

Too Wonderful For Me, Psalm 139

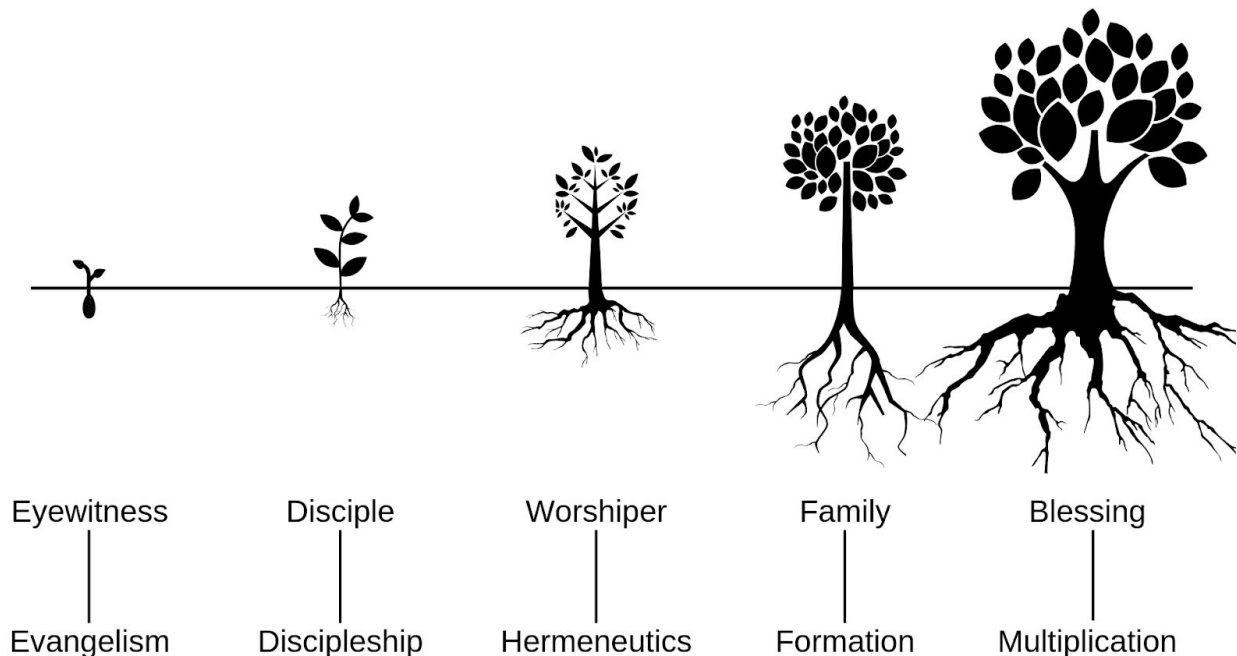
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Introduction

Good morning, my name is Brad and I'm one of the pastors here. We have officially arrived at the end of our series in the Psalms, which we have subtitled "Seeing All of Life Through the Lens of the Gospel". If you're like me and you're sad to leave Psalms behind, just remember that our preaching at Antioch isn't meant to be the main course in your feast on God's word, but more like the appetizer that makes you eager for more. So, if you like, take the last three months as motivation to go dig deeper in the Psalms!

Speaking of the last three months, it wouldn't be a fitting conclusion to the series without a little review. The first thing to remember is that our time in the Psalms was actually intended to help us grow in one of our five Antioch identities: the identity of Worshipers. And this is part of an even larger effort to teach and train through those five identities in a 2.5-year cycle:



Each of those identities has a practical outworking, hence the reason for trainings. The practical skill in focus for our identity as Worshipers was hermeneutics, the interpretation of God's word. The idea is that when we handle the Bible rightly, we begin

to see all of life through the lens of the gospel—in other words, we worship. This prepares us for our next identity, Family, and its practical outworking, formation, which is the care and counseling of one another (we'll hit that in the Spring of next year). All of this is rooted in Ephesians 4, which says,

¹¹ And [God] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, Ephesians 4:11-13

It's our conviction as pastors to equip you, the saints, for the work of ministry rather than hoarding it for ourselves.

