

**ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA**

October 17, 2021 – PENTECOST 21 / PROPER 24, YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Our Heavenly Father Knows Best*”

Isaiah 53:4-12	(A prophecy of God’s Suffering Servant—the Messiah)
Psalms 91:9-16	(God will answer our plea when we cry out to Him)
Hebrews 5:1-10	(Christ is our High Priest, chosen by God)
St. Mark 10:35-45	(Jesus came to serve and to give His life for many)

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On the web site [PicktheBrain.com](http://PicktheBrain.com), Barbara Faison shares “Five Ways to Increase Your Self-Confidence.” She states: “Trusting in your own judgment, abilities and personal power is the essence of self-confidence. ... Self-confidence is an inside job.” Her first and final tips include: “*Breathe/Trust*. Stopping to breathe and check in with yourself on a regular basis allows you to trust your inner guidance system.... *Be Your Own Best Friend* ... Trust and believe that you have the power, abilities and judgment to know what is best for you because you do.”<sup>1</sup>

*Really?* Our own power, abilities, and judgment can be trusted, because we—and no one else—know what’s best for us? How’s that working out for you? Most of the time? Some of the time? Not at all? If we truly knew what was best for us at all times and in all circumstances, we wouldn’t need the Bible or God. Sadly, a lot of people do think that way, today. But Scripture tells us God knows us much better than we know ourselves, and has a plan for each and every one of us.

In fact, the Lord knew us *even before we were created!* In Jeremiah 1:5, God says: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.” And in Psalm 139:16, the writer exclaims: “Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.” For this reason, before God we are totally exposed and utterly vulnerable. Hebrews 4:13 says: “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God. Everything is naked and exposed before His eyes, and He is the one to whom we are accountable.”

Oh, how we hate to be exposed before anyone! Like when you go to the doctor. There you are, sitting in a cold examining room wearing nothing but a paper gown that’s too short and doesn’t tie well behind you, waiting and wondering what the doctor knows that you don’t. As uncovered as that is, we are stripped even barer before the eyes of God.<sup>2</sup> The Bible tells us nothing in our lives is hidden from God. In Psalm 139:7, the writer cries out to Him, “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?”

We could remain fearful of a holy and all-powerful God, but quickly we discover in the Book of Hebrews that God actually identifies with, sympathizes with, and feels for us, deeply, tenderly, and compassionately.

In the fourth chapter of Hebrews (4:14-15, NIV), prior to today’s Epistle lesson, we read: “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.”

*This is good news!* We need not fear or avoid God, because Jesus, our great high priest, has made the once-and-for-all atoning sacrifice that has made our peace with God. In ancient Israel, all earthly high priests had to pass through the curtain of the Temple to approach the altar to sacrifice an animal for the sins of the people. But Jesus has “gone through the heavens”—where no one else could ever go—to sacrifice *Himself* for the sins of the whole world. As God-in-person, Jesus is able “to sympathize with our weaknesses” because, by becoming one of us, He can empathize one hundred percent with our internal and external conditions.

No one truly knows what you're going through unless he or she has lived as you have lived. Self-help websites don't know you. Your well-meaning family, friends, and neighbors are not privy to your inmost being, where there is both good and bad. The government can't feel your pain, nor can it solve the sinful condition of the human heart. But God can, and did.

The book of Hebrews reminds us that we follow a Savior who knows us and our circumstances intimately, because He himself lived as we live, then died and rose again so that He could continue to identify with the human condition throughout eternity. Rather than being fearful of God we can have confidence that God understands us, and loves us unconditionally!

We so desperately want to share this good news with James and John, when, in today's Gospel story, we hear the two jockeying arrogantly for which of them will flank Jesus' throne when He reigns in glory.

These siblings are supremely self-confident they have what it takes to accompany Christ through whatever He will have to endure to attain heaven. Jesus responds in so many words, "Are you truly able to be crucified with me?" Not understanding any of this, they eagerly pledge, "We are!" So then Jesus prophesies that they, too, will suffer for their faith as He will. James would be beheaded in Jerusalem in the year 44 A.D. His brother John, the only disciple not to die a martyr's death, would pass away from extreme old age in Ephesus, Turkey. But not before being tortured repeatedly and exiled by the Romans to the remote Greek island of Patmos. There, the Lord revealed to him the Book of Revelation.

