

## **EPIPHANY 2B (January 14, 2017)**

### ***Who Am I?***

#### **(Psalm 139:1-18)**

Who am I? I'm sure we've all asked that question at some point in our lives.  
Who am I... *really?*

Now we often think of this as a purely modern concept, don't we? This whole idea of personal identity and awareness. But Psalm 139, in today's lectionary, reminds us that this is also an extremely *ancient* question as well. In other words, people – in this case, specifically people of faith – have, literally, for thousands and thousands of years, wondered and pondered about who they really were; in other words, what made them special or unique.

Who am I? Well, I am the son of Edward and Gloria Kropa and, since I carry the same name as my father before me, I am therefore Edward Ernest Kropa, *Junior*... So our *name*, of course, is one of the very first things that sets us apart. Which reminds me of a story.

When the 1960's had ended, San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district reverted to high rent and, therefore, many of the so-called "hippies" who had been living there moved down the coast to Santa Cruz. There they settled down, had children, even got married; though in no particular sequence, of course. But where they often departed from other young parents their age was that they didn't name their children Melissa... or Brett. Instead, the people in the mountains around Santa Cruz grew accustomed to their children playing Frisbee with friends named "Little Time Warp" or "Spring Fever." And eventually, of course, "Moonbeam," and "Earth," and "Love," and "Precious Promise" all ended up in the public schools along with them. And that's when the kindergarten teachers first met... "Fruit Stand."

Every fall, you see, according to tradition, the parents would dutifully apply name tags to their youngsters, kiss them goodbye, and send them off to school on the bus. And so it was that year for "Fruit Stand" as well.

And so, when he arrived at school that first day of kindergarten, the teachers weren't all that surprised by his rather odd name. After all, he was just one in a class of children with names like "Wind Catcher" and "Cherry Blossom." But what they *did* find odd, and even a little concerning, was that he never seemed to react whenever they called his name. "Would you like to play with the blocks, Fruit Stand?" they asked. But he only responded with a rather blank look on his face. Or, "Fruit Stand, how about a snack?" In this instance, however, he did accept, though rather hesitantly. But, again, the teachers didn't think anything of it. That's because the little girl that Fruit Stand seemed to strike up a friendship with just happened to be named "Sun Ray."

Well, finally, at dismissal time, the teachers led the children out to the buses. "Fruit Stand, do you know which one is *your* bus?" But he didn't answer. Once again, that wasn't strange since he hadn't really answered them all day.

But, fortunately, there was another way to find out. You see, the teachers had also instructed the parents to write the name of their child's bus stop on the *reverse side* of their name tag. So his teacher simply turned over the tag. And there, neatly printed, was the word "Anthony."

Our names... one of the first ways that we are set apart from others. But our names don't necessarily tell us, or others, very much about who we really are, do they?

Instead, the answer to *that* question, at least according to Psalm 139, begins with its very first verse: "Lord, you have searched me out; O Lord, you have known me." In other words, long before we ever even knew *ourselves* we were known by God. Now, although the verse numbers were not included in your bulletins this morning, I would nevertheless like to skip down to verse 13 at this point: "For you yourself" (again, speaking of God) "you yourself created my inmost parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb."

Jeanette and I received some wonderful news recently. Our oldest daughter, Kristyn, and her husband, Josiah, are expecting their first baby in July. And so that means that we're going to become first-time grandparents as well! In fact, just this past week, they went for their first ultrasound and not only did they send us pictures – via their cell phone, of course – but also video as well.

Clearly the quality has improved *exponentially* since the ultrasounds we saw of our own children. Back then it was just this murky gray mass, with little or no form or definition. But, I remember, the technicians were always so excited and kept saying things like, “Do you see the head or the body?” And I couldn’t, quite frankly! All it looked like was some weird Rorschach test that I couldn’t decipher for the life of me.

But this was different! I could clearly see, in this instance, what looked exactly like one of those shrimp I had on New Year’s Eve! And even with my cell phone, I could hear the little heart pumping; 171 beats per minute, you can actually hear the technician saying in the background. Which is amazing since a normal resting *adult* heart rate is only 60 to 100. Clearly there’s a lot going on in the womb; a lot of growing and developing, to be sure.

