

FOUNDATIONS FOR  
LAITY RENEWAL

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*Transforming Daily Life*

719 Earl Garrett Street  
Kerrville, TX 78028

Three Sermon Outlines on

*Work and Faith*

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***Need Series Title***

Gary Klingsporn

SERMON NOTES

*The  
High Calling  
of Our  
Daily Work*

*Making a real living connects you to a bigger picture,  
a grand design, an abundant life.*

*Each of us has only a small part to play, but what a part!  
It's the high calling of our daily work.*

– Howard Butt, Jr., of Laity Lodge  
TheHighCalling.org

## Sermon 1: “Where Can I Go?”

### Psalm 139:7-12

Where can I go from your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.  
If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me fast.  
If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,  
and the light around me become night,”  
even the darkness is not dark to you;  
the night is as bright as the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.

### Luke 15:1-7

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

**Theological Point:** God’s presence is inescapable. We wander away from God and run from God. That is part of our human condition. But there is nowhere we can hide from the God who created us and loves us. God is always reaching out to us. God’s inescapable presence is a gift God offers us.

#### Introduction: The Runaway

- A. “I Am Running Away”
- B. “Where Can I Go?”
- C. “I Will Find You”

#### Conclusion: God’s Gift to Us

**Introduction: The Runaway.** The words of Psalm 139 are among the most beautiful in the Scriptures: “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?” How can one begin to do these words justice when preaching? The meaning is profound. But I have long thought there is also a playful quality in the images: “If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I go to the farthest limits of the sea, even there your right hand shall hold me fast.” The pictures are vivid: up to the heavens, down to the underworld, to the farthest limits of the sea. Where can I go? Where can I flee? Nowhere. “You are there, and there, and even there....”

When our daughters were young, one of their favorite books we read to them was *The Runaway Bunny* by Margaret Wise Brown. Written in 1942, the book has been in print for seventy years and is one of the best-selling children’s books of all time. The book has always reminded me of Psalm 139. Why not use the book in a sermon on Psalm 139:7-12? Maybe you know the story:

*Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away. So he said to his mother, “I am running away.” “If you run away,” said his mother, “I will run after you. For you are my little bunny.”*

*“If you run after me,” said the little bunny, “I will become a fish in a trout stream and I will swim away from you.” “If you become a fish in a trout stream,” said his mother, “I will become a fisherman and I will fish for you.”*

*“If you become a fisherman,” said the little bunny, “I will become a rock on the mountain, high above you.” “If you become a rock on the mountain high above me,” said his mother, “I will be a mountain climber, and I will climb to where you are.”* (Margaret Wise Brown, *The Runaway Bunny*, Harper & Row, 1942; revised ed. 1972).

The story continues in the same vein with the bunny wanting to run away by various means and his mother saying she would do whatever necessary to find him. At the end the mother speaks of catching him in her arms to hold him fast and hug him.

What is it that makes that story so compelling? Is it the profound love that healthy parents have for their children? Love is powerful in all kinds of relationships.

Why not use the runaway bunny story in a sermon as a metaphor for God’s love for us? I’m sure I’m not the first to do so. Some may say, “Too sentimental!” But if done well, the sermon need not lapse into sentimentalism. If one stays true to the text of the psalm, the bunny story can be a delightful entrée into the passage and a focusing image for the sermon. (Another often-quoted image one might work with in this sermon is the classic poem “The Hound of Heaven” by the English poet Francis Thompson. The poem speaks of God’s fierce and relentless pursuit of us).

To use *The Runaway Bunny* story, one could open the sermon by describing and quoting the story as I have done above. In the next section of the sermon one might give examples of how running away from God is one of the prominent themes in Scripture.

**A. “I Am Running Away.”** “I am running away,” the little bunny says. “I will run after you, for you are my little bunny,” the mother says. The story is as old as humankind. It’s the story at the center of the Bible. It’s our story. Think of some biblical examples and use them. Here are some possibilities:

1. Adam and Eve hiding behind the bushes in the garden. Hiding from God who created them. Running from love and from relationship with God. Going their own way. God came walking in the garden in the cool of the day and called out to them, “Where are you?” And God found them, out of love for them.

2. Jonah. The word of the Lord came to Jonah and said, “Arise, go east to Nineveh.” But Jonah fled from the presence of God. He got on a ship and went west—“away from the presence of God.” But God found Jonah, out of love for him.

3. Saul of Tarsus. On his way to the city of Damascus, breathing threats and murder against the disciples of Jesus, he suddenly encountered the risen Christ. Saul was running from God. God found him. It changed his life.

