



YOUTH SUNDAY (AGES 13–17) (BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM) LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, October 6, 2013

Nicholas A. Pearce, Guest Lectionary Commentator
Assistant Pastor, Apostolic Church of God, Chicago, IL

Lection – Psalm 139:13-14 and Joshua 1:9 (New Revised Standard Version)

Psalm 139:13-14

(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.

Joshua 1:9

I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Youth Sunday worship services invite congregations to celebrate the hand of God upon their communities, churches, and families from generation to generation. These services are important

opportunities for churches to encourage young people and be encouraged by them, to celebrate their gifts and creativity, and to affirm them—not just as the “church of tomorrow,” but as an essential part of the church of today. Youth Sundays provide youth with significant opportunities to provide liturgical leadership and courageously express who they are in Christ.

While some African American congregations have historically conducted Youth Sunday services simply out of tradition and routine, many congregations now recognize these services as key opportunities to empower and engage young people in the midst of a world in which they must grapple with violence, incivility, and low expectations. These worship services can also cultivate authentic intergenerational fellowship by providing an opportunity for families and congregations to unite around and celebrate a common Christ-like identity, heritage of faith, and collective purpose. Beyond Sunday morning, these liturgical moments can challenge churches to refocus the agenda of their youth ministries from *doing ministry to/for youth* to *equipping youth to do the work of ministry for the glory of God*.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Psalm 139:13-14 and Joshua 1:9

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

I was blessed to grow up in a loving family and a loving church where being young, gifted, black, and saved were celebrated. I was not a perfect kid, but a loving God and a loving village instilled within me an unshakeable self-worth and humility before God. I was imprinted with a strong identity as a Spirit-led, African American achiever, which has helped me to interpret life’s situations and navigate life’s decisions, and gives me courage to bounce back after failure.

As I write this commentary, I look out the window of the inner-city church I serve into a community where youth are confronted with a choice between the upward call of a God they cannot see and the downward call into a life of crime from thugs they cannot avoid seeing. Youth Sunday is a time when God can use young people to minister to other young (and even some more mature) people, encouraging them to reject the more convenient downward call, and instead press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God, while enlisting others to do the same. It’s not easy, but it’s what adults must encourage and show youth how to do.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Psalm 139 is a sacred song attributed to King David of Israel and believed to have been written at the time when he was attacked, cursed, and accused of being responsible for the murder of his predecessor, King Saul, by Shimei, of the house of Saul (see 2 Samuel 16). While this psalm describes in soaring fashion the omnipotence, inescapability, and omniscience of God in relationship to the individual, it is essentially David’s passionate appeal to his God to defend him in the face of an attack against his character.

David opens the psalm by acknowledging that the Lord has examined him and has perfect knowledge of him—his thoughts, his words, his actions, and his path. On the basis of God’s perfect knowledge of and intimate involvement with him, David moves to point out that there is not a place where he can hide from the presence and divine influence of the living God.

From this foundation, emerge our initial verses of study, verses 13 and 14, where David identifies God as his Creator and the keeper of his soul. God's work in David's life was not a recent development—it extended back to the laboratory of his mother's womb. He tells God in the course of his prayer (v. 13) that it was God who formed his inward parts and knit him together in his mother's womb. In Hebrew understanding during David's time, one's inward parts were the residence of the soul—the abode of one's deepest emotions and secret yearnings. It follows then that God has not only fashioned David, but also made an important deposit in David. The implication is that God did not simply make a deposit in David and then leave His deposit to be guarded by another; rather, God is the intimately-involved owner and very-present custodian of David. Before anyone (even David, for that matter) knew David, God knew, covered, and cared for him as a valuable treasure. It is God who has made us and not we ourselves!

Before David could dislike himself, be discouraged or attacked, accused or cursed, God covered, validated, and affirmed him. His very identity was intentionally imprinted by the Almighty God; what he saw when he looked in the mirror was carefully knit together by the Lord. The psalmist summarily silences the audacity of people who suggest that God made them imperfectly and thus question God's thoughts and the work of His hands.

Humanity is a miraculous phenomenon and is not to be disregarded as pedestrian when God has so involved and invested Himself in its existence. Regardless of whatever violence or unrest may be occurring in the world around us, or whatever turmoil or distress may be brewing in one's heart, the reality that God intelligently and lovingly designs and sustains us as His treasured creations should arrest the agnostic and evoke a profound sense of praise to God from the souls of men and women and even youth.

This is the message our youth need to hear today and tomorrow: God is invested in you more than anyone. More than any gang, more than any interest you may have—God is invested in your well-being, your present, and your future.

