

Compassionate Surveillance

Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24

It's been thirty years since George Orwell predicted the ominous reality of Big Brother, and though it has arrived a few decades late, in 2014 we are about as close as we have ever been to experiencing the fullness of it given what we are learning about government and corporate marketing surveillance. There are cameras everywhere, along with drones, spy satellites, wiretapping, and other monitoring devices keeping track of us, as well as cookies and trojans in our web-based programming and electronic gadgets to allow marketers to know precisely where we are, what interests us, and what items we purchase. Even without Edward Snowden, our growing awareness of what the "alphabet-soup" of government agencies are up to (NSA, CIA, DIA, FBI, and a dozen others, including the Department of Homeland Security) indicates that not only data collection is ongoing, but that we are being monitored and evaluated over what we say or do, often without our realizing it. It's enough to send chills up your spine.

It's not just criminals and celebrities who are watched with interest. Mikko Hyppönen, one the world's leading computer security experts, says this about Big Brother surveillance:

Government surveillance is not about the government collecting the information you're sharing publicly and willingly; it's about collecting the information you don't think you're sharing at all, such as the online searches you do on search engines... or private emails or text messages... or the location of your mobile phone at any time.

In other words, every key stroke, every phone call, every ping transmitted to a cell tower registers something about us to some data collection program monitoring our communications and behavior.

The high-tech imposition doesn't just come from powerful forces beyond us; Howard Rheingold, author of *Net Smart*, adds another element about who may be trespassing on our privacy:

The Orwellian vision was about state-sponsored surveillance. Now it's not just the state, it's your nosy neighbor, your ex-spouse and people who want to spam you.

This interloping comes not only in the form of spam, but also hackers armed with malware and viruses which infect our computers.

Aside from marketers who are intruding into our privacy in order to tailor their ads to sell products, those in the government who monitor the daily activities of citizens do so largely on the argument of enhancing national security. There's little national debate around this, since the presumption is the more that is unmasked and uncovered, the less opportunity there is for nefarious criminals and terrorists to do their harm. Yet, there's a fine line between necessary prudence and abject abuse—what's legitimate and what's overreach.

More importantly, do those who have the power of surveillance actually possess the wisdom and judgment to know right from wrong—not just in terms of evaluating who they're watching, but also relative to their own perceptions and consequent actions? It's a powerful position to be in without significant oversight and accountability. Surveillance can be abused quite a bit for personal gain or political purposes. Or, in wartime, even with sophisticated military surveillance, look how often innocent people are wrongly targeted by combatants (cf. just the other day four young Palestinian boys playing on the beach in Gaza were mistaken for militants and killed by Israeli Defense Forces)! Or, consider how often intelligence agencies and police overstep their authority in order to apprehend a

suspect or get information to gain a conviction, often acting before they really know if they have the right person. It's almost as if we're presumed guilty with constant surveillance designed to prove it!

The courts try to prevent abuses, but the point is, people who possess the power to secretly monitor others are as fallible, and sometimes as criminally motivated, as anyone else. We have to remember that. Just because they have authority doesn't mean they are right in their judgment. Surveillance is not infallible. In fact, it's a human trait to abuse the power one has been granted without proper checks and balances to protect the innocent. Given how ubiquitous surveillance is today, we need a national debate about it, not only to protect what's left of our privacy, but to prevent miscarriages of justice and abuses of power.

Having eyes watching your every move is clearly a concern for us living in these times. But it's not just a worry unique to the 21st century. People of faith throughout history have commonly believed that God is omniscient and omnipresent. They didn't perceive humans would ever be capable of it, but they certainly believed God was. Psalm 139 conveys that perception, though given what I just said about surveillance and intelligence gathering, these words are haunting:

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.
You search out my path and my lying down,
And are acquainted with all my ways...

To the modern ear given our concerns, such words might convey a sense that God is like Big Brother—actively monitoring our human behavior and thoughts like the eyes and ears of scrutinizing

surveillance. Nothing we do or say is unknown to God; we are constantly watched, continually spied upon. If it's read in this way, it could well be received as something to be concerned about—an intrusion into our private lives, a threat from a powerful force—omniscience and omnipresence being the tools of a tyrant who does not trust his or her subjects. Is that what these words might mean, especially given our context?

This may sound like a bit of a stretch until you consider how many people actually do view God in this way—as some sort of stereotyped medieval caricature of the Almighty policing the activity of sinful human beings in order to punish them and to hold them accountable at the Final Judgment. It sounds like Big Brother to me—constant surveillance to catch us in the act. This isn't an unusual belief in many religions, i.e., the perception of a stern moral overlord is found in most forms of religious fundamentalism; even milder forms of it are expressed as behavioral control and moral discipline by parents and parochial schoolmarmes who instill a bit of fear, guilt, and paranoia into children to keep them in check. One of the “Momilies” I remember hearing growing up was: “Behave yourself. You know God is watching you even when I can't.” Somewhere in our childhood hearts there is lingering fear of being watched by God at all times. For me, that was reasonably effective until adolescence. For some adults, it's still the way they perceive God in their lives, as some sort of cosmic watchdog, keeping track of their every move. They're spiritually paranoid in fear of God's judgment. However, as Cicero noted, an irrational, guilt-producing fear of God produces little more

than a religion of superstition—something I’ve observed to be true as well.

