

“Formed by God”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18

Thursday evening, I took my seat at the Indiana Farmers Coliseum around 5:45pm. I was there for the 126th Commencement of Pike High School, of which Erin was a member of the graduating class. We got there early so we could get a good seat, as the graduation did not begin until 7:00pm. And this gave me time to think and reflect.

I thought of a long day in early November of 1999, when Erin took her own sweet time – over 24 hours – to finally enter into this world. I remembered her baptism at Williams Memorial Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, and a picture we have of her with four generations of women – her, Debbie, Debbie’s mother, and Debbie’s grandmother. I recalled Erin meeting her sister, Heather, for the first time, and not being totally sure who this new person was in her life. I remembered our move to Indianapolis when she was three years old, and her first day of kindergarten two years later. I recalled numerous homework projects, field trips, music lessons, cross country and softball, trips, and more homework! I remembered those who were not sitting with us Thursday night, yearning for their presence, but knowing they were with us in spirit. That hour and fifteen minutes provided a lot of time for recalling where we’ve been as a family over the last eighteen years.

As the ceremony began, my attention shifted from the past into the present. I looked out over this sea of red caps and gowns, and I was struck by several things. I saw a brilliant variety of skin colors, which reflects the great diversity of ethnicities and backgrounds within Pike Township. It confirmed for me the decision Debbie and I made fifteen years ago to live within Marion County, so that our girls would learn and grow in an environment where differences are embraced as strengths, not something to flee from as a weakness. I saw families and friends who were genuinely excited for their graduates, and who expressed that joy in real yet respectful ways.

And I saw young men and women who were given a plethora of opportunities to learn and grow in whatever ways fit them best. I will admit that early on, I was nervous about Erin and Heather attending a school as large as Pike or the other township schools here in Marion County. It was very different than my own experience, and I wasn’t sure if they would get lost in such a large school. But what I came to appreciate Thursday night was that a large school can offer a wide variety of opportunities for all students – including the high-achieving

academic who's heading off to college, the first-in-their-family college student, the student seeking an associate's degree, or the student who has been trained and is prepared to enter the workforce after graduation. I thought of all the teachers and administrators and aides and support staff who taught and nurtured these 700 students sitting on the floor of the coliseum, and I was grateful beyond measure.

And the words of the psalmist came into my mind. "O Lord, you have searched me and known me. For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (139:1,13-14). Each of these students, and each of the students in our schools in our community, were fearfully and wonderfully made by God our Creator. They were knit together in their mother's wombs, given life and a purpose which they have sought and tested and nurtured in their years of education. And now, as they celebrate this chapter of life, they are prepared to look ahead to a new chapter and adventure, one which God is already familiar with. "You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it" (139: 2-3, 6).

If you have a New Revised Standard Version of the bible, the editors have entitled Psalm 139, "The Inescapable God." That title does not come from the original Hebrew, but rather is their summary of this psalm's theme. That word - inescapable - has a negative connotation to it: it's impossible to flee from someone or something. It can cause us fear and anxiety to think we cannot be free from something. In this case, it might cause us to be afraid of God, since we cannot be free from God's sight.

But if we only look at faith through the lens of fear, then we are limiting our knowledge of God's truest self - which is love. We read that God hems us in, behind and before, and lays God's hand upon us (139:5). The psalmist declares that this inescapable knowledge of God is "too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it" (139:6). The fact that God knows us completely is to be welcomed and praised by us, for that means our God is our guardian and companion throughout our entire lives.

And in our modern world, where we believe human beings can do so many things themselves, the psalmist provides some proper perspective. It was God "who formed my inward parts; who knit me together in my mother's womb. My frame was not hidden from you, which I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth" (139: 13, 16). The whole act of procreation and childbirth is not an act of our human knowledge, or a technological feat - it is solely and completely an act of our creator God.

God is inescapable, and it's okay to have a little fear over that, since we know we are not our own. But since God is inescapable, we too are to be thankful, to take comfort and joy, and to return praise to the one whose knowledge is truly too wonderful for any of us to comprehend.

Some years ago, I read an article by Nancy Sullivan Geng in Reader's Digest. It was about a girl names Laurie, who was a student in the third grade. *She sat in the back row of her classroom, far removed from her teacher, Mrs. Lake. One day, at the end of term, Mrs. Lake announced that today was the day for parent conferences. On the chalkboard, she listed the names of the students and the times that their parents would be arriving for their appointments. Laurie's name was last, but that didn't matter to Laurie because she knew her parents would not be coming, anyway. Laurie's father was an alcoholic. Laurie went to sleep every night to the sound of slamming doors and pictures rattling on the wall.*

One by one on that long day, Laurie watched her classmates rise to meet their parents. She heard voices in the hall as they arrived. She saw many of the children receive hugs from their parents, and wondered how it felt. The time for her appointment drew closer and closer, and she felt closed in - not by someone who knew her well, but by fear, by failure, by not being good enough. Then it was her turn.

Mrs. Lake opened the office door and invited her in. Laurie took her seat quietly, and sat there staring at the floor. She was embarrassed. She was ashamed. She looked down at the linoleum floor, trying to pretend she didn't feel the way she did. But she could not hide from her feelings. Mrs. Lake opened Laurie's file, then looked up at her and smiled. "First of all," she said, "I want you to know how much I love you." Mrs. Lake went on to tell Laurie that it was not her fault that her parents were not there. And she told Laurie that she had a right to know how she was doing. She went over Laurie's file, and praised her efforts. She affirmed each one of Laurie's strengths. And she even had a stack of Laurie's water colors that she had felt worth keeping (Nancy Sullivan Geng, "Teardrops of Hope," *Reader's Digest*, September 1997, 75-77).

A pastor friend of mine goes on to say: "Laurie had met someone who knew all about her. Someone who watched her from afar, and yet knew all of her fears, all of her struggles, all of her failings, and yet also knew what she could do. That is the kind of knowledge that the psalmist prays about - the kind of knowledge so close, so intimate that only a creator could truly know it. It is the knowledge that frees us to be what God has planned for us to be, rather than the knowledge which contains and limits us" (Rev. George Pasley, "What God Sees in Us," Sermon on Psalm 139; Jeremiah 18: 1-11).

Because we have been formed by our living, loving God, we are freed to be what God has planned for us to be. Indeed, we read that, "in your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed" (139:16). This knowledge does not cause us to be

fatalistic or passive – it spurs us with gratitude and love to embrace God’s calling in our lives.

Emily, Spencer, Kelsey, Erin, Maddie, Evan, Sue – you have each been formed by God in love and grace – through your families, through your friends, through this church, through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The God of your ancestors has known you from before you were born, and has formed you for a life of service and faith. Embrace this moment and time as a gift from your Creator, using all that you have been given to show others the depth of God’s love for this world in Jesus Christ. And know you are never alone in this journey ahead, for just as you have been nurtured and loved in your past, so will you be nurtured and loved by the great cloud of witnesses all your life long.

May all of us hear again the affirmation of faith that the psalmist proclaims: “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I praise you, O God, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.