The biblical faith tradition says that “running away” and “running after you” is also our story. It is part of the human condition to run from God and to strike out on our own. To be self-sufficient, in control of our own lives. To live apart from the reality of God. The Bible calls it sin. But biblical faith also proclaims that the God who loves us is always there, looking for us, ready to forgive and restore us to relationship with God.

**B. “Where Can I Go?”** In the next section of the sermon one might focus on the theme of the inescapable God as portrayed in Psalm 139.

1. Theologian Paul Tillich said it is the reality of our human condition to run from God, to be on our own, to live in the world as if God were not here. But Tillich wrote, “To flee into darkness in order to forget God is not to escape God. For a time we may be able to hurl God out of our consciousness, to reject God, to refute God, to argue convincingly for God’s non-existence, [or] to live comfortably without God.”

Ultimately, Tillich argued, it is not God whom we reject and forget, but rather some distorted picture of God. The God who is really God is inescapable. There is finally “no place to which we can run or flee from God which is outside of God” (Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948, pp. 40-41).

2. Biblical faith boldly proclaims the inescapable presence of God in Psalm 139:7-12. Do a careful study of vv. 7-12 in the larger context of the psalm as a prayer for God’s help against enemies or persecutors. The point of these verses is that there is nowhere that one can hide or escape from the presence of God. God is ever present and everywhere present.

Even though we may “flee” God out of fear, guilt, or doubt, God is still there. That may sound scary, but it is good news. God is there to “lead us” and to “hold us fast.” There is great peace and comfort in that. The spirit of this psalm is not

fear but trust—the trust that nothing can separate us from the loving presence of God. Wherever we go, whatever happens to us, God is there. Think about using some stories or examples to illustrate how you or other people have experienced that truth.

3. Not only is God present, but God also knows us: “O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away” (vv. 1-2). If one focuses the sermon on vv. 7-12, it would be good to touch as well on vv. 1-6. God knows us through and through—what we think and say and do. God loves us enough to pay attention to us moment by moment—like a parent cares about a child. But though we are known and loved, we still run or stray away from relationship with God.

You may also want to include vv. 13-18 in this sermon, but there is more than enough for one sermon in vv. 1-12. The final verses of the psalm (vv. 19-24)—the prayer for the defeat of those hostile to the psalmist—pose interesting interpretive challenges in preaching and teaching. See the commentaries regarding those issues.

4. Why do we run from God? What takes us away from God? You might develop these questions at this point in the sermon. For many people in an affluent, technological culture like ours, it is easy for material things and the consumption of things to take center stage. Money, success, and stuff easily lead to the assumption that we are self-made masters of our own destiny. God isn't necessary. Or God is far down the list of our priorities. Material things become the focus.

For other people, reason may become the focus. The intellect governs life. Only what can be worked out by universal laws of logic can be true and thus real. God is either non-existent or a distant principle uninvolved in our day-to-day lives.

Sometimes people also run from distorted pictures of God or from the church. They have been hurt or wounded by bad theology or by people in the church who have abused them. Think about examples. Distorted images of God might include: a God of unrelieved wrath and judgment, a God of fear, rigid rules, legalism. Grace can be easily lost or minimized. Distorted pictures of God and unhealthy or abusive churches have done much damage to people. Sometimes we run from God because we're running from distorted views of God.

**C. “I Will Find You.”** I have chosen to pair Psalm 139:7-12 with Jesus' parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15:1-7. The reason is obvious. Here is where Jesus teaches on the theme of God's persistent and pursuing love. The tax collectors and sinners were coming to listen to Jesus. Some of the scribes and Pharisees, were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So Jesus told them the parable of the lost sheep and the shepherd who goes in search of the sheep “until he finds it.”

This is a rich Gospel passage to explore alongside Psalm 139. Jesus was saying to his critics that the love of God for us is like that shepherd who always goes in search of lost and straying sheep—people who have run away or wandered away. When the shepherd God finds the lost sheep, there is great joy in heaven, because God loves us that much.

**Conclusion: God's Gift to Us.** Where can I go from your spirit, O God? Where can I flee from your presence? “Nowhere,” says the psalmist. That is the powerful good news of the gospel in Psalm 139. God's presence can inspire fear or holy awe, but ultimately it is God's gift to us.

I can imagine concluding this sermon with words from the psalm and the closing scene from *The Runaway Bunny*. Exhausted by his mother's relentless promise to run after him and find him, the little bunny says, “*Shucks, I might just as well stay where I am and be your little bunny.*”

God's inescapable presence is a gift to us. We call it grace—the love of God made known to us in Jesus Christ. This is good news.

**Connection to Daily Life and Work:** To know that God is present in our daily work, our careers, family life, and relationships, is a source of strength and comfort, especially during difficult times. God's presence can transform the way we view our work and live our lives. God is in our work and our relationships. We can always look to God for wisdom and guidance.