

January 18, 2015

Boone United Methodist Church; Jason Byassee

Last of Heaven Comes Down series, 2<sup>nd</sup> Epiphany, Zoe India Mish Minute by Andy

As we turn to God's word today I want to start with the beauty of the church. I'm amazed at the intricacy of God's church, how exquisite she is.<sup>1</sup> For example this gem is in the mountains of South America, not bad eh?<sup>2</sup> I'm not ordinarily a fan of modern architecture but this is marvelous, isn't it? It's in a suburb of Rome.<sup>3</sup> Or if your taste runs toward the northern European and Viking here's a go. Not bad eh?<sup>4</sup> Or desert, this monastery in New Mexico looks like it's built into the rock. Gorgeous.

Of course as beautiful as these churches are,<sup>5</sup> they're nowhere near as beautiful as a single human person. Nowhere near as intricate or exquisite. So claims Psalm 139, one of the great poems we have. As I read I want you to listen for what it says about who we are. How important we are to God. How fearful and wonderful we are both. I read you the psalm with some nervousness. I've written a book about the psalms, am working on a second, but I've never preached them. It's really hard to preach a poem. But this psalm is too good not to try. Charles Spurgeon, greatest preacher of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, said this psalm is bright as a sapphire, it flashes light so bright it can make the night into day, it's more beautiful than words can describe, my words can only make it worse. So if you listen to nothing else today listen to this as I read from God's word.

Psalm 139

1. O Lord, you have searched me and known me. 2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. 3 You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. 4 Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. 5 You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. 7 Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? 8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. 9 If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, 10 even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. 11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," 12 even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you. 13 For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. 14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. 15 My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. 16 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. 17 How weighty to me are your thoughts O God! How vast is the sum of them! 18 I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you. 19 O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me--20 those who speak of you maliciously, and lift themselves against you for evil! 21 Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? 22 I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies. 23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. 24 See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://static.neatorama.com/images/2007-05/las-lajas-cathedral.jpg>

<sup>2</sup> <http://files.doobybrain.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/09/jubilee-church-rome.jpg>

<sup>3</sup> [http://lh4.ggpht.com/N-GIYZDQYno/TW59Awzu8FI/AAAAAAAAEm8/RheoTwJLovw/beautiful-achitectural-churches-9\\_thumb%5B2%5D.jpg?imgmax=800](http://lh4.ggpht.com/N-GIYZDQYno/TW59Awzu8FI/AAAAAAAAEm8/RheoTwJLovw/beautiful-achitectural-churches-9_thumb%5B2%5D.jpg?imgmax=800)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.abqmennonite.org/sites/default/files/christ\\_in\\_the\\_desert\\_monastery1.jpg](http://www.abqmennonite.org/sites/default/files/christ_in_the_desert_monastery1.jpg)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.everythingmixed.com/wp-content/uploads/beautiful-baby04.jpg>

That's the word of God, it belongs to you, the people of God, **thanks be to God**.

I concluded a sermon the other week with a famous quote from Thomas Merton, a monk from the last century. I say famous but I'd never seen it till recently, y'all never had either,<sup>6</sup> here it is

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I was theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers . . . I have the immense joy of being human, a member of the race in which God himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. If only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

I love how ordinary it is—at one street corner on one day to see God and neighbor and self clearly. God has honored all humanity by becoming one of us. Now we are all like mirrors, shining the sun to one another. We should treat one another accordingly, not least our selves.

So Psalm 139. We are all fearfully and wonderfully made. We get wonderfully—it's a cliché almost to tell someone they're wonderful. And we are wonderful. *You* are wonderful, shining like the sun. Each of us has 300 million capillaries in our lungs. Stretch those out, just the capillaries from one of us, and they'd reach across the US. Each of us has enough blood vessels in our whole body<sup>7</sup> to stretch around the globe. Two and a half times. 60,000 miles worth. Wonderful! Not only that, a little frightening. I think we get saying someone is wonderful, but to say they're fearful? Think of it. God is wonderful, and fearful. Anyone in God's presence trembles, or should. We're all in God's presence right now, and always. We should stand in awe.

Did you notice the psalm takes a sort of turn at the end?<sup>8</sup> "Oh that you would kill the wicked." Gulp.<sup>9</sup> Up until then it's read like a cat poster. Beautiful, put it on the ceiling at the dentist. Then all of a sudden<sup>10</sup> "Do I not hate those who hate you oh God?" You won't be surprised those verses get dropped sometimes from reading the psalm. Feels dishonest somehow, they're in there, we can't airbrush em. What do they mean?