James and John were confident they knew themselves well, and that their assets and self-determination would lead them to a victorious end. Like the author I quoted at the beginning, they were trusting in their own abilities, personal power, and judgment to determine what was best for them. But, as it is for each and every one of us, God—who knows the past, present, and future—had other plans.

These two apostles may not have been permitted to sit at Christ's right and left hands in heaven, but they did become canonized saints and have been revered by Christians around the world for the past 2,000 years. Moreover, St. John gave us four books of the New Testament! This shows us that not only does God know us *best*, He also has a much *better* plan for our lives—even on a day-to-day basis—than we could ever imagine.

Yes, there are occasions when we are able to glimpse the Lord's wonderful designs for us, and we give Him thanks and praise. At other times, we discern where He is leading and—receiving the grace to follow—are delighted with the outcome.

In the 1950's sitcom, "Father Knows Best," Jim Anderson was the thoughtful father who offered sage advice to his children's problems. The television show ended in 1960.<sup>3</sup> Fortunately, our Heavenly Father knows best *eternally*—from way before we are born until long after we die. We were created in the image of God; our bodies are temples of His Holy Spirit; and our lives are forever in the Lord's hands.

This should be a great comfort to us, that we are not facing either our inner torments or the scary world all alone, with only our pretend-coolness to (almost) see us through.

There's nothing wrong with correctly-grounded self-esteem or self-confidence. After all, Jesus taught us: "Love your neighbor as *yourself*" (Matthew 22:39). However, we begin to stray from the best path when we believe that, as Barbara Faison says, "self-confidence is an inside job." While it is important to know, understand, and care for ourselves, a well-integrated Christian life involves the give-and-take, the-back-and-forth between our ego-centric self-awareness and capacity for self-deception and our wider grasp of God's will, intentions, desires, and plans for us.

A healthy inner life will be one that is both constituted of our natural gifts and strengths, as well as open to the working of the Holy Spirit. Just look at Jesus. He was at the same time human and divine. As such, He, too, had innate talents and abilities. But He took His direction from God. And so can we.

Olga Tokarczuk, a Nobel-prize winning Polish author, once quipped: “Reality is like a doughnut: Everything that is good and funny and juicy is outside the center, which is just emptiness.”<sup>4</sup> Sometimes we feel that our center *is* a great big hole, and the sweetness is all on the outside. That’s when we are primed for God to fill that hole with His gifts, presence, mercy, and power. That’s when we are ready to be led along His way.

As terrific and talented as we may be, we are also, every one of us, sinners in the sight of God. Filled with weaknesses, temptations, petty thoughts and wrong ideas, we need outside input from the Father who knows best. “Trusting our own guidance system,” as [PicktheBrain.com](http://PicktheBrain.com) recommends, won’t get us far enough. We need the Lord as our GPS—*God’s Perfect Solution*—at all times. And, to receive the guidance that won’t “recalculate” or lead us astray, we only have to ask for it.

So, I think it’s appropriate to close with a “Collect for Guidance” found in our *Book of Common Prayer* (p. 832):

“O God, by whom the meek are guided in judgment, and light rises up in darkness for the godly: Grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what You would have us to do, that the Spirit of wisdom may save us from all false choices, and that in Your light we may see light, and in Your straight path may not stumble; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*”

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<sup>1</sup> Adapt. Barbara Faison, “Five Ways to Increase Your Self-Confidence,” [PicktheBrain.com](http://PicktheBrain.com), 29 November 2017 <<https://www.pickthebrain.com/blog/five-ways-to-increase-your-self-confidence/>> 12 October 2021. Used with permission.

<sup>2</sup> Adapt. Lee Hemen, “Confidence when everything is exposed!” 5 August 2012, [PastorBlastor](http://PastorBlastor) <<https://pastorblastor.wordpress.com/2012/08/05/hebrews-412-16-confidence-when-everything-is-exposed/>> 17 October 2015. Used with permission.

<sup>3</sup> “Father Knows Best,” [Wikipedia.org](http://Wikipedia.org), 21 August 2021 <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Father\\_Knows\\_Best](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Father_Knows_Best)> 12 October 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Olga Tokarczuk, [BrainyQuote.com](http://BrainyQuote.com) <[https://www.brainyquote.com/topics/outside-quotes\\_2](https://www.brainyquote.com/topics/outside-quotes_2)> 12 October 2021. Used with permission.