

“Jesus Also”
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The reading from Psalm 139 didn't come up in the lectionary today. But I kept thinking about it in relation to the Luke passage about Christ's Baptism. Because the two passages seem to convey different visions of God.

Psalm 139 tells us that God searches and knows us in *this* very moment. God has known us in every moment we have already lived, and God will know us in every moment we will ever live. God is aware of our smallest physical actions—when we sit or rise up, God knows. Even the stuff of our most private thoughts is known to God. God ferrets out which paths we are heading down even as we think it may only be known to us. God knows everything about us—the good, the bad, and the ugly, as well as the bright and blessed. Not only that, we are surrounded by God, as the author of the Psalm says, we are *hemmed in* by God, who is behind us and ahead of us, and who is laying a hand upon us.

Now, I have to say that if this were not God we were talking about that I would be a little freaked out by these descriptions. Even though it is God, I find it pretty overwhelming on some level. This goes way beyond any sort of ordinary, mortal invasion of privacy. Can you imagine if they could get this much information about us in airports? Talk about full disclosure!

I think the Psalm's author is a little overwhelmed, too, although expressing this overwhelm quite gently when writing “Such knowledge is *too wonderful* for me; it is *so high* that I *cannot attain it*.”¹ I think that's a poetic way of saying that God's knowledge of us is kind of mind blowing. There is something incomprehensible about the scope and scale of it. It is beyond human ability to comprehend fully. God's ways are so far beyond our own that we will short circuit if we ponder them too long.

This Psalm suggests that there is a certain inevitable distance between God and God's creatures. After all, we cannot be everywhere at once like God can—places as vastly distant as the heights of heaven and the depths of the earthly pit known as Sheol. That's simply beyond what we human beings can accomplish. Our mortal limits keep us in the dark at night time and light in the day, even though to God “darkness is not dark,” and “the night is bright as the day.”²

¹ Psalm 139:6.

² Psalm 139:12.

It can be really easy to get overwhelmed by how different we are from God, and how far beyond us God can seem to be—especially when we hear about it through rhapsodic psalms or poetry; or built up and dragged out and underscored, point by point.

And yet, one very basic tenant of the Christian faith is that somehow the inconceivably vast distance between us and God has been bridged through the person of Jesus Christ. So, our questions today are these: why did a God who knows absolutely everything about us already decide to share in our humanity, and, perhaps more importantly: what does *God* get out of the Incarnation?

Luke's depiction of Christ's baptism is rightly noted as one of the few Biblical examples of the Trinity. Their distinct roles within the Trinity are defined in the unfolding of the text. Jesus is the human one, the Son of Man and the Son of God, just as God declares from the heavens. The Holy Spirit, swooping down in the form of a dove, brings the heavens and earth together, serving as the liaison between God and mortals. God remains remote—unseen and perceived in part, but not in full—much as today's Psalm implies about God.

Even though a Trinitarian understanding of God sets Christianity apart from Judaism, it employs ancient themes which are well known within Judaism. The title "Son of Man," or "mortal one," is a title given to some of God's prophets.³ The title "Son of God" was applied to Adam and others as an honorific title.⁴ Now, *depicting* God in human images occurs throughout Judaism. Even in the book of Genesis, God is depicted as walking, having limbs and behaving quite like a super-powered human. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, God is depicted as a warrior, a shepherd, and a King. Yet to say that God was *fully present* within one specific human was another matter entirely, and ultimately blasphemy to the Jews, as was calling someone the *begotten* Son of God. So there is clearly something new and different afoot in Jesus: a new interpretation of more ancient understandings, resulting in a distinct and a powerful connection between God and humanity.

God had already searched and known us in our full humanity: our every thought, our every action, and our every way. But now, Jesus returned the favor. Now, Jesus also searched and knew God. As a being who is completely human *and* completely divine according to Christian doctrine, the place of Christ within the godhead provides an invitation of humanity into the very core of God. In the perspective of the Trinity, God's infinity, and enormity, and complexity become open to humanity as fully as our humanity has always been open to God.

Now we may understand this mingling of humanity and divinity to have been a plan made in the earliest moments before the beginning of time, just as it is depicted in the poetry of the Gospel of

³ See Ezekiel 37:3 in the King James Version, for example.

⁴ Luke's genealogy 3:23-38, especially 3:38.

John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”⁵ Or we may understand it to have begun more humbly in the Baptism of Jesus. But it is a vitally important part of the Christian tradition however we understand it. Because within that mingling of God and humanity lies the key to our salvation.

You see, although we are but a week past the end of the Christmas season, the baby Jesus has grown fully. His ministry has begun in the waters of the Jordan, and soon he will be asking us to follow him: into his ministry, and into his full embrace of God. And the *way* in which Jesus embraces God which is most striking. Jesus could presumably make anything happen he wished. The miracles are little illustrations of this throughout the Bible. When he is arrested in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?”⁶ But he doesn’t, does he? He doesn’t unduly tap holy power. He doesn’t do anything the easy way. Instead, he does things the human way.

By all rights, Jesus could have cut right to the front of the line when he came to be baptized by John. In some of the versions of their encounter, the Baptizer questions whether Jesus shouldn’t baptize him instead.⁷ We might rightly wonder why Jesus needed to be Baptized at all. In Matthew he convinced John to Baptize him in order to fulfill righteousness. If you are going to ask it of others, you need to do it yourself. So, Jesus does it the human way: just like all the others who came to see John. He even appears to have gone last. The text reads: “Now when all the people were baptized, and when *Jesus also* had been baptized...”⁸ Jesus also...Far from exerting his authority or his special relationship with God, Jesus demonstrates humility. He apparently placed his own need after everyone else at his Baptism.

From the beginning of his ministry, Christ models humanity and humility as ways to be God-like. Jesus also brings to God a full humanity. The only way God could *truly* know us is to become one of us; to walk with all our limits and challenges, and all our propensities toward sin; to be subject to frailty, limitation and the potential for magnificently catastrophic failure. Only in the encounter of God and humanity found in Jesus could we really know God fully and God really know us. This is the essence of Christian salvation: to know and be known by God; to realize our potential to join Jesus as a child of God; and to humbly serve others. In opening up this connection between humans and God, Jesus completes the work of creation and brings Creator and creatures together—just as God intended in the first place.

⁵ John 1:1.

⁶ Matthew 26:53.

⁷ Matthew 3:14-15.

⁸ Luke 3:21

So, why did a God who knows absolutely everything about us already decide to share in our humanity? To know us not as *an other*, but as one of us: to complete God-with-us. What does God get out of the incarnation? A closer communion with beloved children, and the opportunity to invite us into God's self. For our part, we need to open ourselves to the confounding, mysterious and mind-blowing possibility of directly knowing God, and wrap our hearts around service to others. In this we will follow Jesus. In this we will be like God and Jesus also. May we commit to making this journey together. Amen.

Psalm 139: 1-14

1 O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.

3 You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

4 Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.

5 You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

7 Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?

8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

9 If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

10 even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,"

12 even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

13 For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Luke 3:21-22

21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 22 and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."