



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION SUNDAY (SUNDAY SCHOOL AND BIBLE TRAINING EMPHASIS)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection – Psalm 139:1-6, 13-14 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) O Lord, you have searched me and known me. (v. 2) You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. (v. 3) You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. (v. 4) Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. (v. 5) You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. (v. 6) Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. . . (v. 13) For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb, (v. 14) I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Sunday schools evolved from slavery onward as places where African Americans could explore and link everyday realities and life experiences with biblical passages, and scripture. Beginning in clandestine locations, and later organized in churches, the Sunday school was an educational experience. It engaged people in learning the story of God contained in Scripture, and provided important ground for young and old alike to grow in the knowledge of the faith found in the Bible and beyond. This knowledge was not intended to be inert; rather it was to be utilized in everyday life in ways that showed them to be unapologetically Christian, and unashamedly black amidst life's struggles. Education was to equip people to imagine God's hope for people in community. It was to lead them out with an assured sense of self, which is needed to live life with faith and hope.

Education that gives people knowledge of the Christian faith and prepares them to live it with a sense of their own valued identity and purpose, continues to be an essential task of Sunday school. Some key questions which Sunday school dealt with in years past continue, perhaps with greater intensity, to be as important today: Who and whose am I, and where do I fit in the world? What has God got to do with it? Howard Thurman's mid-twentieth century assertion is powerfully true today: "There is no greater responsibility for the Church than to give religious instruction to its members."¹

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Psalm 139:1-6, 13-14

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Today, growing numbers of African Americans are uninformed about the Bible and do not attend Sunday school or other biblical training classes where the Bible, and its meaning on how to live one's life, may be explored. This lack of participation is unfortunate since it would fortify African Americans against continuing assaults to our identity in a racially charged society, and reduce the heightened sense of powerlessness to live meaningful lives in today's often challenging, fragmented, and hostile world. Participation in Sunday school and bible training also bolsters the community spirit where support of a positive identity and purpose have waned in our communities.

The tendency to wear the mask of grins and lies about which Paul Lawrence Dunbar wrote in his poem "We Wear the Mask" still lingers.² Too often, denigration and self-hatred explode in violence as is evident in the rising African American suicide and homicide rate, or in the clamor for material things as means of garnering recognition and acceptance. There is a great longing by many to know that they are loved and regarded as valued human beings. Within the religious experience, and knowing the self's ultimate worth in the sight of God declared by the psalmist in Psalm 137, these unfulfilled longings can be met.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

We do not know if Psalm 139 stemmed from the psalmist's personal situation of distress or accusation, or from the community's need for assurance in the aftermath of exile. Whatever the case, the 139th Psalm reveals an account of what may be called "an encounter of the closest kind" with God. The psalm details an intimate conversation with God in which the

psalmist is speaker and God is listener. The psalmist focuses quickly in verses 1-2 on the word, “know(n).” This key reference points to the psalmist’s relating to God the experience of not simply being recognized and acknowledged by God, but of belonging inseparably to God. Thurman describes this sort of being known by God as being laid bare, or stripped of the facade. In this knowing, the psalmist references the self as being seen at the deepest center, or at the very core.³ Indeed, verses 1-4 express clearly that all that is thought and done are exposed in the presence of God. God is experienced as a wholly intimate and all-knowing presence.

In verse 5, the psalmist continues speaking to God by describing the experience of being “hemmed in” by God. The description may well carry more than a single meaning. To be “hemmed in” by God (v. 5) may communicate both warning and protection. On the one hand, the psalmist may have experienced being “hemmed in” as God’s warning or caution that the entirety of life is being examined by God; or, as warning, “hemmed in” may have been viewed as God’s counsel or that there is, indeed, no need for wearing a mask and that God is available whatever the situation, limitations, or sin. In this sense, God creates the bounds within which the psalmist experienced the self as being with God, the Great I am, “just as I am.”

On the other hand, the psalmist may have experienced being “hemmed in” as protection. This view conveys an understanding of a border placed by God around the psalmist wherein God serves as guard, defense, shield and safety; and God’s hand upon the psalmist (v. 5) is God’s assurance of God’s presence and protection.

Verse 6 then relates the psalmist’s response of seeing the tremendous experience of God’s knowledge as “too wonderful.” The psalmist tells of God’s capacity for knowing as utterly beyond comprehension. The capability of God is beyond what can be fathomed. In the phrase, “so high that I cannot attain it,” (v. 6), is perhaps the thought that it is impossible to know God at the level of God’s knowing. It is not simply the capability of God that is beyond comprehension, but it is who God is, that is limitless and that extends beyond the human realm. God’s nature is inimitable or matchless and exceeds the psalmist’s limited physical reach.

In verse 13, the psalmist recognizes before God that the creation of life is more than a biological event. In the reference to being “knit together” in the mother’s womb, the psalmist seems to describe God as a weaver who engages in the highly intricate, and artistic, endeavor of creating a unique and wonderfully made living being. But, another glimpse of the psalmist’s understanding of the nature of God is revealed in the words, “fearfully made,” that precede the use of the words, “wonderfully made.” This use points to a God whose love for God’s own creation extends to concern, since this human creation is finite and therefore not perfect. This human creation is prone to sin, and has the choice of straying from a relationship with God. Yet, even though the gift of human will and the right given to humans to make choices in life brings concern to the Creator, it does not lessen but instead heightens the amazing and magnificent artistry of God’s creation. Indeed, this recognition becomes reason for praising God and affirming the self’s ultimate worth in the sight of God (v. 14).

Celebration

This text narrates a religious encounter with God that affirms human worth. It invites what may be called **celebratory education**, that which builds up our knowledge of the faith found in scripture, and leads us out to live with assurance of our valued identity. This is good news about Christian education that prompts an individual and communal *hallelujah!*

Descriptive Details

Sights: See God as knower: The psalmist is known by God (vv.1-4). See God as counselor and protector: The psalmist is “hemmed in” by God in the sense of (1) being counseled or warned by God that all of life is open for God’s examination, and (2) being guarded, shielded, and defended by God. See God as weaver: God knit the psalmist together in the womb of the psalmist’s mother, and is the artistic creator of human life of ultimate worth.

III. Quotes for the Sermonic Moment

We recognize that God’s value assigned to us and love shown to us is also mediated through the parents’ value and love shown first to the newborn child and in care given as the child develops. Each of us also becomes an instrument of the truth of God’s assigned value and love, by what we do and say that mirrors this truth. This mirroring becomes possible only insofar as we are in relationship with God. This requires our giving up those things that make this relationship difficult or impossible.⁴

For an African American sense of self-worth, or “somebodiness,” to develop requires a whole community, or “village,” of character where teaching about and demonstrating God’s positive regard occurs. There must be a community where people belong and feel accepted, can claim a strong and clear group identity, and can come to know God and one’s history and culture.⁵

In the presence of the knowing God, we are relieved of all necessity of pretending. This does not mean that our limitations are extinguished and our sins are no longer sins. What it does mean is that in the presence of the knowing God, even our limitations and sins can be dealt with. There is nothing that cannot be understood and dealt with in our lives in the presence of the all-comprehending God.⁶

Each of us has a valued identity that need not be diminished by denigrating language or the negative behavior of other people. Nor need we internalize, assign to ourselves, and act on such negative influences. Our identity as African Americans is not defined by the “N word,” assigned to us during slavery and still communicated today, including in gangsta rap. Our human worth is not lessened by racial profiling or other indignities. Our valued identity is found in the God who created and loves us.⁷

IV. Teaching Aids for Psalm 139

- Congregations and Christian educators can use the chapter on story-linking that focuses on Psalm 139 appearing in Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, Soul Stories: African American Christian Education, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005, pp. 37-58.
- Invite intergenerational groups to listen to and discuss the poem, “Let’s Be Real,” by Dr. Thema Simone Bryant, found on the Audio CD—Sky: An Upbeat Black Girl’s Song. Durham, NC: Roaring Production, 1999.
- Watch and discuss the video of the production based on the book by Alex Haley, Roots: The Saga of An American Family.
- Study and use in worship “A Statement of Faith for Black History Month,” found in: Davis, Valerie Bridgeman, and Safiyah Fosua. The Africana Worship Book. Year A. Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2006, pp. 190-191.
- Give attention to how negative naming impacts self-identity. A book of articles for review and discussion is Randall Kennedy’s, Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2003.

V. Stories and Illustrations

- **A Slave Story on Self-Esteem Building**

In a sermon, Reverend John Porter told a story from the time when our forbears were in slavery: “When they finished their chores, they would sneak off one by one and gather at the feet of the old preacher, . . . as he told them: ‘Brothers and sisters, y’all ain’t no slaves. God ain’t got no slavery up in heaven. Y’all ain’t no niggahs. God ain’t got no niggahs in heaven. Y’all ain’t all them names they give us either. Children! Do you know who you are? You are the greatest thing God put here. You God’s children. God have you a name just like he gave you a song to sing. So sing yo song and walk with yo head high.’”⁸

- **W. Wilson Goode’s Story**

The autobiography of Wilson Goode documents his experience of denigration as a young man, and how the worshiping congregation gave him a renewed sense of self-worth.⁹ He tells of being a honor student in a predominantly white high school. However, prior to his graduation, he was told and convinced by the high school guidance counselor that he was not college material. The counselor said to him, “You don’t have the background to make it in college. You’re from the South, and college life is more than just knowing how to read and write and do your work. You would never succeed in college, if you made it at all” (45). Wilson was disheartened by this judgment, and that apparently his diligent study and accomplishment had meant nothing. He saw the possibility of a dead-end future, and a life of difficulty that had become all too usual for other African American youngsters.

Wilson became a worker at a tobacco factory. However, on one occasion, the pastor's wife in a local Baptist church asked him about his future. He related the counselor's words to her. The pastor's wife quickly retorted in a tone of restrained anger: "Willie, I don't care what they tell you. You are college material!" (47) Because of the self-doubt Wilson had developed, he reminded the pastor's wife of his tendency to stutter. This drew a quick response: "Moses had a speech problem. He put stones in his mouth to speak properly. God used him. . . You go to college, Willie" (47-48). The pastor's wife continued her plea, "Save your money and we'll help you at the church. Don't let them tell you, *you* can't go to college. You *can* go to college!" (47-48).

Wilson responded to the encouragement he received by applying to four colleges. He received acceptance from all four. He chose one. The Sunday before his departure, Wilson attended his church's Sunday morning worship. During the service, the congregation presented to him a financial gift. He also received a special send-off following the pastor's sermon, further words of encouragement from a deacon, and the rousing shout of the congregation, "Amen!"

Notes

1. Thurman, Howard. Deep Is the Hunger; Meditations for Apostles of Sensitiveness. New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1951.
2. Dunbar, Paul Lawrence. "We Wear the Mask." Ed. Joan R. Sherman. African-American Poetry: An Anthology, 1773-1927. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1997. p. 64.
3. Thurman, Howard. The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and the Social Witness. New York, NY: Harper, 1954. p. 115.
4. Ibid., p. 118.
5. Hilliard, Asa G. The Maroon Within Us: Selected Essays on African American Community Socialization. Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1995. p. 133.
6. Thurman, Howard. The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and the Social Witness pp. 115-116.
7. Porter, John R. "Nobody Knows Our Names." Outstanding Black Sermons, Volume 2. Ed. Walter B. Hoard. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1979. pp. 85-87; Johnson, Charles Spurgeon. Growing Up in the Black Belt; Negro Youth in the Rural South. New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1967. p. 311; Hoard, Walter B. Outstanding Black Sermons, Volume 2. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1979; and Wimberly, Anne Streaty. Nurturing Faith & Hope: Black Worship As a Model for Christian Education. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2004. p. 67.
8. Porter, John R. "Nobody Knows Our Names." Outstanding Black Sermons, Volume 2. Ed. Walter B. Hoard. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1979. pp. 85-97; See also, discussion on the vignette in Anne E. Streaty Wimberly's Nurturing Faith and Hope, p. 67.