And so unto that end, we turn to today's text, Psalm 139. You can find that on page 521 if you're using one of the Bibles in the chairs. The title of today's sermon is "Too Wonderful For Me," and the main idea is this: God is too high for us—unless he comes down (which, if you think about it, is a pretty fantastic preparation for celebrating Advent). How does this psalm bring out the reality that God is too high and wonderful for us? Well, in many ways it's like a reflection on his attributes:

- 1) God is All-Knowing - vv. 1-6
- 2) God is All-Present - vv. 7-12
- 3) God is All-Powerful - vv. 13-18
- 4) God is All-Holy - vv. 19-24

With that said, if you are able, please stand with me to honor the reading of God's word. Again, today's passage is Psalm 139. Church, hear the word of the Lord:

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.

*¹ O Lord, you have searched me and known me!
² You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.
³ You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.
⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue,
behold, O Lord, you know it altogether.
⁵ You hem me in, behind and before,*

and lay your hand upon me.

⁶ *Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is high; I cannot attain it.*

⁷ *Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence?*

⁸ *If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!*

⁹ *If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me.*

¹¹ *If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light about me be night,"*

¹² *even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is bright as the day,
for darkness is as light with you.*

¹³ *For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.*

¹⁴ *I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it very well.*

¹⁵ *My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.*

¹⁶ *Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.*

¹⁷ *How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!*

¹⁸ *If I would count them, they are more than the sand.
I awake, and I am still with you.*

¹⁹ *Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God!
O men of blood, depart from me!*

²⁰ *They speak against you with malicious intent;
your enemies take your name in vain.*

²¹ *Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?*

And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?

²² *I hate them with complete hatred;
I count them my enemies.*

²³ *Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!*

²⁴ *And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting! Psalm 139*

The Lord has spoken to us. [Congregation:] Thanks be to God! (You may be seated.)

Exposition

When Katie and I visited Germany for the first time a few years ago, we were surprised to find that the population was actually severely in decline. The reasons were that many people were not getting married, and most of those who did were choosing not to have any children, or at most, to have one. Our German friend told us this was because of the perceived expense and inconvenience of having a family. What has stood out to us since that experience is just how similar a cultural notion is growing here in the United States. Now, by no means am I belittling singleness or trying to define the number of children a family should have. The Bible actually gives equal validity to singleness and marriage as long as they are received as gifts from God.¹ What I am saying is there's a noticeable hesitation in people today toward marriage compared to generations past. People are therefore waiting longer than ever before to get married (if at all)—waiting on vocational pursuits or financial stability or relational perfection. Let's be honest, the high and holy commitment of marriage is a scary thing. It's risky for two completely different people to say for the rest of their lives, "I do". So it's natural for us to look through our modern cultural lens of marriage and withdraw from it instead of welcoming it.

I think there is a similar exchange taking place in today's psalm. Even though we don't know the precise backstory of it, we're at least told it belongs to David.² And as usual with David, it's deeply personal; almost like a journal entry.³ Now, were you to look into my journal, and perhaps some of yours, you might be struck by how self-centered the reflections. But the amazing thing about this psalm, if you read it rightly, is even though David is involved, the central focus is on God—who *he* is, what *he's* like. And what's even more amazing—and this is the exchange—even though God is so high and so

¹ 1 Corinthians 7

² W. S. Plumer, *Psalms*, Geneva Series Commentaries (Chelsea: Sheridan, 2016), 1161

³ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973), 500

different—David will even say “too wonderful for me”—David’s ultimate response is to welcome him instead of withdraw from him. He is delighted and comforted and compelled by God and his character. Theologian A.W. Tozer speaks to this when he writes,

*What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.*⁴

Have you ever thought about that? What comes into your mind when you think about God? Is it that feeling you get when a police car is behind you? What about confusion? Indifference? Wonder? Welcome? And if it’s not wonder and welcome, then how do you get there? How do you become a person who, when asked if you want to know God in his infinite knowledge and presence and power and holiness, your first thought is wholly and genuinely, “I do!”?

