

PSALM 139:1-7 & 13-18 and JOHN 1:43-51

THERE IS AN OLD STORY ABOUT AN ACTOR WHO HAD THE GIFT OF ORATORY IN READING PASSAGES FROM LITERATURE FOR THE PUBLIC.

AT ONE SUCH SMALLER GATHERING SOMEONE ASKED IF HE WOULD RECITE PSALM 23. HE DID SO WITH MUCH ELOQUENCE, TO THE DELIGHT OF THOSE PRESENT.

THERE WAS AN ELDERLY PASTOR PRESENT AS WELL, AND SOMEONE ASKED HIM TO SAY THE SAME PSALM.

AFTER HE DID SO, WITH A MUCH LESS REFINED TALENT FOR SPEAKING, THE GROUP WAS DEEPLY MOVED.

THE ACTOR WAS PRIVATELY ASKED HOW THE PASTOR CONVEYED THE MESSAGE BETTER, EVEN THOUGH THE ACTOR'S MANNER OF SPEAKING WAS SUPERIOR.

HE ANSWERED IN THIS WAY, "I KNEW THE PSALM, BUT HE LOVED THE SHEPHERD."

ACTING, IT COULD BE SAID IS A TYPE OF MASK. HOWEVER, THE PRETENSE IS UNDERSTOOD BY EVERYONE.

BUT IN LIFE THIS IS NOT ALWAYS THE CASE, SINCE SO OFTEN PEOPLE ARE DECEIVED BY THE PRETENSE OF OTHERS.

HOWEVER, MASKS ARE COMPLETELY USELESS IN THE EYES OF THE LORD.

OF COURSE, I'M NOT SPEAKING ABOUT THE MASKS WE PUT ON BECAUSE OF COVID, OR MIGHT WEAR TO A COSTUME PARTY.

THE KIND OF MASKS THAT BOTHER GOD ARE THE INVISIBLE ONES WE WEAR TO HIDE OUR TRUE SELVES AND TO FOOL OTHERS.

THINK ABOUT IT: BULLIES OFTEN ACT THAT WAY BECAUSE THEY ARE INSECURE OR ANGRY.

ARROGANCE CAN BE A MASK THAT COVERS UP FEAR OF FAILURE OR INADEQUACY.

SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS IS WHAT MANY HIDE BEHIND IN AN ATTEMPT TO COVER-UP THEIR OWN SINFULNESS.

SOMETIMES, THE MASK WE WEAR IS THAT OF BEING ON OUR BEST BEHAVIOR IN PUBLIC.

OF COURSE OFTEN THIS IS EXPECTED LIKE FOR A JOB INTERVIEW, OR WHEN MEETING PEOPLE FOR THE FIRST TIME.

THEN THERE ARE MASKS WE HIDE BEHIND BY WHICH WE TRY TO CONVINCEN EVEN OURSELVES THAT WE ARE SOMEONE DIFFERENT FROM WHO WE REALLY ARE.

AND OTHER TIMES WE WEAR A MASK TO HIDE OUR TRUE FEELINGS, OUR SADNESS OR PAIN, SO AS NOT TO DISTRESS OTHERS.

MASKS, AFTER ALL, CAN HELP US GET THROUGH LIFE WHEN WE FEAR FAILURE OR REJECTION, OR HAVE EXPERIENCED SUCH THINGS.

THE REALITY AND POWER OF ALL THESE KINDS OF MASKS IS EASILY FOUND ONLINE SIMPLY BY LOOKING FOR POEMS OR QUOTES ABOUT THE DIFFERENT KINDS OF MASKS PEOPLE PUT ON.

A POET AND NOVELIST NAMED JAMES BALDWIN PENNED THIS STATEMENT ABOUT MASKS:

"LOVE TAKES OFF THE MASKS THAT WE FEAR WE CANNOT LIVE WITHOUT, AND KNOW WE CANNOT LIVE WITHIN."

THIS IS NEVER TRUER THAN WHEN IT COMES TO GOD'S LOVE FOR US. HIS LOVE ENCOURAGES US TO NOT TRY TO HIDE FROM HIM, EVEN WHEN WE HIDE FROM OTHER PEOPLE.

INDEED, THERE IS NO MASK WE CAN PUT ON, EITHER TO DISGUISE OUR TRUE NATURE, OR TO PUT US IN THE MOST FAVORABLE LIGHT POSSIBLE, THAT DO US ANY GOOD WITH GOD.

