

Today we're starting a new, three week series we're calling Dangerous Prayers, and we're going to be spending some time in the longest book in the Bible, right square in the middle, called the Psalms. And the reason we're calling it Dangerous Prayers is not because it's the old bait-and-switch. We're not going to say each week: "Just joking! These are actually super fluffy, comfy prayers!" The prayers we're talking about are dangerous. They are the tough prayers that sometimes we want to shy away from, avoid at all costs, because they are prayers that lay us open to God's work. They're prayers of complete transparency and submission. They're prayers that give God free reign over us, over our deepest secrets, over the sins in our lives we'd like to ignore, over our futures. And that's dangerous. We're not asking God to do stuff for us, or give us stuff when we pray these kinds of prayers; we are letting go and asking God to take complete control.

So if I were to ask you to think of someone who had a double-life, I'm sure you can think of someone, or at least a fictional person who had a double life maybe. Someone who appeared to be a mild-mannered, normal person by day, but had another side, another life altogether that doesn't make a lot of sense to you. But I'm pretty sure none of you thought of this guy:



So this guy is Sergio Gutierrez, and the reason why he's wearing that mask and also holding up the host for Eucharist is because he is a priest from Mexico who, for a time, moonlit as a wrestler in lucha libre, which is the Mexican equivalent of WWF. He called himself Fray Tormenta, and the reason why he did it was that he needed to get money to put together a functional orphanage. He was also a fan of lucha libre, but that was mostly a bonus. And he did this without anyone knowing who he was – he won matches, won money, and then would go home, wake up, perform mass, and nobody would know, because part of the lucha libre culture is that the wrestlers wear their masks and never reveal their "true" identity. But then, Gutierrez was recognized while he was officiating a wedding, and the gig was up. Wrestling and the cloth don't really go together; to quote the movie Nacho Libre (which was loosely

based on Gutierrez's story), "it says in the Bible not to wrestle our neighbor." But anyway, he was able to continue being Fray Tormenta, albeit not anonymously anymore.

So this is kind of a funny, heartwarming example of a double life that this man was able to keep under wraps for a while. But a lot of the time, the double lives we see around us are a bit less far-fetched and definitely not as happy. We see it happen in the public life (I'm thinking of politicians like John Edwards and Anthony Wiener who were brought down by secret love children and sexting scandals), but us "normal" folks experience it on a much smaller scale.

It might look a little bit like the successful professional guy or gal who seems to have met every goal they ever wanted and has life all together, the beautiful spouse, white picket fence, 2.5 kids... but the life we don't see is one that crippled by doubt, anxiety, and depression. But they can't bring themselves to admit to someone else that they feel this way because everyone is so impressed with their success.

The kind "double-life," a public life that looks like everyone's dream that's crippled by hidden problems, isn't all that hard to imagine. And yet, these are usually characteristics we don't want made public. And you know, I think a lot of us get away with it: for every secret or double-life that gets exposed, there are probably a handful we never know about.

To a certain degree, we all live a version of these double lives. Sometimes we get caught, sometimes we don't, but it takes a toll. You may not see it or even feel it, and maybe you feel pretty good about your double life, but you are losing a piece of yourself, of who you really are. We weren't meant to live with masks on – we were made to be known.

But the question is, known by whom? Well, there are three possibilities:

One, we can be known by others. This is usually what we mean when we talk about being known somehow. That people recognize us, that they know our name, they know things about us, what we like, what we don't like, our personalities. We are pretty happy when someone knows us really well, our good and our bad sides, and still loves and accepts us, right? That's the ideal.

But there can be some major pitfalls when it comes to this way of being known. First of all: how well can another person really know us? Half the time, it's like other people just don't understand you very well. You've tried to explain, you've shared your life with others, been open and explaining yourself, but there just is a sense that this other person doesn't get you. And the worst is when someone thinks they have you pegged, they might think they know you backwards and forward, but they just don't. So when it comes to being known, being known by others isn't as complete as we'd like it.

Okay, so there's another option of how we can be known: We can know ourselves. This seems simple enough – we know who we are, better than anyone else, right? To get Shakespearean on you, "To thine own self be true."

Well, maybe. Anyone who's ever gone to counseling or therapy may already have doubts about this, because after a few sessions you start to realize how little you really know yourself! Because while we may be good at hiding things and lying to other people, we're actually even better at doing that to ourselves. We can say we know why we are the way we are, or we can think we're doing fine and have it all together, but then when we begin to scratch beneath the surface, we begin to see some kind of not-so-good stuff.