So we have to ask: is this really what the psalm is about—that God is like an Orwellian Big Brother? Is it to look upon the divine Presence as constantly scrutinizing our behavior, keeping a record of our sins? Was this psalm written to inspire fear and paranoia in us, worried about being constantly watched?

Of course, the answer is, no. On the contrary, this psalm is a statement of faith and trust in a context of loving intimacy and knowledge. Striking fear into us has nothing to do with it. Instead, it’s a song about implicit trust. It’s akin to the way that people who have loved each other for a length of time have a spiritual depth to their knowledge of each other and why they watch out for one another. It isn’t a matter of being monitored every moment in life, but it is to trust each other so implicitly—so completely—that even apart, they think each other’s thoughts, they know what the other will be doing, or how he or she will act in a given situation. They’ve written into their hearts each other’s routines, habits, likes and dislikes, what makes the other tick, what ambitions and desires and interests each have. In other words, there is little or nothing that separates them spiritually—stuff they wouldn’t or couldn’t know about the other—because their relationship is both transparent and deeply invested in trust. It’s an intimacy of spirit, not surveillance on one’s conduct. That’s a good way to understand divine omniscience.

In this particular psalm, that is what the psalmist is claiming about his relationship with God. It is intimate, it is meaningful, it is compassionate and merciful, it weathers the storms of life. It isn’t

dependent on complete agreement, but on the experience that even with differing views, each trusts the other for where their heart is. The psalmist, be it David or otherwise, was certain that God had his interests at heart and, in turn, the psalmist sought to have God's.

As we ponder the expressions of this trust in each verse, it carries us along with a beautiful sentiment of oneness, of unity, of shalom or wellbeing, of presence.

Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord,
You know it completely. *[i.e., you think my thoughts before I utter them]...*

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence? *[i.e., I'm thinking of you all the time!]*

At no point in the lyric is there a sense of paranoia or fear, but instead, of wonderment and reverence for how the watchcare of this relationship worked with trust and mutual understanding, allowing the psalmist to relax in peace. It was a relationship of deepest empathy and compassion, where God would always be present in his life watching over him, yet with a perspective that was compassionate and supportive. Psalm 139 reflects the ideal trust one can have in God as a person of faith. It's beautiful, sincere, inspiring, and meaningful to those who sense their intimacy and oneness with God is similar.

What scholars have noticed, though, is that as much as this might express the zenith of faith—of unshakable trust and confidence in God—life rarely allows us to sustain such faith, if we attain it at all. The counterpoint to this utmost trust in Psalm 139 is the story of Job, which actually appropriates much of the same language but presents it with a bitter tone. Though the story of Job isn't particularly

uplifting, it does seem to reflect the way we can lose a sense of God's presence when things are not going well—when we are not at peace. As people of faith, that probably happens to us more than not, leaving these two realities in tension as a fair description of our trust in God and the way life often plays out.

There are times and seasons when the words of Job, echoing the psalmist's, sting with more naked truth in our hearts than anything else:

Your hands fashioned and made me;
And now you turn and destroy me.
Remember that you fashioned me like clay;
And will you turn me to dust again? ...
You clothed me with skin and flesh,
And knit me together with bones and sinews.
You have granted me life and steadfast love,
And your care has preserved my spirit.
Yet these things you hid in your heart;
I know this was your purpose.
If I sin, you watch me,
And do not acquit me of my iniquity. (Job 10:8, 9, 11-14)

Doesn't this sound like a bitter rebuke of Psalm 139? On the other side of the psalmist's spiritual peace and oneness with God lies the broken heart and spirit of Job, who began with the psalmist's faith, but then when he lost everything, felt betrayed by the God whom he thought loved him as intimately as he did in turn. Job didn't question God's surveillance, only the lack of response to his suffering. As much as we might prefer to hear the more hopeful psalm spoken to us, the reality check of Job helps to keep us grounded and connected with God when we're not feeling particularly hopeful—when we're angry with life and with God, or we're so deeply hurt and disappointed that there's not an uplifting thought within us.

It's helpful to give voice to Job's bitterness just to remind us that, like Job, God is still there watching over us, permitting life to be cruel to us, not interfering when we grow bitter and resentful, and allowing us to find our way out of the dark places in life, trusting that we will become more spiritually wise and mature through the hardships we face. What we often discover is that God gives us spiritual strength, even when we don't immediately sense it.

As strange as it sounds and as unhelpful as it may appear at our lowest points, that is part of God's compassionate surveillance of our lives. God watches over us, not to police our behavior, but to give us stability when we need it. Often, God allows us to suffer more than is fair so that we may learn from it and become wiser through the wounds that afflict us and our own willingness to find healing for them. It may take a bitter potion, but the healing will come if we seek it. Through it all, God watches over us, compassionately, even when our eyes and hearts are closed. Though the story of Job is real, it's meant to lead us back to the intimacy and peace of the psalm.

The orthodox saint, St. Basil the Great, offered this wisdom on life for his followers to ponder:

Do not say, "This happened by chance, while this came to be of itself." In all that exists there is nothing disorderly, nothing indefinite, nothing without purpose, nothing by chance ... How many hairs are on your head? God will not forget one of them. Do you see how nothing, even the smallest thing, escapes the gaze of God?

Some days I truly believe that; on other days, I probably don't. But whether or not I make that my spiritual confession, it does me good to sense that somehow, every day of my life, God already knows.

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