IN FACT, SUCH MASKS OFTEN INTERFERE WITH OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LORD.

THIS IS ESPECIALLY TRUE WHEN THEY PREVENT US FROM ADMITTING SIN AND SHORTCOMINGS, OR OUR NEED FOR GOD IN OUR LIVES.

FOR EXAMPLE, NOT WEARING A MASK WAS HOW JESUS COMPLIMENTED NATHANAEL WHEN THEY MET FOR THE FIRST TIME.

JESUS CALLED HIM A “TRUE ISRAELITE IN WHOM THERE IS NO DECEIT.”

YOU MAY RECALL ONE OF THE PATRIARCHS OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE WAS JACOB, ALSO CALLED ISRAEL BY GOD.

HE WAS A MAN WHO DECEIVED MANY-INCLUDING HIS FATHER, BROTHER, AND FATHER-IN-LAW, BUT NOT GOD.

NATHANAEL UNLIKE JACOB AND MANY OTHERS WAS A MAN WHO MADE NO ATTEMPT TO HIDE HIS NATURE FROM OTHERS.

IN FACT, HE WAS COMPLETELY OPEN ABOUT BEING SKEPTICAL ABOUT JESUS WHEN PHILLIP SAID HE WAS THE MESSIAH.

NOTICE, JESUS ALREADY PERCEIVED ALL THIS ABOUT NATHANAEL, AND YET DID NOT REJECT HIM FOR IT.

NATHANAEL, FOR HIS PART WAS NOT JUST A SKEPTIC, HE ALSO WAS OPEN TO HAVING HIS OPINION CHANGED, AS DEMONSTRATED BY THE QUICK REVERSAL OF HIS VIEW OF JESUS.

BUT WHY, WE MAY WONDER DOES HE ALMOST IMMEDIATELY GO FROM DOUBT, TO A PROFOUND CONFSSION OF FAITH?

IT HAPPENED BECAUSE JESUS DEMONSTRATED HIS KNOWLEDGE WAS ON PAR WITH GOD’S WHEN HE SPOKE OF SEEING AND KNOWING NATHANAEL.

PSALM 139 CONVEYS THE MESSAGE ABOUT THE FULLNESS OF GOD’S PRESENCE, AND THE FULLNESS OF GOD’S KNOWLEDGE ABOUT EACH ONE OF US.

LET US THEREFORE LOOK MORE CLOSELY AT THE POWERFUL PSALM, AND WHY IT TEACHES IT IS A GOOD THING THAT GOD SEES THROUGH ALL OUR MASKS.

THE PSALMIST, AS WE HEAR, IS FILLED WITH AWE OF, AND PRAISE FOR, GOD.

THIS HAPPENED BECAUSE HE RECOGNIZES THAT HE IS KNOWN AND WATCHED BY THE LORD OF ALL CREATION.

THE PSALM EXPRESSES THE CERTAINTY THAT NO MASK CAN PREVENT OR INHIBIT GOD’S INTEREST IN EACH INDIVIDUAL PERSON, OR HIS KNOWLEDGE OF EACH ONE OF US.

YES, GOD KNOWS US MORE INTIMATELY THAN EVEN WE KNOW OURSELVES.

GOD ALSO REMEMBERS ABOUT US THOSE THINGS WE DO NOT, INCLUDING THE TIME BEFORE OUR BIRTH.

THIS BRINGS TO MIND THE SENSE OF AWE OR FRIGHT SOME EXPERIENCE WHEN REALIZING THIS.

HOWEVER, FOR THE PSALMIST, HIS EXPERIENCE IS THAT OF AWE AND PRAISE INSTEAD.

OF COURSE, IT IS NOT DIFFICULT TO FOR US TO FEEL SOME FEAR THAT WE ARE AN OPEN BOOK TO GOD, AND HAVE NO PRIVACY AT ALL IN THIS SENSE.

AND YET IT CAN ALSO BE COMFORTING TO KNOW WE ARE NEVER TRULY ALONE WHEN GOD IS WITH US.

YES, IT IS GOOD THAT THE LORD ALWAYS KNOWS EXACTLY WHERE WE ARE, EVEN IF WE BECOME LOST.

BY LOST I MEAN NOT JUST PHYSICALLY, BUT SPIRITUALLY, AND EVEN MENTALLY FOR THOSE INFLICTED WITH AN ILLNESS OR INJURY OF THE BRAIN.

