

Sermon

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St. John the Evangelist

January 14th, 2018

Epiphany 2 (B): 1 Sam 3:1-10; Psalm 139: 1-5, 12-17; 1 Cor 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

I am aware that when we are singing the Anglican chant settings of the psalms, it can sometimes be hard to process what the words are saying while trying to get all the notes and markings correct. Beauty comes at a price. However I want to call your attention back to Psalm 139 a portion of which we sang this morning because I think it is one of the most profound psalms in the entire Bible.

I can tell you the first time I noticed Psalm 139. It was January 18th 2015, the second Sunday after the Epiphany, in the second year of our three year cycle of Sunday morning readings, precisely the same Sunday we find ourselves at today. Melinda was about 10 weeks pregnant with Vincent and so when the psalmist used the wonderful metaphors of gestation to try and articulate just how intimately God knows each and every one of us—it's as if God created our inmost parts, and wove us together in the depths of the earth—it hit me with greater poignancy and power than it ever had before. How amazing to have a God whose power reaches so high that we cannot attain to it, and so low that He is knitting us together in the womb. How wondrous.

Three days later the psalm took a turn in a different direction however, when we went in for an ultrasound to check on how things were progressing. No one should ever have to experience the feeling of rising anxiety as the radiologist goes silent, and starts digging around on the belly. The already dark room closes in around you, your stomach ties up in a knot, your heart rises into your throat. "Is something the matter?" I asked, after a few minutes, not wanting to know. She stopped digging around and turned to face us. "I don't see a right hand," she said. "*Your eyes beheld my limbs, yet unfinished in the womb...*"

I won't pretend that I was thinking of Psalm 139 in that moment. In fact I wasn't thinking much of anything in that moment or for the days that followed. This news knocked us off our feet for a bit. But those lines echoed back to me eventually and, to be honest I thought it a cruel joke. For what kind of a God is a God who would leave those limbs unfinished in the womb?

But if we're being honest, more honest than we usually are in church, our bodies are rarely a place of divine encounter. For a very few they are a source of great vanity. And for the rest of us, even those of us with all the normal number of fingers and toes, they are a source of, shame, frustration, and embarrassment. To think that God made us this way—with all these wrinkles and rolls, blemishes and boils, scabs and scars, aches and pains—is not exactly to experience joy and wonder in the face of the Almighty. Our bodies are often a place to focus on our flaws—both the external flaws we work hard to hide from all but a very trusted few and the internal flaws that we know make up our minds and hearts. If God made all this, I'm not so sure I should be saying thank you.

And yet, if we can find a way to step back and look not at the flaws of our creation but the fact of it, the very fact that we have these complex biological machines which can do so many incredible things, and think so many incredible thoughts and feel so many incredible feelings, then despite its

limitations our body and the person it houses becomes a miracle. Each and every one of us, a miracle. And we can start to see why Paul would be going on so strongly about our bodies as Temples of the Holy Spirit, to be treated as sacred gifts from our creator. The truth of Psalm 139 is not in the perfection of our creation, but in the marvel of it. “I will thank you because I am marvelously made,” not “I will thank you because I am *perfectly* made.” And by God is Vincent marvelously made. We didn’t know it would feel like that back in January 2015, but I can say it with absolute conviction now. I don’t believe that God made him this way on purpose, but I do believe God made him the boy he is, and that boy is marvelous.

What the Psalmist is trying to communicate through the language of incubation is not some scientific theory of reproduction, but a location of divine revelation. A place for an epiphany. God’s wonder and power is made visible in the marvels of our bodies. God knows our physical flaws and our selfish thoughts. God knows our shameful feelings and our frequent failings. He knows us that intimately, that closely. But all those things we see as flaws, that make us feel embarrassed or different from everyone else, are actually the things that make us uniquely who we are. They are our unique markings that make each of us capable of a unique relationship with God and a unique impact on this world. Our bodies are God’s handiwork, through which we can glorify and encounter the Almighty. For even through those things we see as broken in us—and not in spite of them, but because of them—God can say, “my works are wonderful, and I know it well.” Do we know it well, too?

God’s knowledge of and manifestation in the marvels that are our bodies, leads to a second aspect of the God that is closely related and just as important. God is one who *creates* AND, because of that, one who *calls*. It is because God has searched us out and known us, because God knows our sitting down and rising up and discerns our thoughts from afar that God doesn’t just make us, but makes us for a purpose. Our readings from 1 Samuel and from the first chapter of John are stories of call. Of people who were living fine lives, whom God came to—in a voice at the early hours of the dawn for Samuel, or in the person of Jesus Christ to Phillip and Nathanael—and said I have more in store for you. I made you for more than this. “Where did you get to *know* me?” Nathanael asks, Jesus. “I saw you under the fig tree before Phillip called you,” Jesus responds. “*You trace my journeys and my resting-places and are acquainted with all my ways.*”

God calls us because God knows us. And calls us not generally but specifically. God called Samuel to be a prophet and priest who had a vitally important role in the anointing of King Saul and then King David. Jesus called Phillip and Nathanael away from their lives in Galilee to a life of discipleship and all the wonders and hardship that entailed. Where is God calling you? Too often we talk about a “calling” only in the context of ordained ministry. But I can assure you, God calls people to far more interesting and important roles than that. I know a man who, mid-career, left a job at a big pharmaceutical company to become a High School English teacher. That was what he had always wanted to do, it was his calling. It can’t have been an easy change to make, it certainly didn’t pay as well. But last year he emailed me a video of himself giving the school’s faculty commencement address. I was so impressed. Not because the speech was good, though it was. But because I have rarely seen such a happy man. It was clear in his communication and in his speech that he was loving life, loving work all because he had the courage to follow where God was calling him.

He’s not alone. I’ve heard stories of calls fulfilled from and nurses and doctors who love their work, from artists who cannot help but create, from mothers or fathers whose calling is to rear an excellent family, heck we have an exterminator who comes to address a small mouse issue at the curacy

who seems to just adore his job. I hear that kind of vocational fulfillment less often from lawyers, bankers and financial advisors, but I do hear it. Friends, our lives are such a gift, and they are so short. Where is the God who made you, who knows you better than you know yourself, who presses on you in front and behind, calling you to go? What were you made for? Even if it can't be your profession, do not neglect your calling, for in doing so you neglect the gift of a life full of glory.

God creates and God calls. The challenge of this life is to make those two things match up; to be the person and do the things God made you for. If you are someone who has found that calling, congratulations that's a wonderful gift. But don't stop listening because even still God may have more in store for you. This is the work of our lives, and we will spend years, maybe even decades deciphering the answer. Would that it were as clear as it was for Samuel, or the disciples. Would that we could be sure how God wanted us to use these bodies He fashioned and would that we had enough time to figure it out. *"How deep I find your thoughts, O God, how great is the sum of them. If I were to count them, they would be more in number than the sand; to count them all, my life span would need to be like yours."* That is the hard part but it is also the fun part. Taking our bodies, our minds, our hearts, those unique and specific things that make you, you, and then searching, listening, trying, praying, asking, thinking about how you can align yourself with God's purposes for you. It's like a great treasure hunt, full of U-turns and dead ends, with long stretches of wandering in the desert seeking some direction and some little successes along the way where you know that yes, this is what I was meant to do on this earth. It is exasperating and it is hard and it is never-ending but I tell you what, if you stick with it, with following God's call for you, it won't be perfect, but it will be marvelous because you are marvelously made.