But going back to our heart rate for a moment. Taking an adult heart rate of 80 for the sake of argument, basically halfway between 60 and 100, this results in an average cardiac output of approximately 6 liters of blood every minute. So the next time you’re in the grocery store, go to the aisle where all the two-liter soda bottles are found, and consider this: that every minute your heart is pumping enough blood to fill up 3 of those plastic two-liter bottles. In one hour, your heart has filled 180 bottles. In 24 hours, your heart has filled 4,320. And in one week, which is 168 hours, it has filled 30,240 of those two-liter bottles! That’s pretty amazing stuff!

In fact, that’s exactly the reaction of the psalmist as well in verse 14:

“I will thank you because I am marvelously made...” Other translations, you perhaps remember, say here: “for I am *fearfully* and *wonderfully* made. And there’s the thing, the Hebrew word translated “fearfully” does not mean to be “frightened.” But instead refers to a sense of reverence and awe; reverence and awe in response to this amazing thing that God has done in creating us. Moreover, the word translated as “wonderfully” can also be translated as “distinctly” or “uniquely.” I praise you, O God, for I am awesomely and uniquely made!

“...your works are wonderful,” the psalmist goes on. Again, the word here can also be translated as “extraordinary.” Your works, again in creating us as human beings, are simply *extraordinary*!

“Your eyes beheld my limbs, yet unfinished in the womb...” Again, in that video of our daughter’s ultrasound, the technician says, at one point, “Here’s the head, the body, the arms...” It makes you kind of feel a little like God yourself, looking at this new life – yet unfinished naturally– but nevertheless being formed in the womb; the head, the body, *even the arms!*

But then the psalmist pivots, in a sense, and now goes in an entirely *different* direction. From talking about God knowing us even before we were born, even while we were being knit together in our mother’s womb, he now says “...my days were finished before they came to be.” In other words, God doesn’t only know us *before* we were born, God also knows our *future* as well!

In fact, Jeremiah 29:11 puts it this way: “For I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.” Again, God does not only *create* us, God also sets before us a future as well; a good and hope-filled future.

Now that’s not to say, however, that life will not have its share of challenges and disappointments; perhaps even tragedies. But simply that these things are not of God’s making or doing, and even if *or when* they come, God is nevertheless still with us, still in our corner, so to speak, continuing to lead us to that good and hope-filled future.

No matter how many times things in our lives seem to go south, seem to go wrong, God does not abandon us or let us wander off somewhere on our own. In point of fact, the very *opposite* is true. And so now we go back to verse 2...

“You know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You trace my journeys and my resting places and are acquainted with all my ways. Indeed, there is not a word on my lips, but you, O Lord, know it altogether. You *encompass* me, behind and before, and lay your hand on me.”

Encompass... I’m not so sure about that word. Basically, of course, it means to “surround,” I guess. But, here again, earlier translations were perhaps a bit more helpful when they said “you *hem me in.*” According to Jeremy Troxler, “The Hebrew word for ‘hem in’ used here doesn’t mean to cuddle. It doesn’t refer to a protective embrace, a great big bear-hug, or to be wrapped in Bubble Wrap.” The word for ‘hem in’ (translated as

encompass in your bulletin), he says, “is the word used when a city is laid under siege.” In other words, “ ‘You *besiege* me. O God. You hem me in... You entrap me. You beleaguer me, behind and before.” In short, “You will not leave me alone.”

As Troxler notes, during the Civil War, Union forces under General Ulysses S. Grant laid siege to the Confederate Fort Donelson in Tennessee. The Union Army surrounded them on every side. The Confederate soldiers tried to break out, of course, but soon realized that it was impossible; that there was absolutely no escape. So they sent a messenger to Grant to sue for peace; in other words, to try and negotiate favorable terms of surrender. But Grant, apparently, would have none of it. His reply was short and to the point: “No terms, but unconditional and immediate surrender, can be accepted.” (Apparently that’s where he got his nickname, U.S. Grant, short for “Unconditional Surrender.”)

In a way, says Troxler, God is like that as well; always pursuing us, surrounding us, hemming us in. Again, there is no escaping from God.

