

Why...Vocation?: Losing Your Alias and Your Alibi!

Psalm 139:1-6 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Psalm 139

The Inescapable God

To the leader. Of David. A Psalm.

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 far away.

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,
O Lord, you know it completely.

⁵ You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

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

So...Why Vocation? Or – as known in these halls – the “V” word.

Perhaps you’re like me and sometimes feeling a bit lost and stressed as the new academic year begins. For new students, it may be that first time away from home and family, and wondering whether you belong here. For returning students, perhaps it’s that anxiety of finding the right major or career path. For faculty members, it’s the anticipation of a classroom full of new faces and new questions to be addressed. For staff members, you may wonder if your work adds value or whether this is the right job for you. For all of us, there is this thing called the “imposter syndrome” – do we measure up, are we true to ourselves?

And what do we sometimes do in the face of our stress and anxiety but to find ways to hide or avoid the fear? I know I’ve done so many times. Maybe we take on an alias – put on an identity or behave as if we were someone else. Or maybe we seek an alibi – an excuse for why we are feeling the ways we do. Aliases and alibis – too often our way of coping with the fear and anxiety of living in the world.

And why shouldn’t we be afraid – the world can be a frightening place where we are judged or ignored or labeled or indicted for reasons we can’t fathom. Aliases and alibis seem like reasonable responses to an unpredictable and untrustworthy world.

I want to suggest this morning that the Psalmist speaks directly to the heart of our fears with words that remind us of God's abiding promise for God's people – for us. And they are words that are at the heart of Augsburg's mission – words that call us to trust in a God who searches and knows us. Words that are about our vocations, our callings. Words that define why we care so deeply about vocation.

Now I could go all theology-nerd on you here and recite the scriptural and theological bases for our belief in vocation, but I'll spare you all the Lutheran-speak for a moment. Instead I want to suggest that the reason we embrace vocation in this university is because when you are called and when you follow your call, you lose your aliases and your alibis and become just who God intends for you to be. And that is a word of comfort and love and hope in the midst of our real lives.

So how does this happen – this losing your alias and alibi? I recently heard a remarkable story about Brother Roger, founder of the Taizé community in France. Brother Roger would travel to some of the most difficult parts of the world with a ministry of peace and hope – despite the on the ground evidence of violence and poverty and natural disasters. He would urge victims to pray for enemies even when that seemed impossible. He proclaimed the power of trust – not as some naïve sense that all would magically be right in the world – but as a gift from a God who searches and knows us from the beginning of time so that we might be God's people for others.

When asked by a fellow member of the community what he meant by trust, Brother Roger replied "Trust takes away your alibi." Trust takes away your alias and your alibi – the many ways in which you hide or make excuses to be someone else or leave the problems for someone else to solve. Trust is the openness to hearing the call to be yourself and to get to work as God's faithful servant in the world.

And so, maybe a little bit of Lutheran-speak.

This is the remarkable word of grace and reconciliation that is at the heart of our faith. I'm drawn again and again to Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler's thought that the entire Christian faith can be summed up in the liturgical formula, "Almighty God, from whom no secrets are hid." This is a prayer of confession that reminds us, challenges us and comforts us with the good news that we are known – fully and genuinely known, like it or not – by the One who loves us, and once we accept that gift of faith, once we accept the power of trust, we will find the remarkable centering power of lifting up our sins, our lack of knowledge, our pride, and letting the gift of forgiveness and reconciliation free us to be loved, to keep on learning, to serve others who also need the embrace of forgiveness. We are called by our God in Jesus Christ to follow, not because we are righteous, but because we are sinners all, sinners who are forgiven and reconciled so that God's good work in the world might be accomplished in and through us.

There is sin in it, no doubt about it, but that sin does not define God's people, redeemed, called and equipped for the work of hope and reconciliation. In fact, our Lutheran faith demands that

we face the reality of a sinful world with clear-eyed focus. We recognize the messiness, the complexity, the self-interest and greed, the violence and deception. We ask tough questions about the ways of the world. We confess our aliases and alibis. And then we get to work with a sense of hope and promise, believing that we are called to live as those reconciled and redeemed, offering that same wellspring of hope and reconciliation to all.

And now back to you all and this moment at the beginning of a new academic year – especially this year, when we celebrate 150 years of being guided by the faith and values of the Lutheran church. In chapel this week and next, we are asking “why?” Why worship, Why Jesus, Why serve, Why vocation – and in our rich and meaningful responses to these questions – and despite the abiding temptations we face – all of us – to hide behind our alibis and aliases, please know this...

We believe in Jesus, through whom we know God’s plans for us. We embrace worship, in which we practice the sacred work of community. And we believe we are called to be neighbor, following the call of our God who searches and knows and names and claims us. We have the gift of trust in a God who knows us. We are a community of trust in which each of you – student, faculty, staff member – is called to be who God intends for you to be. No aliases required, no alibis allowed. It won’t necessarily be easy – and there will be times when we doubt and fear and want to retreat – but know that God loves you, we love you – God has your back and so does this remarkable community. You are called, Auggies! Thanks be to God. Amen.