We might think we're a pretty nice, thoughtful person, but then find that in reality, we spend most of our time looking out for #1. We might think we're chill and calm, but find ourselves freaking out while stuck in rush hour traffic. We might think we're sure of who we are, feel stable and secure, and suddenly find ourselves flailing when we lose a job, lose a relationship, lose a home, lose our health.

I'm going to be transparent for a second: this is me all over. So this past year has been pretty good to me after a long stretch in my twenties and early thirties that was very unstable and unhappy. But in the past seven or eight months, things that I'd been working toward, life goals, they're happening, baby! I just graduated from seminary and have a job working for an awesome church: check! My husband and I are having a baby: check! But here's the thing: the times, they are a'changing, as the Bob Dylan song goes. And some tough changes, too- like, finding out our apartment building got sold to UMass Lowell, and we won't be able to stay there as long as we planned and... yeah, having a kid is exciting, but also scary as heck! So even though things are stable, I am also realizing I'M NOT SO STABLE, which is tough for me because I want to be put-together. I'm a pastor at a church, for goodness sakes, I'm not supposed to have PROBLEMS! But these things crop up and remind us that aren't always who we think we are.

C.S. Lewis describes this as being the "rats" in the basement. If they hear you banging around and are prepared, they have plenty of time to hide, so when you open up that basement door there aren't any rats there. But then there are times when you swing that door open unexpectedly and the rats can't hide in time and you see those nasty pink eyes and wormy tails, and hear the squeaks. In both cases, they've been there the whole time- it's just in the second instance they weren't prepared. So when I'm surprised about something like losing my year lease, I'm not ready, and I react with those old rats: feelings of hopelessness, fear, depression, anxiety, because deep down that's still a part of who I am.

So we see there are problems if we're known by others, and known by ourselves. That leaves us with option number three: We are known by God. Let's take a look at Psalm 139:13-18. 13 You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit me together in my mother's womb. 14 Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! Your workmanship is marvelous—how well I know it. 15 You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion, as I was woven together in the dark of the womb. 16 You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed.

So in this day and age, we all kind of think we know all about what's happening in utero, and as you can see, in my current life situation, I've been given some opportunities to see what my baby looks like even though she won't be born for another three months. And yet, my husband Jeff and I have seen her go from being a little circle with a heartbeat to a bean with little nubs for arms and legs, to being a baby –

albeit an alien-like baby, but recognizably human. In David's day, it was more of a mystery. But even though this technology exists for us now where we can see our children before they're born, it's always kind of a surprise, because a lot happens in between ultrasounds that I'm not seeing—huge stuff, stuff like cells and nervous systems, and muscles and bones, God knitting her together.

And even though I'm going to be a parent soon, I don't \*really\* know much about this little person. I know it's a girl, I know it's a baby, I sort of know what her profile looks like, I know she gets a little crazy at night time and kicks around a lot, but that's about it. I don't know what her personality will be like. I don't know what her voice will sound like. Hair color, favorite ice cream flavor – those are things that I don't have access to right now. I can imagine, make up stories, but I just don't know!

But here, in these verses, we get a completely different story: we get God's view of us in verse sixteen: You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed. So not only does God know my daughter already, he knows her life story.

From the beginning, God saw us whole, and saw our entire lives stretched out ahead of us. In verses 17 and 18 we read: *17 How precious are your thoughts about me, O God. They cannot be numbered! 18 I can't even count them; they outnumber the grains of sand!* And when I wake up, you are still with me! If this isn't a love song, I don't know what is.

How beautiful to see that the God who created the world and everything and everyone in it cares about each and every one of us that he thinks about us, that he knows us more than any other person ever could, more than we can even know ourselves. That is a beautiful, loving, attentive Father, one we cannot even begin to understand or love enough in return.

On the other and, this also means he has more access to us than we might be comfortable with. This means God knows what you're thinking. He knows the search history on your phones and laptops. He knows every word of gossip, every lie you said. And he knows your future search history, gossip, and lie you haven't even said yet! This is an extremely vulnerable place to be. You have a spotlight on your past, present, and future, all the time, wherever you are.

So if we're going to define reality the way David has defined it, we are very vulnerable creatures. God made us and has known us even before we've taken a single breath. But vulnerability is a catch-word these days. A lot of us say we like it and we want it, but the truth is a lot of us don't want it.