In verse 14, David's reflections on God's greatness overflow into explicit praise. Because God made him, he is fearfully and wonderfully made. What an understatement! God fashions humankind exquisitely, with great attention to the most intricate details of the human anatomy that leave us awestricken should we even attempt to fully comprehend these details. That God is solely responsible for the innermost function of the human frame (not to mention the soul) is miraculous and praiseworthy. The psalmist declares that all of God's works are wonderful, and although they far transcend the finite human mind, his soul recognizes how amazing and praiseworthy they are. We need not go to the ends of the earth to experience the marvelous works of God; they abound within us. The fact that God shapes the identities of His children and charts their lives' courses provides the best defense against the onslaughts of a culture that seeks to strip away the Christian identity and character of the child of God. It follows then that God's formation of humanity is not simply corporeal—God is yet forming people into His image through the Holy Spirit for holy purposes.

So, for those who are only beginning to bud into their humanity, the fact that God is yet forming you says that God knows that there are days that will confuse and confound you. God knows that

the teenage years can be hell on earth. God knows that your view of the world is most often reflective of the opinions of your peers. And just as God knows these things, we pray that parents and churches know them too. Adults, never give up on a teenager. Instead, embrace them in all of their fickleness, their failures, and faults. Embrace them for they are our present, our future, and our responsibility. When we treat them as such, this goes a long way toward giving them the measure of self-esteem they need so that they will believe that any teenage hell they may endure, number one will pass, and number two, does not have to have to be the last word about who they will become. God is still forming them in his image.

This truth underlies our secondary text. In Joshua 1:9, God commands Joshua to be strong, courageous, unafraid, and undismayed as he prepares to lead the Israelites into Canaan, the land promised centuries ago to their forefather, Abraham. Although the land was promised, it had to be conquered in order to be possessed. Its possession required extraordinary reliance on the active presence of God to defeat their enemies, both external and internal. Before the milk and honey could be enjoyed, the Israelites had to defeat some natural enemies in the land. But before they could defeat those enemies, God first had to grant them victory over the spiritual enemy within—a self-defeating spirit (see Numbers 13).

Armed with the courage to obey the God who formed, commissioned, protected, and guided them, a new generation, led by Joshua, would be victorious and possess the promise of God. Before they could walk into the land, they first had to walk in the promise of God within. This final message is the other word that our young people need to hear today and tomorrow. Before you can walk into any victory, you must believe that you can. Adults, let's shower our youth with messages of the great victories that lie ahead of them as they walk with God.

Celebration

These texts teach us the power of teaching youth to walk in the power of their God-given identity in a world that calls them to sacrifice it at the altars of compromise and conformity. Even when you lose “the real you” and struggle with low self-worth, God can restore a sense of purpose to your life and put a praise in your soul. No matter how the enemy tries to distract you, you can gain the courage to live the life God created you to live. He is with you wherever you go—from the streets of Chicago to the halls of Harvard, from the boardroom to the courtroom, from the cradle to the grave! Marvelous are the works of His hands! Young people, God has made you and chosen you for greatness.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of the Psalm 139:13-14 passage include but are not limited to:

Sounds: (v. 13) The movement of a baby within the womb; the exclamation of a mother's pain in pregnancy; the voice of the mother speaking to the baby in the womb; (v. 14) shouts of praise; clapping of hands;

Sights: (v. 13) A pregnant mother; a developing fetus; the hand of God forming the baby; the Spirit of God within the womb silently conversing with the baby; the placenta covering the baby

in the womb; (v. 14) uplifted hands in praise; the creative hand of God; a smiling face reflecting on the marvelous works of God; and

Smells: The scent of pregnancy; burning incense.

The descriptive details of the Joshua 1:9 passage include but are not limited to:

Sounds: Silence; the voice of the Lord heard in the mind of Joshua; the silence punctuated by the wailing of people mourning the death of Moses;

Sights: Joshua lying down or sitting very still receiving the word of the Lord in a revealed vision or dream; and

Colors: The blackness of the night sky.

III. Other Material That Preachers and Others Can Use

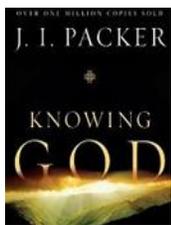
Books



Durso, Chris. Misfit. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011.



Harris, Alex and Brett Harris. Do Hard Things. Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2008.



Packer, J. I. Knowing God. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973.

Music

- “Happy” by Tasha Cobbs
- “Imagine Me” by Kirk Franklin
- “Not Forgotten” by Israel and New Breed
- “Speak into My Life” by Micah Stampley