

BE YOU

When Michigan changed our license plates from blue with white letters to white with blue letters, I had to get a new plate. So for about 2 years, I've received a lot of ribbing for the fact that my license plate begins with BAD. So if people mention to you that someone in town has a "BAD" car, be sure to tell them that's your pastor.

I've tried to balance by BAD plate with one on the front of the car that was given to me by a parishioner. His father had bought this plate in the 1970s, and proclaims in gold, blue and white letters, "God is my Co-Pilot." Looks pretty sharp on my blue car.

However, even that phrase cannot escape controversy. I've had a couple of people counter with, "If God is your co-pilot, you need to change seats."

But my rebuttal is that God invites us to have Him as a co-pilot. If God were our pilot, it means we would simply be along for the ride, allowing God to make all of the decisions about where to go and what to do. When we are in the pilot seat, it means God is there beside us every day to guide and encourage us in our journey.

This theology is supported by Psalm 139. The writer reminds us that God is always there. God always knows everything about us. There is no escaping God's scrutiny – and the good news is, this means we have the freedom to be ourselves.

One of the remarkable things about Psalm 139 is it is a prayer, an intense conversation with God. And yet how many noticed something peculiar about this prayer? The writer does not ask for anything in the traditional sense of a prayer. There is no petition lifted up, or a request for God to act in a particular way.

Rather, the speaker seems to take this opportunity to ponder aloud about the presence, mystery and miracle of being the subject of God's attention. He begins with lots of active verbs.

The first four verses are dominated by the verb "know" – how many times does the psalmist say God knows him? This is reinforced by the verbs search, discern and be acquainted with. "When I sit down," "when I rise up" – these things make no difference in God's awareness of our actions. Nothing that can be hidden from God.

Even as he mulls over this thought, the writer of the Psalm is not resistant or disturbed by the idea. He simply recognizes it to be true and awesome.

As he continues in verses 7-12, the psalmist focuses on God's presence. This is not God's presence that is mystically available because we as humans are seeking God. Rather, God's presence is active and intrusive. God is present in heaven, God is present in the sea and God is present in every hidden place in the core of the earth. God is actively in pursuit of the psalmist wherever he might go.

There is a sense in Verse 7 that at times, the psalmist would like to evade that presence. A few years ago, Dave and I attended the wedding reception for a friend of Dave's sons. Since both sons were in the wedding party, there weren't many other people we knew at the reception. We simply found a table with two open seats and sat down. Conversation continued with the other six couples already gathered around the table.

After about 15 minutes, someone turned to Dave and asked, "So, what do you do for a living?" And Dave responded, "Both my wife and I are pastors."

Suddenly, there was dead silence at our table. I could tell from their faces that the other guests were mentally rewinding their conversation since we had joined them, trying

to remember what off-color stories they might have told thinking they were funny at the time, and wincing as they remembered a few swear words they used to color those stories. A couple of people nervously kept glancing at the number of bottles sitting in front of them. I could tell everyone at the table suddenly was wishing they were at another table – pretty much any table.

For this reason, Dave and I don't attend very many wedding receptions.

Even when I'm not at a reception but just in public and introducing myself as a pastor, I see that look on people's faces as they are suddenly confronted with the idea that God might be present with me. And in that recognition of God's presence comes this sudden concern that God is suddenly going to be aware of why they are and what they have done, and will respond by throwing down a few lightening bolts as punishment.

Contrast that sense with the psalmist. He has recognized that God is present whether we call upon Him or not. God is present whether we are being saints or devils. God is present, even though at times we like the people at the reception would prefer a little privacy.

But in recognizing he cannot escape God, the psalmist comes to the conclusion that God's presence is actually friendly and positive. God not only leads the psalmist; God holds him fast, in a sense of protecting and securing his well-being.

As a consequence, in the last two verses of this psalm, the writer lifts up an appeal to God to do a thorough investigation of his life, confident that God will find him innocent and pure.

What an amazing statement of power and confidence that comes in a God-centered life. The psalmist realizes God is not one who stays with us so He can punish or

change us; God is ever present to offer us life and well-being, even in the face of threat and danger, throughout this journey called life.

One of my favorite scriptures is Romans 8 where the Apostle Paul declares that nothing can separate us from the love of God. This is the same good news the psalmist has discovered. Although unable to comprehend God's thoughts, the writer is assured that God knows us. And in spite of that knowledge of who we are, God loves us.

And because of that, we are able to entrust our lives and futures to God, inviting God's gaze upon us in openness to God's plan for everlasting life.

I invite us this week to allow God to be our Co-Pilot, flying alongside us wherever we might go and whoever we might be.