

Psalm 139:1-18
The Saints, the Poets, and the Moms
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Well, we are picking up where we left off before Lent in our series of messages called *Inspired: How the Story of Scripture Shapes Our Everyday Life*. The Bible is this grand narrative that speaks to us in these pages, offering us wisdom and hope. Not only is it God's story, but it's our story, too. Here we meet the God who uniquely forms and continues to reform and redeem human creation, God's crowning achievement.

How fitting that the Sunday when we come to the part of Scripture we call the Wisdom Literature, that it should fall on Mother's Day. Maybe this is God's wink.

The Wisdom Literature and Poetry of the Bible is composed of the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and Lamentations, that broad middle of your Bibles. If you were to set your Bible down on its spine and simply let it fall open, there's a good chance what it will open to is the Poetry of Scripture. It's no coincidence that the longest book in the entire Bible is the book of Psalms, because poetry is absolutely essential to us making it in this life. The journalist Erma Bombeck said, "There is a thin line that separates laughter and pain, comedy and tragedy, humor and hurt." Nothing captures this experience better than poetry.

Throughout the rest of the Scriptures what we read is that grand story of God's love offered, love rejected, and the measures God went to, through his Son Jesus, to restore that relationship with us, then (as we read last week) setting us loose to do the same for others. But right in the middle, God gives us this special gift of poetry and Wisdom Literature to help us deal with the very everyday challenges of living: of Daily Life (Proverbs), of Love and Marriage (Song of Solomon), of pain and struggle and longing (Job and Psalms), and of Death and Eternity (Ecclesiastes and Lamentations). Perhaps the reason there's so much poetry is because life itself is so varied and unpredictable. Moment by moment, our lives are changing and what the poetry of the Bible is there to do, I think, is help us savor each moment on earth more fully.

Thornton Wilder's beloved play *Our Town* centers on the town of Grover's Corner. It's a play in three acts. Act one: daily life, and in this act we meet the people of this town. Act two is called love and marriage, two of these kids have grown up and they're getting married, George and Emily. Act three: death and eternity, it opens at Emily's funeral, she has died in childbirth. On the stage are a few rows of chairs, people who have already died and are in the grave yard and a stage manager who is escorting Emily to her place in the graveyard. And it is at this point that the stage manager gives Emily an opportunity: you can have one day to relive. Everyone in the grave tries to dissuade her, but Emily doesn't listen and goes back to a fairly insignificant day, her 12th birthday party. After only a few minutes, she asks the stage manager to make it stop because it's just too hard. It goes too quickly, nobody's looking at one another, they're not really tasting what they're eating, they're not paying attention to what is happening, the full gravity and

weight of what it means to be alive in one seemingly ordinary day. And in one of the most famous monologues in American Theater, she turns and says goodbye for the last time to everything, finishing it by saying:

“O Earth you are too wonderful for anybody to realize you.” And turning to the stage manager she asks, “Do any human beings really realize life while they’re living it? Every, every minute?”

“No,” he replies. “The saints and the poets maybe, they do some.”

The saints and the poets, maybe they do, and to them, I would add moms. Moms, I think perhaps more than most, you embody and help us to understand what these books of the Bible are saying. You moms, for those quiet moments of observation, of mentally cataloging all those life experiences and then telling the story to us right when we need to hear it, for helping us to remain present in the here and now of life, we love you.

And so this morning as we place ourselves before God’s word and listen to its wisdom and poetry, I want to invite you to turn with me to Psalm 139, if you are following along in the red pew Bibles, it can be found on page 552 of the Old Testament. This morning I am going to read our text in three parts, and briefly comment on each part—particularly the ways in which God is revealed to us, and also the ways in which our moms embody similar characteristics.

O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue behold, O Lord, you know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it.

What is beautiful about these words is that God is not abstract, God is not just a philosophical concept. But God is real and personal. The author David is inviting us into an intimate and personal conversation with God. David, the Bible says, was a man after God’s own heart. Though he screwed up at times, his heart beat for God’s. David knew the intimacy of God, and knew that our lives were more than simply the time spent breathing, but that in our mothers and fathers, and theirs before them, are the fabric of what make us who we are. And it’s God who uniquely weaves these stories together in each of us.

