

Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24 “Wherever You Go, There You Are”

A few weeks ago, I read a response to this Psalm in a devotional book by a young woman who struggles with depression and addiction --

“No pretense. No point. All is laid bare. God knows what makes me tick ... I’m still trying to work it out. If you could see me before I was born ... if you made me ... you know my potential ... who I can be ... and I am beautiful because you wouldn’t create anything ugly. When I give up trying, you can show me the whole part of me. I’m not obstructing you then. I’m not trying to create myself then into my own image of the perfect me.

Sometimes it would seem easier, if you know what I am going to say or what course of action I am going to take, for you to take control by force if your hand is on my shoulder at every turn. I wish you would stop me. I wish you had the other day. But then I would be angry. I’m so confused and everything seems too complicated, but you can see life laid out so you must have the answers. But sometimes the answers seem out of grasp.... they are in your thoughts.... but then it is a relief because I don’t have to say anything. I can sit in your presence. Just sit. I don’t have to ‘be’ anything. No point. No pretense. My greatest complication/confusion is simple yet not simplified in your presence. It almost feels like an indulgence to be lost in the timeless place that you occupy where wisdom seems just little bit more accessible, where beauty is just that much more heightened in your creation.... a place where I sense bursting joy and excitement...even your pride in me your creation whispering to me. I long sometimes for my mother’s womb when I hadn’t felt grief, loneliness, despair, fear and shame, when my mother’s heartbeat comforted me, but tonight I can almost feel yours’ and I sense you, and it’s too much to bear but I don’t want the moment to go.”

Both the writer of our Psalm and this young woman had a divine revelation ... an “epiphany” like we talked about last week. Both of them knew they were known intimately by God ... and that they were

beautiful. And they were able to take off their masks and were surprised by a presence much closer than they ever imagined. A loving presence of one who longed to fill their deepest needs. All the sadness and disappointment they ever experience exposed their vulnerability and drew them to a closer awareness of how God loves and cares for them. And you know what? These moments are *gifts*. These moments are evidence that God encounters us *where we are*. And these moments can *change* us. They invite us to keep coming back because we know this is where we belong -- In communion with the God who made us.

But *pretending* to be the image of our created selves is exhausting and self-defeating. Not only does this put pressure on ourselves but it also allows the pressure of *others* to dictate how *should* be and how we *should* live. So we end up wearing masks so we can hide the *real* us. And all that does is keep us far from each other and far from God. The result? Confusion. The potential of who God intended us to be is distorted and frustrated because we spend all this time and effort pretending to be something we aren't. We're always on edge because we're afraid we'll be exposed for who we *really* are and that we'll be rejected. And because of this fear, we get all worked up trying to prove ourselves worthy of acceptance and love. Ever feel that way? I'd be lying if I said I never felt this way. "Oh, but preachers aren't supposed to feel this way. Come on. Pull it together. Fake it to make it." Okay, but that never seems to work. At least not for long. When we become disconnected from our true God-created selves, our thinking becomes distorted. We become confused to the point where we can't even *see* our situation let alone recognize the need for a solution.

We long for things that destroy us, and we do anything we can to obtain them, whether it's through toxic relationships, trying to achieve social status, giving in to or checking out with whatever behaviors or substances we can find to alter our mood. And our destructive acts don't just affect us, they overflow into the lives of others. We become stunted because of the fear that drives us to satisfy our own needs. So the question on the table this morning is: "Is there any way through this?"

And -- If God really does know what we're going to say and what we're going to do, then why doesn't God just *stop* us before we do something stupid? If God knows us so well and loves us so much, why isn't God more ... *forceful* when it comes to directing us away from these self-destructive thoughts and actions? I mean, God is supposed to know how we tick, right? God knows what we need and what we can become. God didn't create us to be frustrated with the potential to be something we could never achieve. That would be like a bad joke ... something far from what a loving God would do.

But here's the reality -- Along with all this potential we have, God offers the gift of freedom, which is both the greatest *gift* and the greatest *risk*. We can choose to be masters of our own destiny and create ourselves in our *own* image. But on the other hand, in our moments of despair, we can stop, reflect, and choose to listen to the heartbeat of God. God's love can be ... precarious. It can be misunderstood, misjudged and rejected.

Over the course of Advent and Christmas, we talked about the "incarnation" and what it means to know that because God dwelled in human flesh, God truly knows us. God is not surprised by anything we say or do. So there's no point in pretending or putting on a performance. God comes to us and says, "Listen ... *I know*. I know all about your disappointments, griefs, shame and failures. I ... *know*." And this "I know" is in such sharp contrast to the messages we hear from all the "false gods" that scream for our attention every day. These false gods promise fulfilment and happiness and security if we just buy this cool toy or follow this miraculous diet or use this shampoo or get this degree or read this book or invest our money into this stock account or support this cause. But so often they leave us hollow and empty, because even after all our effort and performance to appease their demands *it's never enough*. Their voices are loud and persistent and ... unfortunately ... they are celebrated and respected in our culture. Because even when we give in and perform our "rituals" to these gods we still have this feeling

of unworthiness and insecurity that tears away at the fabric of our souls. These false gods pressure us and drive us into a deeper resolve to fill the gaping holes of neediness in our lives with something ... *anything* else. Life becomes meaningless.

Listen, I know that for some of us the times we feel affirmed by God may be few and far between. But I also know it takes a conscious effort to get out of our own heads and to be quiet -- to listen for the Word of God through the Scriptures, through the beauty of God's creation, through those "thin places" where the heavens and earth intersect and God is revealed to you. My challenge to you this year is to put yourself in the place where you can hear God's affirmation. All the competing false "gods" of this world that seek to consume and devour you and convince you that you're garbage can be all too convincing. So keep a conscious check on where you are. A rhythm of prayer will keep you more aware and focused on God's presence in and around you.

Here's a question for you as we launch into this New Year: Can our small community here at FCC Chico continue to live out the reign of God both to each other and the rest of the world? Can we defy the world's standards of beauty and success and receive each other as Christ receives us, just as we are, with no pretense? Gotta tell you ... that's a tall order and one that will take love, patience, time and maybe even some tears to achieve. The masks we put on to protect us from being vulnerable are often put on unconsciously. We don't even know we do it. And those masks are complicated and confusing. When our motives are so mixed up, it makes it impossible for us to know each other as Jesus knows us. But by affirming the gift of our beauty to each other, we can release ourselves to have the courage to look inside, to find the unique potential that lies within our true selves, and become aware of the compulsions that drive us to "fulfil our own destiny." The creative richness of each individual here in this sanctuary is the most precious gift this community has to offer one another and to everyone we meet. We are, after all, the human hands and feet of Jesus.