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Andrea Paschal
Forest Lake Presbyterian

GPS – God Positioning System

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18, 23-24

Hebrews 12:1-2

Introduction to reading Hebrews passage:

The letter to the Hebrews was written for Jewish Christians who were on the verge of giving up their Christian faith and returning to beliefs and practices of their Jewish ancestors. The theme of Hebrews is the absolute supremacy of Jesus as the revealer and as mediator of God's grace. Hebrews chapter 11 shares stories of trial and tribulation of God's chosen – Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses and many others. These stories remind these early Christians, and us, about their faith and obedience that kept them in relationship with God, but looking toward the promised future that God had in store for them. Chapter 12 starts with the word, therefore, in the Greek it is *Toigaroun* (toy –gar-oon') defined as for which reason or consequently. Using therefore was a way to say – this is important, listen up.

I have been using the New American Standard version of the Bible in my studies lately, so will be reading from this version. Hebrews 12:1-2

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

This is the word of the Lord.

As a child, I loved traveling on family vacations. We would take 2 weeks every summer, pack up the station wagon and pop-up camper and travel all over the country. In preparation for these trips, my father would get out the maps and begin to plan our route. During the trips, each of us kids had to take a turn at being navigator. He wanted to make sure each of us could read a map and locate where we were. I liked reading the maps to find where we were going and also to learn about surroundings that were different than the

center part of Florida. If I'm being honest, the best part of being the navigator was the conversation and quality time spent with my father as well.

The skills my father taught me have stuck with me throughout my life. I love to travel, but always like to get out the maps and see what is on the path and make a plan for where to go. The possibilities are always endless! However, over the years, I have also learned it is important for me to use these maps to get my bearings. I want to familiarize myself with the route, my surroundings and what the possibilities are so I can be more comfortable while traveling. Heading off to a new place without being familiar with which direction to go is uncomfortable and has caused more than a few "discussions" on family travels with my husband and children.

As I was reading these passages of scripture, it occurred to me that Psalm 139 is like the beginnings of a well-known map. The psalmist lets us know that God is omnipresent by knowing when we sit down and when we rise up, searching our path and is *intimately* acquainted with all our ways. God our Creator knows us better than we know ourselves – even down to the words we will say. And yet, God seeks us and searches for us, constantly watching and observing us. God knows all that we do and where we will go. Samuel Annesley, a prominent Puritan, nonconformist pastor in the late 1600's, suggested that it would be well for Christians to repeat Psalm 139 every morning and evening because, in his words, "it is David's appeal of a good conscience unto God." It has the added benefit of reminding us of a portion of what is called the Shema from Deuteronomy 6:4-9. This portion of scripture is the Jewish confession of faith that was to be recited and taught to children "when you lie down and when you rise up" – a constant reminder of the connection to the One who knows us intimately.

During our recent Created By God weekend with fifteen 5th & 6th grade students, we talked about the history of the word intimacy. It comes from the Latin word, *intimus*, meaning closest. In the PowerPoint slides, there was a list of words that are characteristics of intimacy – words like honesty, trust, time, communication, talking, listening, forgiveness, commitment, laughter, crying, and love. The conversation with the students was about a variety of relationships including best friends and family while pointing out that our most intimate relationship should be with God.

Think back for a moment on the past week. How intimate were you with God? Or maybe, you were more like me, I certainly talked TO God, but I'm not really sure I took the time to *listen*? Did we "settle in" for a special time with God as we would for a dear friend? Or was

the conversation mostly arrow prayers consisting of a sentence or two that didn't take very long? Was there honesty of emotions that may have included tears, laughter, joy, anger or frustration?

Fortunately, as the Psalmist declares, our Creator God knit us together in our mother's womb, knows us better than we know ourselves, and has all our days mapped out for us before we knew they existed. We are intimately known by God, who cares about the smallest details of our lives and our well-being. The Jewish Study Bible says it like this, "You observe my walking and reclining and are familiar with all my ways." As we journey through life, God surrounds us in all of the ups and downs. The knowledge that God knows us better than we know ourselves can be a comforting place to come back and get our bearings.

In my mind, the first century Christians must have been living in confusing times. If I had been walking with Jesus, I am sure there would have been many times I was scratching my head and asking him to repeat his teachings. Trying to learn the variances of this new faith that was being shared and how it was different from the well-known path of Judaism might have been extremely challenging.

As the author of Hebrews shares the stories of the faithful obedience of ordinary men chosen by God, this was comforting to these new Christians. It was something familiar and might have helped them 'settle in' for a bit. But, the author doesn't leave these early Christians, or us, there. We are told to look again at Jesus the author, or pioneer of our faith in the NRSV, as our guide.

These pillars of the faith from chapter 11 became the first cloud of witnesses that bear testimony to the power of faith and to God's faithfulness to us. Then Jesus takes us on a new journey, striking out into the unknown to show us a better way. Jesus pioneered a new path for faithfulness to God. Thinking in terms of having our days mapped out as in Psalm 139, Jesus became our new map, the GPS – our God Positioning System.

Now, I will admit, it took a long time for the Paschal family to adapt to even owning a GPS for navigation and still there are times when I am unsure about trusting the GPS because it has led us astray on more than one occasion. So thinking of these new Christians trying to learn new ways of living the faith by following Jesus, the one who blazed a new trail, I can only imagine it must have been like hearing the GPS in my car telling me, recalculating, recalculating.

Growing up with a grandfather who was a Presbyterian minister and knowing that when the church doors were open my family was there was a great foundation for a life of faith. As a college student away from home making my own decisions, I remember being in my home church one Thanksgiving and breathing a sigh of relief as I 'settled in' for worship. I felt relief as I realized I needed recalculating while trying to study and figure out where I was heading. Along the journey there have been other times when recalculating was needed, the hardest time was when my father died. But I am grateful for those who walked with me to help me hear God's voice to get back on the right path.

Being part of the FLPC family has showed me perseverance in so many ways. Members of this congregation have experienced turns in their journey that might be an occasion to need recalculating – birth of a child, loss of a loved one, health situations that come unexpectedly, being passed over for a job, a child moving away to start a new job or getting married. But I am awed by the ways this faith family walks together and maps out a new way.

Each time we come to worship, pray for one another, take a meal to someone, mentor a Confirmand, teach Sunday school, chaperone a youth or children's event, share in the joy of a baptism or share the sorrow of a funeral, we are embodying the faith that Jesus set before us. Each of these actions can help guide our fellow travelers. Each gathering of believers is a way to recalibrate and help us get our bearings as we set out again to "run the race set before us."

The great cloud of witnesses listed in Hebrews 11 is the beginning. It also includes Margaret McArthur, DCE in my home church who made sure I heard in so many ways how God was calling me as a youth. It includes Al & Lois Hamilton who spent many hours in the presence of young people here in this church. Jane Rowell and Suzanne O'Dell who taught children on Wednesday nights for many years. Mr. Dr. Beth and Ms. Elizabeth who teach our children the language of faith through music. The many Presbyterian Women who have given their time and talents for so many activities over the years. The list is endless right in this place. Look around . . . (No really, look around this room) . . . Who has helped orient you to God? And who might need your guidance on this journey of faith? What will your place be among the cloud of witnesses?

Therefore, Brothers and Sisters in Christ, "let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith."