

2 Epiphany - Year B – January 15, 2012
1 Samuel 3:1-20; Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51
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As we embark on our journey into the season after Epiphany, we have a remarkable opportunity to reflect on the reality of Jesus, the Word made flesh, manifest in the world at a specific time and place in world history. But also present with us now as His work of reconciling all creation to God's self continues. I may be stating the obvious, but in order to reflect on the Light of Christ, who is the Light of the world, we have to touch truth and feel it, experience love and embrace it in faith for ourselves. We can't reflect on the living-giving, healing Light of life, unless we're willing to interact with Jesus Christ. There is no more dancing around in the shadows, or trying to hide from whatever the Light may reveal. One of the things we can always say to those who ask us why we believe or come to church is simply this, "Don't knock it, 'til you've tried it!" Oh, and not twenty years ago! Because things have changed and are always changing.

Our celebration of the incarnation also presents us with the opportunity to consider the reality of our own lives as spiritual and Spirit-empowered beings of flesh and blood. At some or several points in our lives, most of us ask the question, "Who am I?" For example, as a teenager when we're wrestling with our physical, emotional and intellectual transition from childhood to adulthood. Or maybe when we see that same transition in our children and grandchildren. How about the time when our children leave home and we're labeled as 'empty nesters'? As life goes on, most of us also face retirement, and wonder about our new identity outside of the working world. We also wrestle with the question "Who am I?" after the death of a spouse, a parent or other loved one.

In light of the question, Psalm 139 offers us an eternal answer that both comforts and challenges us. Above all, the psalm gently denies any prideful claim into the culturally pervasive illusion that we're autonomous, self-determining individuals. Theologian H. Richard Niebuhr suggests that we enter into and experience genuine self-hood, through the knowledge that "the soul and God belong together." Whether we know God or not, it doesn't change the truth. The psalmist reminds each of us of God's constant and immanent presence in our lives from beginning to end. Paradoxically, God is also a profound and transcendent mystery to us. According to the psalmist, God has always known what it means to be human. He is the One who knits us together in our mother's womb, and in the dark secret places of earth, as the Genesis story attests. So the incarnation is not so that God can experience humanity, but purely for our benefit, so that all we are is fully redeemed through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God's Son. The incarnation is a fleshy reminder of how deeply God values each of us, and our relationship with Him. In a time when life is often cheapened, and frequently degraded the psalmist affirms God's supreme valuing of humanity. A friend of mine from my corporate days had an old Calvin & Hobbes cartoon taped to the inside of her cubicle. It was sad and hopeful all at once. The picture was a down and out, dejected looking figure wandering the streets, with old newspapers whipped up by an invisible breeze carelessly flouting the laws of gravity. The caption read, "I ain't a nobody. I must be somebody. Because God don't make no trash."

This psalm is particularly relevant to us as we reflect on the name God gives us at our baptism. We are His beloved children, and heirs of His kingdom. God has knit us together individually in the womb. We're also bound together as members of Christ's body, in communities of faith across the world. The spiritual bond we share is eternal. We are essentially social, community-oriented creatures. Something within us yearns to be known. How often do we hear the question, "Do you know, X, Y or Z?" We long for a meaningful connection with others. However, this need is held in tension with our determination to maintain our privacy, and protect our identity. If our identity is stolen, we can't help but feel violated. Most of us share only a small part of ourselves with others, even within our families, or with our friends. The psalmist shares quite a revelation about God. In so many ways, like it or not, God has already invaded our

privacy. As our creator, God is the only one who knows us better than we know ourselves. If we've been standing in the light of God for even a little while, we'll know and experience God's presence, not as an unwelcome, or intrusive force in our lives, but in the same way as the psalmist. His tone is not defensive, but full of trust in, and openness to God. There's no guilt or shame, only praise and wonder. There's a hint of judgment, tempered by the expectation that it is balanced perfectly by God's grace and mercy. The psalmist is dependent on God throughout his life. As he says in verse 18, "I come to the end—I am still with you." As we reflect on our own identity as God's children, in and through our faith in Christ Jesus, how might our lives change if we set self aside, and put *our* trust and faith completely in God? What does it really mean to live as a child of God?

For those of us who desire and crave God's discipline and guidance in our lives, God's intimate knowledge of who we are is a source of comfort. For those of us who resist change and growth, who desire the illusion of an immovable and comfortable life, there's a hint that God wants more. God desires to be in relationship with us. The psalmist reveals that God is the One who searches us out and knows us. To "search out" carries with it the promise of judgment, and even the inevitability that our illusions of self-control will be shattered, that we will be compelled to change. God only wants the very best for us. As many of us can attest, God often goes to great lengths to get our attention, so that we move forward, grow, and experience the fullness of life in Christ. God's knowledge of humanity – of you and me – penetrates time and space, light and dark. God is the encompassing reality in whom all that is lives and moves and has its being. As we say each week in our gathering collect for purity, God is the One "to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid."

For each of us who respond to the Light of God with praise and thanksgiving, because we *are* marvelously made, and because God's works *are* truly wonderful, there is great solace in our intimacy and personal relationship with Him. God is known and knowable to us. God is a friend not a stranger. God knows where we live! He's not the one with whom we'd hesitate to share our address, phone number, or email. God is not some unknown quantity who touches our lives like a suspicious friend request on Facebook. As members of Christ's Body, when we stand in the Light of Christ, we're clothed in righteousness, and our sins are forgiven. By God's grace and mercy, all that is revealed, be it good or bad, is cleansed in the blood of the Lamb, and healed.

Psalm 139, like so many of the songs in the Psalter, offers lasting words of comfort. The promise of God as Emmanuel, God with us is fulfilled. No one and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, as Paul says in his letter to the Romans. Whilst imprisoned, and shortly before his death at the hands of the Nazi regime during World War II, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a poem called "Who am I?" In it he writes, "Who am I? They often tell me... Am I then really all that which other men tell of? Or am I only what I know of myself? ... thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,... powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance, weary and empty at praying, at thinking, ... and ready to say farewell to it all? Who am I? This or the other? Am I one person today, and tomorrow another? ... Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine." At the conclusion of the poem, he writes most profoundly, "Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine." The good news is that we know ourselves best when we live in trusting dependence on our gracious God, responding with gratitude and joy to the presence of Christ in others. Psalm 139 invites us to embrace fully our identity rooted not in the things we say about ourselves, or the labels others give us, but in God the Father, the One who truly knows us inside and out.

Amen.