



Broken Reflections: Broken Selves

Psalm 139

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Throughout this season of Lent, we are focusing on the *Broken Reflections* that exist in our world – those places where, when we look, all we see is brokenness. From the fractures of international diplomacy and the tension between power-hungry nations, to the division present in our own nation, community, and personal relationships because of the *-isms* that plague our minds and hearts, we are seeking to learn more how God is working to heal our brokenness, and how God is inviting us to participate in the work of reconciliation that has already begun.

This past week, the Northern Virginia Bi-District Office of the United Methodist Church held a gathering, at which consultant and coach, Rev. Phil Maynard, was invited to speak about *Intentional Discipleship*. As a part of the teaching, a friend of mine captured this quote, “Our role as the church is to help people be where God is at work where we are.”

As anyone might expect, he posted the quote on Facebook (because, you know, that’s what you do). In response, as anyone might expect, someone disagreed with the quote, and made their thoughts known in a replying comment. (Sometimes I’m simply amazed at how even the most innocent of posts on social media sparks the most critical of responses.) The person said in response, “Might I suggest an edit? ‘Our role is to help people be God at work.’”

My colleague pushed back and stood up for the original quote; and this replying individual further stood up for her edit. Like most Facebook spats, neither side was willing to back down or acquiesce. Oh the joys of digital disagreements.

I can’t say I fully agree with the original quote, but I can say with certainty, I do *not* agree with her edit. Her edit for me is indicative of the primary reason we find ourselves to be broken individuals. Did you catch the difference between the original quote and her edit?

The original quote offered that the church should be teaching us, “to be *where* God is at work.” Her edit offered that the church should be teaching us, “to *be* God at work.” ... To be *where God is* verses to *be God*. Friends, I will claim and apologize that it is the church, its curriculum, its teaching, its preaching, and its witnessing that are to blame for the confusion in these two phrases. Too often we have taken scriptural passages like Matthew 5:48, which reads, “Be perfect, therefore, as your Father in heaven is perfect,” and proclaimed, you are a failure if you have not become like God, even pushing it to say, you are a failure if indeed, you have not become God.

This mentality says you must become as perfect as God – as holy and blameless as the Lord – and it not only leads to our broken self-images, but it a heresy that leads to the detriment of all

the other broken relationships we have looked at in recent weeks. When we put ourselves in the place of God, we give ourselves permission to chastise and judge others for their lack of “perfection” (however that is to be defined). When we teach that our calling is to *be God at work*, we have diminished the very being of God, as if we can become a substitute or an auxiliary stand-in for God.

Let us be very clear about our call as people of faith: *There is a Lord, and we are not him. There is a Creator, and that is not us. We are a broken people in need of the Lord’s saving redemption.*

Fitting, this is exactly what Psalm 139 proclaims. “Psalm 139 invites us to receive an identity rooted not in the things we say about ourselves or the labels others assign us, but in the One who knows us more deeply and more lovingly than we could ever know ourselves.”ⁱ

Let’s break this Psalm down into four sections, just as it is usually found printed in your Bibles, and identify how Psalm 139 speaks a word that offers healing into our broken selves.

Verses 1-6 proclaim God’s knowledge of all the psalmist thinks and does. “You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you know my thoughts from far away; you know my words before I speak them; you are acquainted with all my ways.” Such intimacy and knowledge is a scary and often unwanted thing. Especially here in America, we spend exorbitant amounts of money protecting ourselves from such breach of information. From the fees for LifeLock type identification theft protection, to the monthly costs for a home security system, to the \$39.99 I pay TurboTax to defend me in the case of an Audit, to the cost of a travelling mi-fi hotspot so I don’t have to use public wi-fi in case of a cyber hack, to the fences and walls we build to keep people out of our land, to the less tangible emotional barriers we put up so others won’t get to know us too intimately – we are a people of security.

Yet, for as much as we try to protect ourselves from others, for as much as we invest in personal security, for as much as we try to cut ourselves off from others, lest they know too much about us, it seems there is security in being known by God. “The Psalmist recognizes that when the knower is God, the vulnerability is worth it.”ⁱⁱ “Such knowledge,” the psalmist proclaims, “is too wonderful for me.” There is comfort in being known by God. There is security in being understood by God.

This sense of being known is only strengthened in verses 7-12, as the psalmist proclaims there is nowhere one can go to escape God’s presence. “If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol (the place of the dead), you are there; if I went to the farthest limits of the sea, you would be there leading me; even when I reach my end, I am still with you.”

There are times when we find God’s presence more of a nuisance than a blessing. Consider Jonah, we sought to flee God. God had said, “Go to Nineveh at once!” But Jonah sought to flee the presence of the Lord. He paid his way onto a ship, yet God was there on the sea. Jonah could not escape God’s presence.

And there are times when God's presence is nothing but a blessing. Having been thrown out of the boat, Jonah was swallowed up by a great fish, and God remained steadfast and present. The Lord spoke to the fish, and Jonah was spewed out onto dry land. "As Jonah found, to his dismay, it is easier to delude oneself than to elude God."ⁱⁱⁱ

The psalmist proclaims, "Even if I surround myself in darkness, even if there is not a bit of light the shine on me, to you – to God – the night is as bright as the day, darkness is as light." There is no pit of darkness in which it is too dark for the Lord to see. There is no place to go wherein the Lord will not be. From the Scriptural depths of the belly of the fish, or the Lion's den, or the flooded earth, life in exile, or the hopelessness of the grave – God is there. To the more tangible and present depths of depression, or prison cells, or financial challenges, or lost jobs, or gripping addictions – God is there. God is steadfast and will be with us, not just in times of faithfulness and celebration, but through the most difficult of times, even when we seek to flee from God's presence.

As we keep reading, we find in verses 13 – 18 why it is God stands by us through thick and thin. The psalmist proclaims, "It was you who formed me; I was not hidden from you when I was being made; you saw my unformed substance even before I was woven into being. You knew the days of my life before even one had yet existed. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

God knows us inward and out, and God stays with us throughout all our days, because we are a unique part of God's creation. Each of us is claimed by the God who made us. We do not choose God as though it is our choice to proclaim God as Lord. We proclaim God as Creator for it is God who created us! The psalmist is proclaiming God's prevenient grace – that before we knew God or claimed God as Lord, God had already known and claimed us. In this text, we hear and are reminded of God in creation. In Genesis 2:7, we read, "The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being."

That we are "autonomous self-determining individuals is an illusion produced by pride."^{iv} Which speaks to the error of asserting the language that we are to *be God*. There is a God – there is a God who knows us intimately, that will be with us wherever we exist, and who created and knew us at creation – but we are not God.

It is this error of self-loathing that leads to the psalmist's conclusion in Psalm 139. After 18 verses, which reads like a hymn of praise, worshipping God for the intimate knowledge and involvement in our lives, we come to verse 19. Seemingly out of nowhere, certainly breaking from a focus on God's love, the psalmist offers, "O that you would kill the wicked."

What?

"O God, that the blood thirsty would depart from me – those who speak of you maliciously, and lift themselves up against you for evil!"

Excuse me?

“Do I not hate those who hate you? And loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.”

How is this the same Psalm? Wherein does this vengeful and judgmental accusation against others fit into this psalmist’s hymn of praise?

The late Dr. James Mays, a Hebrew Bible and Old Testament scholar, offers that the psalmist’s change in prose seems not to be a direct attack on any individual, or even response to a known person or group of persons. Mays offers, “[The wicked] are described as the enemies of God. That is their danger. ... To be willfully an enemy of God is unthinkable to the psalmist, but there the wicked are, the embodiment of another way than the fear of the Lord, conditioning and endangering the whole society by their character.”^v

In such a reading, one does not see the lashing out of the psalmist as an honest invitation of God to smite the unfaithful, but instead as a dumbfounded response to the thought that someone could know of God’s knowledge, intimacy, and presence and still willingly choose to reject the Lord. Such an astonished reaction, such an implausible reality, leads the psalmist down a different path of thought. He does not maintain a call upon God to smite the unfaithful, but allows such a consideration to convict his own being.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

Here, in this shift from verses 19-22 to verses 23-24, is what calls us not to *be God*, but to be *where God is*. It is this shift wherein we find the healing of God in our broken lives.

When we claim ourselves to be perfect as God in heaven is perfect, verses 19-22 become our battle cry. When we claim to be part of God’s creation in need of grace and mercy, verse 23-24 become our beckoning cry.

When we claim to *be God*, asserting we are living as God, and touting perfect knowledge of what is right and wrong as God, verses 19-22 become our sword against others. Yet, when we profess we are seeking to be where God is, admitting we are but sinners among God’s created desiring to be in God’s presence, verses 23-24 become our prayer for healing.

When we claim power over others due to deceitful realities, we strip verses 19-22 from their context and use them to justify our hatred and mistreatment of others. But when we take these verses in union with verses 23-24, we acknowledge that we are not without sin ourselves, and offer a prayer that God would convict us of the ways in which we participate in such maliciousness against God’s eternal will.

The psalmist concludes, claiming that because God is so almighty (knowing us, claiming us, creating us, and standing by us), we in turn should be inviting God to lead us in healing – having our brokenness named so that we may be led in the way of new life. And this is why God sends his Son – this is why God becomes incarnate in flesh – that we may be offered the way everlasting.

“God did not send Jesus to know what it was like to be human. Rather, because God *already knew* what it was like to be human, God sent Jesus.”^{vi} God knows us, and God loves us, such that God knew the way of salvation must be done *for us*. This is why we do not proclaim that our job is to *be God*. There is a God, who came to us in the form of a Savior, to make new life possible. We are not God; the work of the Savior is not our own. We are claimed, and known, and given new life through the work that has already been done for us.

We are a people, who though we are broken, are invited to find new life and healing in God’s great love as witnessed in Jesus Christ. May you hear the call of the psalmist and know, God is with you that you may receive the good news of the work of God that promises new life and eternal healing.

ⁱ Allen C. McSween, Jr. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year B, Volume 1*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Timothy A. Beach-Verhey. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year B, Volume 3*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v James L. Mays. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary, Psalms*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994.

^{vi} Dave Bland. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year B, Volume 3*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008.