

Sermon – “Intricately Woven”

Scripture Readings: Psalm 139:1-18, John 1:43-46

Sunday, January 14, 2024

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Psalm 139 is among the most well-known and beloved of psalms. Using elegant poetry, the psalmist celebrates a God whose presence knows no limits and who abides with us in the intimacy of our thoughts and feelings. Hear now God’s Holy word.

*O LORD, you have searched me and known me.<sup>2</sup> You know when I sit down and when I rise up, you discern my thoughts from far away. <sup>3</sup> You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. <sup>4</sup> Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. <sup>5</sup> You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. <sup>6</sup> Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. <sup>7</sup> Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? <sup>8</sup> If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. <sup>9</sup> If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, <sup>10</sup> even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. <sup>11</sup> If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,” <sup>12</sup> even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you. <sup>13</sup> For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. <sup>14</sup> I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. <sup>15</sup> My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. <sup>16</sup> Your 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. <sup>17</sup> How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! <sup>18</sup> I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you. Amen.*

In our second reading, John 1:43-46, the call to the disciples connects the prologue’s description of the cosmic Word becoming flesh with the very human story of Jesus from Nazareth. The God of Psalm 139 who abides with us wherever life takes us invites the disciples to abide with him. Hear now the word of the Lord.

*The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” <sup>44</sup> Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. <sup>45</sup> Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found the one about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth.” <sup>46</sup> Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” Amen.*

The title of the meditation: “Intricately Woven”

*Text: ... when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Psalm 139:15*

Let us pray. Holy God, we gather with gratitude for being intricately woven into being by a loving Creator who is also our Companion, present in whatever place, situation, or position we find ourselves, and who joined us in our humanity inviting us to follow. As we reflect together, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

Dr. Timothy Verhey, Professor at St. Andrew’s Presbyterian University in North Carolina, and the son of my favorite religion professor at Hope College, reminds us of the complicated, contradictory characteristics of God. He writes in the *Feasting on the Word Commentary: God is transcendent (beyond our experience) yet also immanent (present within us). God is just (objective and impartial) yet also merciful (kind and forgiving). God is omnipotent (all powerful) yet also personal (belonging to a particular person).*

The wonder and beauty of Psalm 139 is that it knits these complex threads of God’s nature together into a single garment of God’s providence and character. The psalmist affirms the Creator God who intricately entwined each one of us into being as One who is intimately involved—profoundly concerned and, at the same time, transcendent (beyond our experience, our knowing or our understanding).

When the eternal and infinite God chose to enter the finiteness of humanity and the Word became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, we are presented with yet another paradox about the God who is beyond our knowing. We are presented with a new understanding of strength and the power of love.

In Jesus of Nazareth, the town from which nothing good comes, we learn, with Nathanael, that our prejudices are unfounded and ignorant. In Jesus of Nazareth, we meet the God who is a servant, a teacher, and an advocate for the poor, the sojourner, and the marginalized. In Jesus of Nazareth, we meet the God who treats all people with dignity and respect and who does not judge us by the color of our skin but by the content of our character. In Jesus of Nazareth, we meet the God who speaks truth to power and who absorbed the hostility of the world, conquering death by dying on a cross.

Bryan Stevenson, a young African American lawyer chose the title *Just Mercy* for his 2014 memoir, which was depicted in a movie released on Christmas Day, 2019. This is the book our 2023 youth mission team members were asked to read in preparation for their Road to Selma rebuilding homes following the devastating January tornadoes and visiting civil rights monuments including the one initiated by Bryan Stevenson.

A graduate of Harvard Law School, Mr. Stevenson founded the Equal Justice Initiative, a legal practice dedicated to defending those most desperate and in need: the poor and the wrongly condemned. One of his first cases was that of Walter McMillian, an African American man who was sentenced to die for a notorious murder he did not commit, not unlike the unjust sentence for our Savior. The case drew Stevenson into a tangle of conspiracy, political maneuvering, and legal brinkmanship which transformed his understanding of justice and mercy forever.

*Just Mercy* is an unforgettable account of a gifted young lawyer's coming of age, a moving narrative of the lives of those he defended, and an inspiring argument for compassion in the pursuit of justice, richly and intricately woven together with Christian imagery.

In 2018, Stevenson and his organization opened the Legacy Museum and The National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. Both are dedicated to the legacy of slavery, lynching, segregation, and mass incarceration in the United States. For Stevenson, the museum and the monument are an effort to address the past ---and to change the future. He believes that unless the sins of our past are acknowledged, owned, and confessed, we will not experience restorative justice or just mercy. As our young people will share in the Adult Education Forum today, the intricately woven museum and monument speak lifechanging truth,

Stevenson writes, "We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated. An absence of compassion can corrupt the decency of a community, a state, a nation. Fear and anger can make us vindictive and abusive, unjust and unfair, until we all suffer from the absence of mercy, and we condemn ourselves as much as we victimize others."

As we gather around the communion table on this Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend, we are mindful of the need for an extra measure of God's mercy as we confess the sin of racism that is woven into the fabric of our country. We ask forgiveness from the God who discerns our thoughts and is acquainted with all our ways.

In whatever place, situation, or position we find ourselves; may we live the equity, show the mercy, and seek the justice of the One who is before us, behind us, and within us. Amen.