1) God is All-Knowing - vv. 1-6

To answer that, let us be helped by Psalm 139 and its first reflection: that God is all-knowing. Read with me in v. 1:

¹ *O Lord, you have searched me and known me! Psalm 139:1*

I would love to know what the occasion was, because something has so affected David that he bursts out with what would be in our language, “O God, you have read me like a book!” The language describes a thorough investigation.⁵ But is David saying this a good thing? ‘Cause you might say the same thing about getting audited (or a certain medical procedure when men turn 40). What’s he mean? Well, let’s read on (v. 2):

² *You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.*

³ *You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.*

⁴ *Even before a word is on my tongue,
behold, O Lord, you know it altogether.*

⁵ *You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me. Psalm 139:2-5*

⁴ A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1978), 1

⁵ Plumer, 1161

What David's confessing here is God's omniscience, the reality that he knows *everything*. And yet David's not just pondering it in general—he's applying it to himself:

- 'Lord, you know when when I sit down and when I rise up'—God knows everything David *does*.
- 'Lord, you discern my thoughts from afar'—God knows everything David *thinks*.
- 'Lord, even before a word is on my tongue, you know it altogether'—God knows everything David *says*.⁶

But not just that, God knows what David *will* do and think and say—everything future. And not just that, but what David *could* do and think and say—all possibilities. Like I said, *thorough*:

- 'Lord, you search out my path and my lying down'—God knows David in the day and in the night; in public and in private. The language here is to be spied out, as when a grain of wheat is separated from its hull and you can inspect the quality of both.⁷
- 'Lord, you hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me'—God's complete knowledge of David is absolutely *inescapable*. Job puts it this way, "[God] has walled up my way, so that I cannot pass."⁸ There are not many people in your life who could back you into a corner and lay their hand upon you—and you would feel ok with that. The question is, is God one of them?

David's answer seems to be yes, as he continues in v. 6,

⁶ *Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is high; I cannot attain it. Psalm 139:6*

David's response to the all-knowing God is wonder. He tries to wrap his head around it, but he can't—the language is more literally, "I cannot be equal to it."⁹ It's like trying to grasp the concept of eternity—ever tried that? The first time I did, it literally freaked me out. I just tried to imagine something going on and on forever and I couldn't fathom it—because everything I've ever seen, tasted, or touched is temporary. I even found

⁶ Plumer, 1162

⁷ Plumer, 1162

⁸ Job 19:8

⁹ Plumer, 1162

myself afraid of the idea of existing on and on without end. I have the knowledge to understand the idea of eternity, but not the reality.¹⁰

There's no way you can reflect deeply on this God and not feel the ridiculous amount of distance between you—and *that's how it's supposed to be*. The Apostle Paul, who arguably understood God better than anyone, in the middle of a very systematic letter to the church at Rome loses his composure and suddenly exclaims, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!"¹¹ It's like, 'The more I know about him, the more I realize I don't know.'

And so Paul, along with David, becomes another who when asked if he wants to know God in his infinite knowledge, lifts his hand and says, "I do!"?

