my paths and my resting places. Friends who can finish my sentences for me. Friends who are there even when we’re thousands of miles apart from one another. Friends I thought were out of my life entirely and then showed up one day. Friends who were there all the time after all.

Our psalmist knows such a friendship. She sings of it as she writes, “You have searched me out and known me; you know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You trace my journeys and my resting – places and are acquainted with all my ways.” Our psalmist sings of her friendship with God – a friendship formed and grounded in a deep knowing and being known. How does she put it – “My body was not hidden from you, while I was being made in secret and woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my limbs, yet unfinished in the womb; all of them were written in your book.”

Yet I think she’s somewhat ambivalent about that friendship – maybe she finds it confining. She says, “You press upon me behind and before and lay your hand upon me.” The King James Bible puts it thusly, “Thou hast beset me behind and before....” Sometimes friendships can feel confining; sometimes we want to break the bonds of friendship.

But as our psalmist knows those bonds are not easily broken – particularly when the friendship is with God. She says, “Where can I go then from your Spirit? where can I flee from your presence? If I climb up to heaven, you are there; if I make the grave by bed, you are there also. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, Even there your hand will lead me and your right hand hold me fast. ”

What a friendship she has with God – a friendship that pierces the darkness, a friendship that brings out the light, a friendship that teaches her that she is marvelously made.

This week I’ve been reading an account of a similar friendship with God. I’ve been reading [An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbork](#), the journal and letters of Etty Hillesum, a Dutch Jew who really came to the fullness of her being in Nazi-occupied Amsterdam, and later Westerbork, the deportation camp for

Dutch Jews bound for Auschwitz and an almost certain death. It's the record of her deepening friendship with God, a friendship that shapes how she responds to the terror of her day.

At one point she asks, "Ought we not, from time to time, open ourselves up to cosmic sadness?" Then she adds, "And if you have given sorrow the space its gentle origins demand, then you may truly say: life is beautiful and so rich. So beautiful and so rich that it makes you want to believe in God."

Towards the end of her life, shortly before she is deported to Auschwitz, Etty writes, "My life has become an uninterrupted dialogue with You, oh God, one great dialogue. Sometimes when I stand in some corner of the camp, my feet planted on Your earth, my eyes raised toward Your heaven, tears sometimes run down my face, tears of deep emotion and gratitude."

Think of it—in the midst of all the cruelty and depravity and meanness of the Holocaust, as she witnessed others being sent to their death, Etty Hillesum developed a deep and sustaining friendship with God. She learned and lived the truth of St. Gregory of Nyssa's claim that "the one thing truly worthwhile is becoming God's friend. She learned and lived the truth of the psalmists words—"Darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day...."

Friendship with God is not limited to psalmists and saints, mystics and martyrs. We all can become friends with God. We can develop a friendship with God that is, as my friend Mary Ellen puts it, "loving, forgiving, generous, honest, big enough for difference and deep enough for shared suffering." We can develop a friendship with God like the one Jesus had.

Let us today gather with our friends around God's table as God welcomes us back once again.