Vulnerability is basically your "weak spot." You are opening yourself up and exposing yourself, making it possible for someone to have access to you in some sense. It's not necessarily being physically vulnerable – it's also about being emotionally vulnerable, or spiritually vulnerable.

So here's a picture of my dog Dori. So when she's sleeping like this, it means she's feeling especially safe and secure, because the underbelly is a very vulnerable place where we like to keep our vital organs. So you might have noticed that when a dog is submitting to you, they'll often roll on their backs and show

their stomachs for belly rubs. They are making themselves vulnerable because they think the risk is worth it for the belly rub.

The reality is that when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, we could get hurt. In fact, many of us have been hurt when we were vulnerable.

But vulnerability is also the only way we can truly Live Fully because that is who God made us to be—we're vulnerable before him. That is reality: we are not knights walking around wearing heavy armor that protects us from being seen by anyone and everyone. The truth is: We're already vulnerable before God – we need to live in this truth and pray the way David shows us here in Psalm 139.

In verses 7-12, David establishes the reality of our existence: 7 I can never escape from your Spirit! I can never get away from your presence! 8 If I go up to heaven, you are there; if I go down to the grave, you are there. 9 If I ride the wings of the morning, if I dwell by the farthest oceans 10 even there your hand will guide me, and your strength will support me. 11 I could ask the darkness to hide me and the light around me to become night— 12 but even in darkness I cannot hide from you. To you the night shines as bright as day. Darkness and light are the same to you.

There's nothing we can do, nowhere we can go that's outside of God's reach. We cannot escape God's presence. God already knows and sees everything and is everywhere.

When we're fully vulnerable and open to being known by God, that's when we can fully be safe, we can live lives that are full complete, experience a love that's deeper than we can imagine because God actually knows everything about us... and yet He still loves us. And isn't that what we all long for? Isn't that what we desire above all else? To be fully known and yet also fully loved?

Once we acknowledge our complete vulnerability before God, and that we were designed to be vulnerable, to be known completely by Him, that's where the dangerous prayer comes in. This is where we need to be asking: "so what does this prayer look like?" "What does this attitude and posture before God look like?"

We pray like David does at the opening and the closing of this Psalm: verse one he says: 1 O Lord, you have examined my heart and know everything about me. And later, in verses 23 and 24: 23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. 24 Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life.

When we acknowledge our vulnerability and pray this "search me" prayer, things may feel a little scary, it may get a little dangerous, because God will shed light on things we might not want him to shed light on.

He may search you and reveal sin in your life that you need to confess. He may search you and uncover thoughts that you have that are intrusive or keep you from him. He may search you and reveal patterns and behaviors in your life that are harmful or hurtful to you or to others. He may search you and find things that you want to hold onto so tightly but need to loosen put into His hands.

But I'm not letting you off the hook, and I'm not letting myself off the hook: We're still going to pray this dangerous prayer. And we're going to do this together.

On your seats there are little slips of green paper that say: "Search Me" and no, this isn't a weird spin on Alice and Wonderland – this is a place where we can write out our prayer, for God to search us and find that thing we think we've hidden from Him. There are pens in cups at the end of the aisle, and I want to encourage you to write out that prayer on that slip.

Maybe it's a sin. Maybe it's an area of your life you haven't given over to him. Maybe it's anxiety, fear, pride, whatever it is, write it down. And we're going to give you a key chain that you can put that prayer in, and carry around as a reminder, that you're praying this, bringing it before God, that he knows you through and through, and that He can take care of that Dangerous Prayer.

So first, let's pray, and then we're going to give you some time to pray, reflect, listen for God's voice, and write out that dangerous prayer to God, and then we'll come back together.

Communion Liturgy:

We can only say these "search me" prayers in confidence because of our Heavenly Father's Love for us, which was most fully displaying through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ.

The reason we all can say David's prayer and be confident that God's searching will not lead to condemnation is because of what we find on these tables throughout the worship area: The bread and wine represent Jesus sacrificed body and blood. He made himself broken and exposed to God's judgment and wrath so we don't have to; he made a way for us to be made whole, and welcome in God's presence.

We're going to spend some time celebrating and practicing this act of communion, and anyone who chooses to remember Christ in this way is welcome to participate. If you're still praying over your search me prayers, or if you would rather use this time to sit and pray and think about the message, you're also welcome to do so.