2) God is All-Present - 7-12

This brings us to the psalm's second reflection: that God is all-present. Read with me in v. 7:

*⁷ Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence? Psalm 139:7*

If you are brave enough with David to reflect deeply on who God is, then you will find that alongside wonder can easily come the urge to escape.¹² Just think about how this is the case from the very beginning of the Bible. God walks into the garden the first time after the man and woman had sinned against him, and what do they do? Hide! They flee from his presence.¹³ But apparently David has worked through this urge enough to continue his reflections (in v. 8):

*⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!
⁹ If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me.
¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,*

¹⁰ Plumer, 1165

¹¹ Romans 11:33a, NIV

¹² Kidner, 500

¹³ Genesis 3:8

and the light about me be night,”
¹² *even the darkness is not dark to you;*
the night is bright as the day,
for darkness is as light with you. Psalm 139:8-12

What David has come to realize is that hiding is pointless, because of God’s omnipresence—the reality that he is everywhere:

- “If I ascend to heaven...If I make my bed in Sheol”—if David proceeded to the highest height or the lowest depth, even there he would feel God’s presence.
- “If I take the wings of the morning”—if David took off as fast as the speed of light, like the break of dawn, even there he would find God ahead of him instead of behind.¹⁴
- “[If I] dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea”—if David let the ocean take him to the farthest, most remote place in the world, even there would be those old familiar walls and that holy hand once again laid upon him.¹⁵
- “If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me’”—if David trusts that darkness will conceal him from God the way it conceals him from man, he might be crazy enough to deceive himself, but not God.

And even though we can all agree with that logically right now, there will be moments, some before this day is done, where we act as though we can hide from the all-present God:

- We sin in secret and refuse to confess it in the light
- We sense the Spirit’s nudge and resist obeying him
- We despair over something as though God’s not with us

Were the prophet Jonah here, what would he say? The man who in disobedience to God’s command literally tried to flee to the end of the known world and ended up hemmed in by the bowels of a fish. Perhaps he would now say along with Paul, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?...For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Plumer, 1163

¹⁵ Kidner, 501

¹⁶ Romans 8:35, 38-39; Kidner, 500-501

And Jonah, along with David, becomes another who when asked if he wants to know God in his infinite presence, lifts his hand and says, “I do!”?

3) God is All-Powerful - 13-18

This brings us to the psalm’s third reflection: that God is all-powerful. Look at v. 13:

*¹³ For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother’s womb.*
*¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it very well.*
*¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.*
*¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them. Psalm 139:13-16*

Here David transitions his reflections to consider God’s omnipotence—the reality that he has unlimited power. And we would expect reflections on such a mighty thing to be big and distant, like God playing ping-pong with planets. But instead, God’s power is showcased to David in the smallest and most personal of ways:

- ‘God, you formed my inward parts and knitted me together in my mother’s womb’—David is saying that God as the One who created him knows him and possesses him all the way down to his most secret internal physiology.¹⁷
- ‘God, my frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth’—David is carrying the thought even further: “the depths of the earth” is a description of the womb to show how hidden that sacred place is—and yet God is there; and there David was “intricately woven,” meaning the flesh and bones and skin and nerves and arteries spun together with greater complexity and artistry than anything we could ever replicate.¹⁸
- ‘God, your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of

¹⁷ Plumer, 1163

¹⁸ Kidner, 502; Plumer, 1164

them’—David is describing how in the womb we blossom like a flower—while keeping in mind that every detail of that development is according to a perfect plan from eternity past.¹⁹

Ever tried to read through the Old Testament instructions for the building of the temple? Well, somewhere in God’s library is a book with your name on it full of instructions for your assembly.²⁰ And you might think it a small book—one cell from your mom and one cell from your dad came together and formed a new cell. Simple enough. Except that that one cell contained 3 billion characters of DNA—the description of who you are written in the language of God. Scientists say that if you took that microscopic DNA from that one little cell and stretched it out, that DNA would be six feet long. Were I to read your DNA, reading one character per second night and day, it would take me 96 years just to read the description of you. A description, by the way, unlike any other person in the history of humankind.²¹

And by them you were fearfully and wonderfully made, which is to say you were created in such a way that is meant to lead you and the rest of us to the fear and wonder of God. You are *amazing*—in the most humbling of ways.

