

Yes, You

[Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; January 14, 2018]

Last week, we listened to Mark's crisp description of Jesus' baptism — his second birth — as he emerges from a tepid river and hears a voice from up above address him with the first word of a new life — God says *Beloved*. Centuries before anybody was baptized, the ancient author of this Sunday's psalm had the audacity to insist that God loves each of us this way. God recognizes us, knows all about us, before we're born. This is a scripture we read aloud sometimes, at christenings; sometimes at funeral services too, and you'll see why.

A Reading from Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

¹O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

²You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.

³You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely.

⁵You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

¹³For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

¹⁵My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

¹⁶Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.

¹⁷How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

¹⁸I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.

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Unlike other books of the Bible, the psalms weren't written to Jews in Judaea, or to early Christians or people like us; they're addressed to God. Elsewhere, we can find histories, letters and laws, proverbs and poems, but the psalms are a prayer book. Old as they are, they voice our deepest fears and hopes, joy and outrage better than any other holy book.

This is one of my favorites. Many have called it a "*psalm of creation*," but it's not about how heaven and earth came to be. It's not about the cosmos; this is about how we're each formed one at a time, by someone who cares.

We aren't "*mass-produced but custom-made*,"¹ each with our own trials and triumphs. That's a recurring theme of many of tales told by Hasidic Jews, millions of whom didn't survive the Holocaust.

One, for instance, tells of Rabbi Zusya, a young teacher who is afraid he's not as wise or good as he should be. An older rabbi takes him aside. "*When you get to paradise*," the old man says, "*God won't ask, 'Why weren't you Moses?'* *God will say, 'Why wouldn't you be Zusya? Listen to me. Don't try to be Moses. Be the Zusya God meant you to be.'*"

That's what God always wants. "*Please be the Judy or the Tom, Peter or Pat, Ginny or John I made you to be. Quit trying to be someone who isn't real.*"

¹ For this and for much of my sermon today, I'm indebted to Kate Huey, whose commentary on the psalm appears online @ http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit_weekly-seeds_called-and-recalled.

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I love this text because it reminds me of the very first time I saw my son on a sonogram.

What can one say about this mysterious creature of moving shadows, floating within the amniotic sea?

All of those years ago, I tried to write, in a poem called “The Heartbeat”:

*so there it was, rapid and sure. Strong as
an amplified hummingbird's trebling wing.
Tears in your mother's eyes, in my own,
we hear the crackling that means you move.*

Confirming that he was okay filled me with gratitude:

*I sense a signal from under the earth that
the miners are safe, they will be brought
up unhurt, and the prayers of their wives
have been heard. This is the sounding of*

*dolphins, far out at sea as a boat passes;
They plunge back into the green world, warm
through the laver and coral. It is a surge
from the second star, that is inside us,*

*unnameable yet so fierce; this love carries
farther than I can look on,*

—farther than I could have possibly known at that time.

All at once, I had this powerful sense that everything would be all right — not just for me but for us all — and maybe that's why rescued miners, dolphins leaping in the air —those blessings occurred to me.

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What does the psalmist say? That “*It was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.*”

What sort of prayer can you pray when you behold something like that?

A prayer of praise, not of ourselves, as if we’d picked this color eyes, that color hair—all of the traits and talents of our children. From one’s heart comes a prayer of praise for a God who’s not only formed oceans and stars but also the ten fingers and toes of a newborn.

Well, my baby’s now thirty years old, writing his dissertation at Brown on something I only partly understand.

I know something he doesn’t now — not quite a secret but, nevertheless, incomprehensible to the young. He’s independent now; he’s a full-grown adult, and I’ve had to learn how to let go.

But, of course, I can’t see him the way others do — the way his girlfriend does, or as his friends do now, or his teachers, or his students, first day of class. Because I see the toddler I read to, the little boy obsessed with dinosaurs, who would turn every stick he picked up into a sword. I see the angry kid on a skateboard, and — well, you know, I could go on — but this how God sees *you*, at every phase of *your* life, *simultaneously*. God’s understanding and tenderness isn’t subject to time.

Michael has a future in which my part slowly diminishes. Parenthood teaches us all sorts of things about patience and sacrifice; ultimately, though, it’s a lesson in humility. The very best thing, perhaps, in your life, is just a short stage in someone else’s story. And that’s enough. . . .

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It’s easy for most of us to see the beauty of God’s handiwork as we cradle an infant out in the narthex.

It’s a lot harder to look at ourselves, once in a while, and sing this psalm with the same cloudy mixture of wonder and thanks.

For we tally up failures — some real accomplishments, but mainly faults — and, usually, we try to hide them.

Peter Gomes, once a chaplain at Harvard — Harvard in Cambridge, not near Marengo — describes the “*imposter syndrome*” that worries us all. We spend most of our days, he says, building an image, concealing our shortcomings in the classroom, the boardroom or the bedroom, all sorts of places.

We dress a certain way, behave a certain way, try to look confident, collect credentials and new toys to show the world we’re “*good enough*.”

Peter Gomes tell us,

*"Well, there is good news. . . that is why they call it the gospel. The news [isn't] not that we are worse than we think, [it's] that [we're] are better than we think. . . better than we deserve to be. Why? Because. . . [of] the indisputable fact that we are created, made, formed, invented, patented in the image of goodness itself. That is what it means, that is how one translates being created in the image of God. . . . People may take everything away from you, they may deprive you of everything you have. . . but they cannot take away from you the fact that you are a child of God and bear the impression of God in your very soul. You cannot be destroyed, and that cannot be denied."*²

Although we often try.

Tomorrow, our schools, banks, and post offices close to honor a man who—had he lived—would turn eighty-nine. And this morning, we sing three hymns linked to his legacy, songs we can’t separate from the Civil Rights Movement he led.

Dr. King fought for justice for all of the people in our country who’ve not been accepted as being “*fearfully, wonderfully made*” simply because they weren’t pale enough somehow. Dark skin was demonized, and a whole host of human beings were robbed of dignity and opportunity.

² Ibid.

Outward surely turned inward for if you're told that you're worth nothing every day by people in power, if others treat you as if you're nothing, you will begin to feel like nothing.

King challenged that.

"I have a dream," he said *"my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."*

Yet if you're too big, or wearing a hoodie, or walking in the wrong neighborhood, uh uh.

These past few years, as we've watched events unfold in Charlottesville, Ferguson, New York, maybe we've seen how very far we've still to go.

What the psalm claims is that God is with us at the core of our being, deeper than anything science can measure or faith can comprehend. No matter what, you see, God knows each one of us. . . .

I don't know if you watched Ken Burn's series about the Roosevelts on PBS three years ago? I'm sure you'll find it on Netflix these days. When FDR died, thousands of people stood by the railroad tracks as they brought his body home to be buried.

A reporter asked one mourner, *"Why are you here today? Did you know Franklin Roosevelt."*

And the man replied, *"No, I did not know the President, but he knew me."*

So he'd wait there all day if he had to watch that train roll by. . . .

Tell me if you knew Jesus when he healed a blind man, or if you knew God back before you had words, back before you were born. The right answer is *"No, but God knew me."*

The psalm's word here for "know" – in Hebrew it's *yada* – means to know in this intimate, ultimate way as when Adam "knew" Eve, and that's why she conceived, and nine months later, bore a child

The psalmist's word for "know" – "yada" – shows up in Genesis: We're told Adam "*knew*" Eve, and that's why she conceived and, nine months later bore a child.

In this utterly yielding, unbearably tender way, God knows you *each*, every, and always. And may God bless you all.