David says of God, **you search me and know me, when I sit down and when I rise up you discern my thoughts from afar.** God shares a little of that insight with our moms, doesn’t he? Last Monday after putting the kids down in the evening, Amy went out with a few friends, while I stayed home with the kids. At about 10:15, Annie began to cry upstairs, and not 2 seconds later Amy walked in the door—mind you, I had not called or texted or anything. “Darling, you were across town, how in the world did you know to come home.” Amy said, “I just know when my babies need me.” Now I’m sure that there

are scientific studies that can argue for phenomena like this, but maybe the best way to understand things like this is through poetry. Somehow, God, you hem me in, behind and before and your hand is upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is too great for this feeble mind.

When we come to the inevitable moments in life that simply baffle our human understanding, I think these are the moments where God invites us into the poetry. Poetry gives us perspective.

Moving on to verse 7: **Where shall I go from your spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, "Surely darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.**

Where can we go apart from God? You know, in our lives, we have experiences that demand explanation. We see this everyday in the 24 hour news cycle, this is what happens. An event takes place and then immediately the experts step in and start analyzing. This is what happened, this is what should have happened, this is who is culpable. And you get into this loop of event followed by analysis; event, analysis, it becomes this insidious loop. This happens in our lives as well. What often happens when I get home from work is I analyze the day, and I realize I'm in the loop. But what if you and I, or what if the anchors of CNN or Fox News, instead of analyzing and going to the experts, what if they said, "Let's take a moment to pray, or grieve, or praise"?

This is what happened to Israel in their life with God. In the Old Testament, we have the law and we have the prophets. The law is given to the people to tell them how to live, then the prophets step in as the expert analysts to explain and correct. And this is the loop that the Israelites found themselves caught in. Action, reaction, action reaction. That is, until the poets step in inviting the people into worship, into praise, to look at the circumstances, to stop and give voice and lyric to praise, to pray. This space that we give also opens the way for Jesus to step in and give meaning to the meaningless. The law and the prophets are important, Jesus said neither one of them are going away. What the poets do and what Jesus does is step in and interrupt the loop, inviting us to praise.

Kate and David Ogg experienced this in a life changing way. Back in 2010, this young couple was pregnant with twins, when Kate began labor at 27 weeks. Tragically, during delivery, one of the twins died, and was born limp and lifeless. But in an expression of such profound love, Kate asked the doctor to place baby Jamie's lifeless body on her chest. He remained near to her, she and David celebrating and mourning this devastating reality, and after 5 minutes he twitched, in what looked like a gasp for air. It's just an involuntary reaction the doctor's said, don't get your hopes up. But over the next two hours little Jamie kept fighting and his parents remained with him cheering him on to life,

there skin to skin on his mother's chest. Until at last this little life that was written off by everyone but his parents finally opened his eyes.

The experts stepped in analyzing how in the world this boy could live. One Cornell Medical School researcher said: *"The warmth the mother provides and the stimulation that the baby may have received from hearing the mother's heartbeat, may have helped the baby in terms of going down the path to living as opposed to dying."* Call it Kangaroo Care, give it a medical category, those are all well and good, but one thing is for certain: something miraculous took place and it seems the only appropriate response is simply to praise. Kate and David Ogg went with Baby Jamie to the place where Psalm 139 says God goes. So that when little Jamie emerged from the grip of Sheol, all David and Kate could do was celebrate, give thanks, and in their own way offer praise to God.

Because they gave us life, only a mom could know the anguish of seeing a child struggle. That is where the poetry becomes a wellspring of living water; reason and explanation are simply incapable of capturing the fullness of those moments. When all you feel like doing is singing and dancing, or shouting and crying, theological treatises just won't do. Poetry invites us to behold and worship God in his mystery and wonder, and invites the living Christ to interrupt the loop of regular life.

Finally verses 13-18:

For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in the secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God, how vast are the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you

Is there anything better than to be truly known? To have someone who knows you better than you know yourself. To possess that inexpressible closeness that you cannot define or quantify. For me, it is when I return to my parents' home in Minnesota, come through the front door, put my bags on the floor, lie down on the couch, and immediately be transported back to when I was 15 years old. Mom, no matter how old I am, whenever I'm with you, I'm always your baby. There is nothing that can capture, define, or explain this better than letting the poetic words of Scripture wash over us and interrupt the loop.

Only when we immerse ourselves in the poetry of the Scriptures can we understand that it's God who is inviting us into that warm, all encompassing embrace—the type we experienced from our moms. So this year, families, let's embrace our moms or the memory of our moms all the more, and adorn her with the jewels befitting the queen she is, and let's interrupt the loop. Then join in praise together to the God who loved the world so much that he sent his one and only Son, and then for good measure—because God is just that good—he gave us moms, too.