No wonder David cries out in v. 17,

*¹⁷ How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!*

*¹⁸ If I would count them, they are more than the sand.
I awake, and I am still with you. Psalm 139:17-18*

In light of such divine involvement and detail, David begins to put it all together. ‘My days and development didn’t end in the womb, and so God you are still attentive to me this way.’ And this is a part of the Bible that wrecks me, because as a 17 year-old I couldn’t quite grasp the part about the womb, but I could understand sand. I could stand on the beach with a handful of sand and try to count it. And then I could look up and down the beach at the seemingly infinite amount of sand, and consider the deserts of the earth...and it would hit me—“God, you think of me this way? God, you really do love me?”

¹⁹ Kidner, 502-503

²⁰ Plumer, 1164

²¹ Adapted by a sermon from Louie Giglio, “Wonderfully Made,”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2f5ST7FDyRI>

And so I, along with David, have become another who when asked if I want to know God in his infinite power, I lift my hand and say, “I do!”?

4) God is All-Holy - 19-24

This brings us to the psalm’s fourth and final reflection: that God is all-holy. We read in v. 19,

*¹⁹ Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God!
O men of blood, depart from me!
²⁰ They speak against you with malicious intent;
your enemies take your name in vain.
²¹ Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?
²² I hate them with complete hatred;
I count them my enemies. Psalm 139:19-22*

What—did you think I would skip this part? I know these are the verses that everybody leaves out of Psalm 139—they’re like the crazy cousin that ruins Thanksgiving. But let’s give them a chance. Why in the world would David go from one of the most reverent passages in the Psalms to what seems really irreverent?

Well, because David’s reflections have moved to God’s holiness—which is the infinite moral perfection that crowns his knowledge and presence and power.²² When you begin to see God as he is, and to see yourself in light of him, another very fitting response isn’t just the urge to hide or to stand in wonder, but also (as weird as it sounds) to hate—to hate sin, anything that would trample God’s holiness. David isn’t asking God to kill his own enemies; his hatred is toward the enemies of God—those who shed the blood of God’s wonderfully-made creations, who speak against God with malicious intent, who hate God and rise up against him. The bottom line is David can’t love the holiness of God and be indifferent to wickedness.²³

Now, we want to be sensible here because the New Testament teaches us to love our human enemies.²⁴ And yet it also clarifies who the true enemies currently are: “the

²² John MacArthur, “The Holiness of God,”
<https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/GTY100/the-holiness-of-god>

²³ Kidner, 503; Plumer, 1164-1165

²⁴ Plumer, 1167; Matthew 5:43-48

rulers[,] authorities[,] cosmic powers[, and] spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”²⁵ Toward them I think we can echo David’s prayer and sentiment.²⁶

But perhaps the best application is not toward those enemies to God’s holiness outside of us, but to those *inside* of us. This is why David continues in v. 23,

*²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!
²⁴ And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting! Psalm 139:23-24*

If David was hesitant at all when he opened the psalm with “you have searched me and known me,” all his resistance is now gone. He sees that he needs the thorough investigation, and he cries out for it with all his heart.²⁷ What a perfect followup to last week in Psalm 51 where God does such a deep work through repentance that we don’t end up wanting just fire insurance—we want to be holy, to be like him.

And not only does this bring us full circle in this psalm, it brings us full circle in the series. David’s final request, “lead me in the way everlasting” takes us straight to the very first sermon in Psalm 1 where it contrasts the wicked man and the righteous man, the wicked way and the righteous way. That psalm ended like this: “for the Lord knows the way of the righteous [the everlasting way!], but the way of the wicked will perish [the not-everlasting way!].”²⁸

And so the righteous man of Psalm 1, and all who desire to walk his path, along with David, becomes another who when asked if he wants to know God in his infinite holiness, lifts his hand and says, “I do!”?