This psalm comes from a tradition of testing. The psalmist wants God to try him and see whether he is innocent or guilty. Presumably something bad has happened and the writer wants to know why God has allowed it. Hey, I'm innocent, just check, shine the light in all the dark corners and see. Or in the psalm's matchless poetry,<sup>11</sup> "23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. 24 See if there is any wicked way in me." The psalmist thinks of sin the way we think of germs—get rid of them, keep them as far away as possible. Or the way we rightly think of the massacre in Paris last week—hey I want no part of religion that hurts people. We recoil in horror. Here's what interests me about the psalm's denunciation—he's probably denouncing religious people. That is, those who sound religious but act differently in their hearts and actions. Violence in the bible is one of the chief points of criticism folks have for faith, rightly so. This sounds like exhibit A. It's actually a denunciation of hypocrisy. Test us O God and find any ounce of hypocrisy and root it out, that's what it's praying. Here's the problem. To remove any hypocrisy from us will hurt. Cause we all got it. It will feel like a cross. Root out all evil and let's see if there's anything left. Pray that and buckle up cause it'll hurt. There's a famous response to the question of whether a rich person can be saved. This is

---

<sup>6</sup> Quote On screen please

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.groonk.net/blog/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/gregsacblemap.png>

<sup>8</sup> This phrase from Psalm 139:19 up please

<sup>9</sup> <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/236x/b1/a9/8f/b1a98f1e5ef141fd9f47482f4eebf8c8.jpg>

<sup>10</sup> This bit of 139:21 up plz

<sup>11</sup> This part of 139:23 up plz

important for us, compared to the rest of the world we're all rich.<sup>12</sup> "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." You can get a camel through a needle. It's just going to be awfully hard on the camel. So it is with ridding us of hypocrisy, evil, sin. It looks like a cross. Which is what it means to be a Christian. To have our whole life look like a cross.

Too much introduction, time to get to the meet of the sermon. Point one who I am, not me Jason, but who each of us are. Point two who you are, not y'all God's beloved church gathered this morning but whatever other person we see, and point three what we are together. Point one who I am.

<sup>13</sup>I am fearful and wonderful, the psalm says. "I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works. That I know very well." If there's one thing I've learned as a pastor it's that lots of people don't believe this. We don't. We look at ourselves and see not fearful wonder but disappointment. Disgust even. This is what Merton is trying to respond to. No no no—you shine like the sun, don't you see? The answer is no, most of us don't most of the time. Because we're told something different. Our world tells us what we are is a consumer. And none of us can have all the products pitched to us. Professionally many feel like failures. How much money is enough? Just a little bit more, said John D Rockefeller, richest American in history. Think if you're alienated from your spouse. The person supposed to love you most is indifferent or hostile. What if they're right? We worry. Or if you wish you had a spouse but don't. Painful. And we hide all this. Asked how we are we say "fine!" You? Fine. A lie lots of the time. But who could stand if we told the truth? I don't think I've ever told anyone this in public. In middle school at lunch time I found the most obscure place in the school and sat there and ate till lunch was over. I couldn't stand the idea of having to talk to people. I felt that awkward, out of sorts, and sitting alone I felt no one judging me. More people feel that way than anyone thinks.

The bible says no. Actually you're beautiful.<sup>14</sup> "15 My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth." God is like a weaver, making something so spectacular we can't breathe when we see it. God knew us when we weren't us yet. When no one knew we existed or would exist. Think of how we are with babies. Be careful! That skull isn't closed yet. That neck can't hold up that head. You're so beautiful! God was that way with us before we were born. Still is. Hold your soul carefully like you hold a tiny child.<sup>15</sup> That's a newborn off the web named Nathan. When does he forget what a treasure he is? Look what God does. Writes the whole bible to tell him. Gives him the whole church to remind him every day. I was with Johnny Carson recently, our lay leader, at sunset, and he said look what God does with a sunset. God says hey y'all watch this: boom! That's what God says with each of us. In another cat poster way of saying it, God don't make no junk.<sup>16</sup> In the bible's way, "you knit me together in my mother's womb." All we are is not cells and blood and bone alone. We are unending reflections of the endless beauty of God.