The God of Psalm 139, he says, “has laid us under siege, accepts no terms but unconditional and immediate surrender.” But then Troxler goes on to say this, however: “The surrender to the siege is a sweet one. For the God of unconditional surrender is the God of unconditional love.”

You see, this God who will not let us escape, who will not let us go, who will pursue and keep on pursuing us our entire lives is the very same God who created us in the first place and, someday, will also welcome us back home...

Then, in verse 7 the psalmist continues: “ ‘Where can I go then from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I climb up to heaven, you are there; if I make the grave my bed, you are there also.’ ” Again, there is literally no escaping God. As Stan Mast has put it: “You were there before my life began and you will be with me when my life ends, and you are with me in every intervening moment.”

Similarly, Martin Buber, the 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish philosopher offered these words to describe our relationship with God:

*Where I wander – You!*  
*Where I ponder – You!*  
*Only You, You again, always You!*  
*You! You! You!*

*When I am gladdened – You!*  
*When I am saddened – You!*  
*Only You, You again, always You!*  
*You! You! You!*

*Sky is You, Earth is You!*  
*You above! You below!*  
*In every trend, at every end,*  
*Only You, You again, always You!*  
*You! You! You!*

God is always there. Always!

So where does that leave us? Where does that leave us in trying to answer the question, “Who am I?” Well, for one thing, according to the psalmist, each one of us is a wonderfully unique creation of God. As we heard, just like snowflakes, no two of us are exactly alike. According to geneticists, even identical twins have their differences.

That being said, there is then the even deeper existential question of *Whose* am I? And here the psalmist has an answer for us as well. The very same God who created us does not turn away from us and leave us to our own devices. Instead, this God who knows literally everything about us from the womb to the tomb, and every stop in between, has also claimed us as his own. That’s what baptism is all about, isn’t it?

I’m reminded here of Isaiah 43:1, which goes like this: “But now says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel; Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” In the end, and when all is said and done, the bottom line is that we are God’s. Who am I? Quite simply, I am a child of God...

I remember hearing years ago that there is the person that others see. Then there is the person we believe ourselves to be. But then there's the person who we *really* are; that person known only to God.

One of my heroes in the faith is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a German Lutheran pastor and professor who courageously stood up against the evil represented by Adolf Hitler and the Nazis. This opposition even led him, at one point, to become involved in one of the plots to assassinate Hitler. For that involvement, Bonhoeffer was arrested and imprisoned and on April 9, 1945, less than a month before the end of the war, he was finally executed.

And it was while he was *in* prison that Bonhoeffer wrote a poem in which he meditated upon the difference between what *others* said about him... and what he felt about *himself* inside. Others, you see, saw him as a pillar of strength, for example, fearlessly maintaining his faith amidst great danger and hardship. While, on the other hand, Bonhoeffer himself was well aware of his innermost doubts and fears. His poem was called simply, "Who Am I?"

*Who am I? They often tell me I stepped from my cell's confinement calmly, cheerfully, firmly, like a Squire from his country home.*

*Who am I? They often tell me I used to speak to my warders freely and friendly, and clearly, as though it were mine to command.*

*Who am I? They also tell me I bore the days of misfortune equably, smilingly, proudly, like one accustomed to win.*

*Am I then really that which other men tell of?  
Or am I only what I myself know of myself.  
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,  
struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat, yearning for colors,  
for flowers, for the voices of birds,  
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,  
tossing in expectation of great events  
powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,  
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,  
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all.*

*Who am I? This or the Other?*

*Am I one person today and tomorrow another?*

*Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,  
and before myself a contemptible woebegone weakling?*

*Or is something within me still like a beaten army  
fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?*

*Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.*

*Whoever I am, Thou knowest O God, I am thine!*

That was the very same conclusion reached by the psalmist, isn't it? Who am I? I am this wonderfully and marvelously and uniquely created child of God. A God who knew me before I was even born, and who knows equally well the future that lies ahead of me. But even more

than that, I am one who this God surrounds and pursues until I finally surrender. And then showers me with his grace and blessings; now and forevermore.

Who am I? Whoever I am... I am God's.

Amen.