SO CONSIDER THE WONDER OF GOD'S PRESENCE WITH YOU AND KNOWLEDGE OF YOU.

IT BEGINS BEFORE YOUR BIRTH, AND CONTINUES AFTER YOUR DEATH.

INDEED FOR US ALL- IN LIFE AND IN DEATH WE BELONG TO GOD, AND THIS IS A GOOD THING.

THE CLOSING VERSE OF THE PASSAGE READ TODAY SAYS, IN MANY TRANSLATIONS OF THE HEBREW, "I COME TO AN END, I AM WITH YOU."

THUS HERE, IN THIS PSALM, WE FIND A CONFESSION OF FAITH THAT EXPRESSES THE TOTALITY OF GOD'S AWARENESS OF US.

AND FOR THE PSALMIST, KNOWING GOD'S COMPLETE AWARENESS, BECOMES FOR HIM SOMETHING TO EMBRACE RATHER THAN TRY TO FIGHT AGAINST.

THE PSALM INVITES US TO ALSO TRUST IN GOD, WHO IS NOT ONLY THE CREATOR AND RULER OF ALL, BUT GRACIOUS AND MERCIFUL AS WELL.

GOD'S GRACE AND MERCY, AND ESPECIALLY GOD'S LOVE IS MOST BEAUTIFULLY AND POWERFULLY REVEALED TO US IN JESUS HIS SON, OUR SAVIOR.

IT IS IN JESUS THAT GOD THE FATHER RENEWS HIS CALL TO HIS PEOPLE TO RETURN TO HIM.

AND IT IS ALSO IN JESUS THE FATHER CALLS ALL PEOPLE OF EVERY TRIBE, RACE, AND NATION TO HIMSELF.

IT IS A BLESSING THAT GOD, WHO SEES THROUGH ANY AND ALL MASKS WE MIGHT PUT ON, LOVES US NO MATTER WHAT HE SEES.

YET, THE LORD'S LOVE ALSO CALLS US INTO BECOMING WHO WE WERE CREATED TO BE, AND THIS BEGINS WITH A RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LORD.

THINK ABOUT IT, OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS IS A KEY PART OF WHO WE ARE AS HUMAN BEINGS.

YES, SCIENCE DOES TEACH THAT A LARGE PART OF WHO WE ARE AND CAN BECOME IS BASED ON OUR PHYSICAL MAKE UP- OUR GENES, DNA, ETC.

AND YET THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTS WE ARE BORN INTO, GROW UP IN, AND LIVE IN AS ADULTS, ALSO HELP SHAPE US.

THOSE, OF COURSE, MAY CHANGE. WE OFTEN ADJUST TO NEW OR DIFFERENT ENVIRONMENTS. AND WHO WE ARE, OR HOW WE PERCEIVE OURSELVES MAY CHANGE OVER TIME.

INDEED, OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER PEOPLE IN OUR FAMILY AND IN SOCIETY ARE AN IMPORTANT PART OF WHO WE WERE, ARE, AND MAY BECOME.

HOWEVER, NO RELATIONSHIP WE HAVE OR WILL HAVE IS MORE SIGNIFICANT THAN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, WHO KNOWS AND LOVES US.

IT IS GOD WHO GIVES US OUR ONLY TRUE AND LASTING IDENTITY, SO THAT WE ONLY CAN REALLY FIND OURSELVES IF WE FIRST FIND GOD.

THERE ARE OF COURSE, A LOT OF PEOPLE WHO DO NOT AGREE WITH THAT STATEMENT, BUT THE PSALMIST IS NOT ONE OF THEM.

HE REALIZED HIS IDENTITY IS FOUND IN THE FACT THE HE WAS FEARFULLY AND WONDERFULLY MADE BY GOD.

LET US PRAY: LORD, WE THANK YOU THAT WE ARE INDEED FEARFULLY AND WONDERFULLY MADE BY YOU. THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE OF EACH ONE OF US IS IN YOUR HANDS.

HELP US TO TRUST IN YOUR ABIDING PRESENCE, AND YOUR UNFAILING LOVE, SO WE MAY TO BE OPEN TO YOUR WILL FOR US. IN CHRIST'S NAME WE PRAY. AMEN

SERMON SUMMARY: PSALM 139:1-7 & 13-18

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