

Sermon – July 23, 2023  
Pastor Dan Hollis  
Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24

There's a special place in my heart for TV shows. I actually prefer a good TV series to a good movie, because if a series is done well, you can get to *know* the *characters* over several years and watch them learn and grow and struggle and overcome. You come to *love* them, because of just how close you've come to *know* them. You know their hopes, their fears, their foibles and insecurities. You want to see them *succeed*, you wanna see them get out of danger. You *feel* their dreams and their loves and their pet peeves.

But I will tell you, *I* have my *own* pet peeve, when it comes to TV shows... and it has to do with those... scenes when they're *driving*. Oh you know the ones, you've got somebody in the driver's seat and somebody in the passenger's seat, and they're really getting into it. The most tense discussion of the episode, full of emotional moments and lingering eye-contact. Lingering... *eye*-contact. They're *speeding* down the road—highway or country back-road, rain pouring down, it doesn't matter... and they just *have* to keep *looking* at each other to have this conversation.

And all I can think, even in those scenes when there's emotional declarations and vital exposition and that one perfect tear trickling down from one eye... all I can think is, "*Watch the road!*"

Because I mean yeah, they're actors, and the car's being pulled along by a tow-truck the audience can't see, and the director probably *told* them they *had* to keep making eye-contact for the sake of how *good* it's gonna look on camera. Nobody's *actually* in any danger.

But people don't drive like that in real life! Or at least, they don't drive like that for *long*.

So, when the Hollywood executives *finally* agree to give all the actors and writers who are on strike right now a *fair* deal for all the *work* they do to *bring* us these great movies and TV shows... I *hope* that when they start filming those *driving* scenes again, that they *keep* their *eyes* on the *road*!

I just wanna keep 'em safe.

There's a beautiful passage from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 13, where Jesus tries to explain *his* wish to... gather up the children of Jerusalem... and keep them safe.

We see Jesus compare himself to a mother: a hen that yearns to gather her young beneath her wings. See, Jesus came to reach his arms around the vulnerable and the powerless to protect and care for them, even at his own expense. He preached liberation and equality and performed life-giving miracles. All he did *stood* against every power-

system that existed in the world of Ancient Rome, and he knew full well that those powers would see him killed for it.

I've shared with some of you in the past a link to a podcast by Anglican bishop N.T. Wright, who shared a bit of folk wisdom from the farmyard. "Sometimes," he said, "when there's a raging fire in a farmyard and all the animals are scattering for cover if they can, the *hen* will gather her chickens under her wings. And when the fire has finally done its worst... you may find a dead, scorched hen... with *live* chickens under her wings."

It's *so* easy to think of God as someone who... sees all the things we do wrong and just *condemns* us for it... a God that looks down on His children with disappointment.

But then the Gospel of *John* reminds us, "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him."

While God *does* see when we get it wrong, and doesn't *ignore* it... what God *chooses* to do in response? Is to nurture us. To nourish us. To shelter us under Her wings. To give us another chance.

Jesus is *our* proof of that... and while he may be the *biggest* billboard *reminding* you of God's love, he's certainly not the *last* sign God's given you.

We are loved, by a God that reaches out to shelter us, nurture our growth, and provide us with all those chances to do better. And if we'd stop texting while driving or fiddling with the radio or the bag of fast food, or taking your eye off the road to hold way-too-long eye contact with your co-star in the passenger's seat... if you keep your eyes *on* the road, even and especially when the rain's coming down and the windshield wipers are working overtime... you'll start seeing the signs God has placed along the highway of your life: the signs that God *is* watching out for you, that God is safeguarding you, that God is leading you to scenic routes and green pastures and safety and light.

Now I don't know why God *lets* the rain come down at all. I don't know *why* God hasn't... fired the cosmic politicians running the celestial highway department, and *replaced* them with someone who'll actually... *fill* the potholes and *repaint* the lane markings of our lives.

I don't know why suffering exist when we have an all-powerful God that loves us. I don't know why bad things happen, and oh do I look forward to getting *that* explanation in the great by-and-by.

But I still have faith that God exists... and my faith tells me, deep in my heart, that God does *care*, more than anything, *even* in our suffering.

As our reading today says, God *knows* us. I mean really knows us. God can *hear* what's important to us, and *feel* what angers us. God can make sense of the yearnings of our hearts even when we stumble to make sense of it ourselves. God has known us from

blueprint to factory assembly-line, and God knows when we need a tune-up. That God, who knows you from the cradle to the grave, who has walked *miles* in your shoes, and can feel your pain as if it's His own? That's a God that can't *help* but love you. God has no *choice* but to feel for you, to want the best for you, and to *yearn* to be there for you.

That is the God Psalm 139 reminds us of in our stormy nights, and it is signs *of* that God that we always need to be looking for... to bring light in the darkness, direction in the wilderness, and joy amongst the sadness.

Henri Nouwen was a Dutch professor and Christian theologian who died in 1996, and he had this to say about *joy*: "Joy is not the same as happiness. We can be unhappy about many things, but joy can still be there because it comes from the knowledge of God's love for us. ...Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day. It is a choice based on the knowledge that we belong to God and have found in God our refuge and our safety and that nothing, not even death, can take God away from us."

*That* is a thought that should forever keep "joy" in our hearts. Nothing—not death or loss or the turmoil of an ever-shifting world—*nothing* can separate us from the love of God. God just *loves* you, no matter how far you may stray from God, or what life or the world may do to you... God loves you. And if it doesn't feel like it today, it *will* one day, I promise you that.

But *recognizing* that love and letting it fill us with joy, even when things are tough—Nouwen's right—that *is* a choice, and one we have to make as often as possible.

And when you're in a place where "happiness" seems like a far-off dream... God's love is still sitting right there, waiting for you to notice it and grab onto it like a life preserver. *Let* the joy of God's love hold you up until the day comes that you *are* happy again.

Nouwen said, "Joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing—sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death—can take that love away."

So let God be the highway billboards to remind you you are loved. Let God be the sign on the side that says "Rest Area, Next Right."

And let God be your "check engine" light.

When that *dreaded* light on your dash goes on, you have to... go to a *mechanic* who'll plug in this electric reader, then your car spits out a code number that the mechanic can cross-reference in a manual to tell you what's wrong—and how much it'll cost.

Well *God's* got that manual for *your* make and model. And God's *got* that electronic reader... and God's tune-ups are always free—no insurance necessary. And isn't that joyful news.

So let this Psalm remind you... Someone out there knows you. *Gets* you... feels your pain, and finds your hopes *exciting*. And for God's sake keep your eye on the road, because God has put signposts all along the highway. Signs to guide your way, signs to keep you safe, and signs to remind you that you are loved. Thanks be to God. Amen.