Some of the time. We're also sinners. That's why the psalm asks to be tested and claims its innocence. I was with one of you in a bible study recently talking about God's unending knowledge of us. And you said God's heart must break every second. Think of the unspeakable things we do to each other. The endless pain each of us suffers. And I agreed—God's heart is always crucified. Until the end of the world. So why does God create at all? Risk all this pain? Why doesn't God drop the curtain and end things? I think I saw why recently. Two friends at a coffee shop met. I was spying on them avoiding this sermon. And the two women embraced. Held each other a little longer than most hugs. And got to talking. In a moment of stolen beauty like that I saw why God makes anything. Because for all the pain there is so much beauty. Creation is worth the risk.

---

<sup>12</sup> Mt 19:24 up plz

<sup>13</sup> I. I am fearful and wonderful

<sup>14</sup> On screen plz Ps 139:15

<sup>15</sup> <http://lookingatfrema.typepad.com/.a/6a00d8341d77e953ef0105371d5a89970b-500wi>

<sup>16</sup> Psalm 139:13

<sup>17</sup>Point two, you are that beautiful too. Whoever you are. Maybe especially if you're the person making me most crazy insane angry at the moment. This is what the bible means by loving our enemies. The person we most dislike, we have to love that one. That's God trying to convert us. Right now. I've told you this story before, of a Catholic woman saying she's having visions of God. Her bishop thinks he can root this out, ask God what sin confessed at my last confession. Bishops confess directly to God, no human can know. She calls him back, I saw God again. Really. What sin did God say I confessed at my last confession? She said "God said, I forgot." That's the bible's word on forgiveness. Sounds like good news, right? Thing is, it's true of our enemy too. The one we like least. God throws their sins into the deep ocean of God's forgetfulness. Not sure I want that. I want to run up to God and remind God all they did wrong. Pastor Reggie Hunt said this so beautifully last week in one of his three sermons (can't remember which)—we want grace for us, and judgment for others. To grade ourselves on the curve, hey, doing my best here. And others throw the book at em. Give em what they deserve. You hear a bit of that in the psalm. Hey I'm beautiful. But slay the wicked O God. Problem is if God slayed everyone wicked there'd be no one left.

So what's God do? God becomes one of us wicked. And slays himself. To give life to all. God is fearfully and wonderfully made. Knit together in a womb. To save all those God knits in the womb. And the ones we'd rather not be saved with. Was with a great famous Christian recently who reflected on a lifetime of betrayals. He said honestly, "there are some people I don't want to live nextdoor to in heaven." Keep it real. Notice he has them on that side of the gate. If anybody's out let God decide that. Get ready to be their neighbor forever. Looks like a cross doesn't it?

Most of us don't believe it. We think we're alone. No one understands us. If they knew us they'd hate us or pity us at best. That's certainly how the murderers in France felt. Islam is not respected, they say, so let's blow some stuff up and hurt some people and at least we can be feared. That's what people listening to hate media think in this country, yeah, the Muslims are evil! Or the right is evil! The left is evil! God says no no no, you're beautiful. And so is your enemy. And here's how I'll show it. I'll become one of you. No one can say God is not on their side. God is on humanity's side. And we gang up and kill God. Put him on a cross. And say there now leave us alone.

And God comes back with forgiveness.<sup>18</sup> And makes us a new we that we wouldn't be without the resurrection. The church is the beginning of the new humanity made by the risen Christ. We are resurrection people. We exist to show the whole world a new way of being human has begun. It says you're beautiful. And a sinner. And God became one of you to save. That's worth living and dying for!

Let me close with an image so beautiful I can hardly describe it, because that's what each of you is, so beautiful we can hardly stand it.<sup>19</sup> It's this, of Eve and Mary. In the bible Paul describes Christ as the new Adam. The church has wondered after this and called Mary the New Eve. Just as Christ is Adam done right this time so Jesus' mother Mary is Eve done right. This image is of Mary comforting Eve. Eve looks ruined. She still holds the apple. She's ashamed, miserable, and can't let it go. The snake is still coiled around her leg. Mary understands. She looks at her with compassion and grace and gentleness. Holding her like the two women I saw at the coffee shop. And putting her hand on her growing womb. Look who's in there. Without your sin sister this great a salvation would not have come. Look what else Mary is doing. Without looking like a point guard making a no look pass she's crushing the snake's head. All you multitasking moms can relate, snake? I got this, while comforting where needed. Two sisters across the ages in a new humanity that sees beauty, sees

---

<sup>17</sup> II. Who you are

<sup>18</sup> III. Who we are

<sup>19</sup> <https://intostillness.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/marycomfortseve.jpg>

sin, and makes forgiveness together, a new humanity that all people want to join even if they don't know it. That's us church. That's us. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.