Conclusion

And so this brings us back to our opening question. How do *you* become a person who, when asked if you want to know God in his infinite knowledge and presence and power and holiness, your first thought is also wholly and genuinely, “I do!”? Is David just that much more pious than us? Because he has clearly come to a place where he welcomes

²⁵ Ephesians 6:12

²⁶ Kidner, 504

²⁷ Kidner, 504; Plumer, 1165

²⁸ Psalm 1:6; Kidner, 504

this God. Well, we can be really spiritual because it's church o'clock, or we can be honest that sometimes:

- all-knowing can feel like the God who just invades my privacy
- all-present, the God who always has to be in the middle of everything
- all-powerful, the God who leaves me (and the world) with all these flaws
- and all-holy, the God who holds over me an impossible standard

So if the most important thing about us is what comes to mind when we think of God, then I'm gonna need something a little more inspiring, preacher, because my first thoughts of God aren't always pretty! Well, there is someone who would agree, and he is, in my opinion, a better theologian than A.W. Tozer. In his book, *The Weight of Glory*, C.S. Lewis writes this:

*I read in a periodical the other day that the fundamental thing is how we think of God. By God Himself, it is not! How God thinks of us is not only more important, but infinitely more important. Indeed, how we think of Him is of no importance except in so far as it is related to how He thinks of us.*²⁹

How can we be people who don't withdraw from a God who is so high and holy, but welcome him? *Not by us somehow rising up to him, but by him coming down to us.* When you put yourself (or your effort) at the center of what makes worship happen—you "rise to the occasion" of it—it throws the whole thing off. But imagine what happens when this reality descends upon you:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:1, 14

The all-knowing, all-present, all-powerful, all-holy God—the One whom David says, 'He's too high, too wonderful for me'—that God comes down in the Person of Jesus Christ. And he seems like just another guy (the Bible says "he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him"³⁰), but when he looks at you he sees right through you. Those billions of DNA, he reads them—*because he wrote them*. And you would think with that kind of clarity into your sinful heart he would be the one who withdraws—'Away from me, sinner!' We ask, 'Jesus, do you want

²⁹ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001)

³⁰ Isaiah 53:2

to know me in all my infinite ignorance and limitation and weakness and sin?' and it doesn't matter what he says, we assume the answer—'No way!' And we walk away.

Meanwhile, what does Jesus do?

- He lowers himself even further, this time to be stretched and hammered onto a cross; and in so doing he calls out to us, "I do."
- And if that's not enough, in three days Jesus steps out of a tomb and once again calls out to us, "I do."
- And if that's not enough, after forty days Jesus ascends to his Father, sits down on a throne, and from heaven calls out to us, "I do."
- And if that's not enough, he says to us from the Gospel of John,

²⁶ But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. John 14:26

If you have believed that Jesus does say of you "I do," then his Spirit comes down not just to search you, but to dwell in you. No more hiding, no more ignoring him, no more denying his love. The Spirit will not stop reminding you, 'I see, I hear, I know, and yet still...I do. I welcome you...so that you can welcome Me.'

Communion - Church, God is too high for us—unless he comes down. But thanks be to God—he has! On the night that he was betrayed, taking a loaf of bread, and after blessing it, breaking it and said to his disciples, "This is my body, which is broken for you; eat this in remembrance of me." He also took a cup of wine, and after blessing it, gave it to his disciples and said, "This cup is the new covenant marked by the shedding of my blood. For as often as you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you announce the Lord's death until he returns." **Today we are announcing that Jesus Christ has first said "I do" to us that we might say "I do" to him.**

Our tradition here at Antioch is to come forward and break off a piece of bread and dip it in the juice. There will be stations here in the front; gluten-free bread will be available to your right. If you're a baptized believer, come and remember who you are and whose you are. If you're a believer but not yet baptized, before coming to the table, we would love to help you first come and declare your faith publicly through baptism. If you're not a Christian, this sacred symbol is not for you, but rather than taking communion, we encourage you to take Christ. He has made himself available to you this very moment. There will be pastors in the back to talk and pray with you about any need you have. Let's pray.

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