

“Awakening to God’s Purpose”

Psalm 139: 1-18

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A small-town prosecuting attorney called his first witness to the stand in a trial, a grandmotherly, elderly woman. He approached her and asked, “Mrs. Jones, do you know me?” She responded:

“Why, yes, I do know you, Mr. Williams. I’ve known you since you were a young boy. And frankly, you’ve been a big disappointment to me. You lie, you cheat, and you manipulate people and talk about them behind their backs. You think you’re a big shot, but you don’t have the brains to realize you never will amount to anything. Yes, I know you.”

The lawyer was stunned. Not knowing what else to do he pointed across the room and asked, “Mrs. Jones, do you know the defense attorney?” She again replied:

“Why, yes I do, I’ve known Mr. Bradley since he was a youngster also. I used to baby-sit for him. And he, too, has been a real disappointment to me. He’s lazy, bigoted, and he has a drinking problem. The man can’t build a normal relationship with anyone and his law practice is one of the shoddiest in the entire state. Yes, I know him.”

At this point, the judge rapped the courtroom to silence and called both counselors to the bench. In a very quiet voice, he said,

“If either of you asks her if she knows me, you’ll be jailed for contempt!”

In the 139th Psalm, David warmly praises the Lord, before whom he stands in awe. He also expresses the close personal relationship he feels with the Lord. He is astounded by how thoroughly and intimately the Lord knows him.

God’s “knowing” David is prominent in the psalm; the Hebrew verb “to know” has a rich range of meanings – to have intimate knowledge of, to take care of, to understand, and to experience.

The 139th Psalm has a particular meaning to me because it was one of the scriptural text’s that the Rev. Dr. Coleman Brown used in his “charge” to me at my service of ordination in February of 1969, almost 48 years ago.

Coleman Brown was a special person to me. While I was a student at McCormick Seminary, Coleman was the pastor at the Olivet Presbyterian Church on Chicago's near north side in the Cabrini Green neighborhood. In the summer of 1966 and throughout the following school year Coleman served as my field work supervisor at Olivet.

That summer was such a meaningful and memorable time in my life. On Sunday, July 10, 1966, over 50 years ago, along with Rev. Coleman Brown and members of the Olivet Presbyterian Church, I attended the rally at Chicago's Soldier Field to hear Dr. Martin Luther King speak. After the rally ended we all marched with Dr. King from Soldier Field to City Hall where Dr. King presented his demands for "Open Housing" to the city of Chicago.

In the weeks after that rally I attended other rallies and one Sunday I marched with Dr. King for "open housing" in Chicago's Belmont Craigen neighborhood.

Throughout the remainder of my seminary years until I finished my course work at McCormick in 1968, Coleman was my primary mentor and he remained a life long dear friend. Coleman went on to serve for 30 years at Colgate University as a Professor of Religion, and for a time served as the Chaplain and Dean of Students. He retired in 1999 and sadly he died two years ago.

On the occasion of my 60th birthday, Colman sent me a hand written copy of the sermon he preached at my ordination service. It was a wonderful gift then and it continues to be an even greater gift to me now. You see, I didn't remember any of his words. I of course remember that he was there; and that he preached and delivered the "charge" to me; his words and his presence meant so much to me, but what he specifically said, I really didn't remember.

Coleman read parts of the 139th Psalm:

*"All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."*¹

Then Coleman said:

¹ Psalm 139:16

“Today I am charging you, Don, to make these words of the psalmist’s your own words. Your days are already held, already written; they’re already programmed. Your job is not to decide what you will do and be. Don’t fight to hold on to an anxiety that God in His love seeks to take from your heart. That isolated, autonomous self responsible for deciding – ‘what you want to be when you grow up,’ that autonomous self has died. Your life is hid with Christ in God.

Your job is not to decide, but to discover. To discover; that’s what the 139th Psalm says to you; your job is not to decide your life, but to discover it; and how do you discover it? By doing, Don; hear God’s word and do it. **“You will discover your life by doing it.”**²

To hear those words again, “again for the first time,” was a great awakening for me. To reflect back on my life, then and now – the many years that I’ve spent trying to decide “what I wanted to be when I grew up,” and to realize that my whole life has been a part of God’s plan, part of a discovery process. That revelation is in itself a discovery, an awaking to my purpose.

I have been doing it, that is... discovering God’s will and purpose for my life, doing it by the living out of my days realizing that it is God who is in charge and not me.

*“All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”*³

Several weeks ago here in church, we renewed our Baptismal vows, we remember and re-affirmed our own baptism. We realized once again that we have been claimed, been marked as God’s very own, now and forever more. Marked for what? Marked for service.

This past Sunday Pastor Dave in his sermon encouraged us to give over our lives to Christ, to not only hear Christ’s call, but also to answer that call by following him wherever he leads us. We discover our life by doing just that.

This past Monday our country celebrated the life and legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. In the course of his life, he walked “through many dangers, toils and

² Rev. Dr. Coleman Brown, Charged to the Pastor, Ordination and Installation Service for the Rev. Don Dempsey, Feb. 16, 1969, at the Old First Presbyterian Church, Huntington, NY

³ Psalm 139: 1

snare,” but through it all he knew that God was walking with him. The Lord was his divine companion giving him the strength and the courage to face any and all the difficulties that came his way.

He had the very same faith as the writer of Psalm 139:

“You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is too lofty for me to attain”⁴

Although life is fragile and full of danger, we can draw comfort from the knowledge that God is with us, in all that we do. In the midst of both internal and external tension, God gives us an inner peace, and that peace gives us courage and confidence, inspiration and insight, serenity and strength.

Most of all, the peace of God frees us to do God’s will.

This is important, because peace doesn’t necessarily protect us from pain and suffering; it doesn’t shield us from the hardship that comes from taking bold stands for the Lord in a world that so often resists God’s reign.

Martin Luther King Jr. died by an assassin’s bullet on April 4, 1968, one day after his well-known “I’ve been to the mountain top” sermon at a rally in Memphis.

God’s peace didn’t give Martin Luther King a long life, but God’s peace was *“life long.”*

God’s peace never failed him. God’s peace enabled him to say to the Lord, as does the 139th Psalm: “I come to the end - I am still with you”⁵

And it made all the difference in his work for racial peace and justice.

- If Martin Luther King had not felt God’s peace, he would not have been able to organize the Montgomery bus boycott.
- If he had not felt God’s inspiration and insight, he would not have been able to give his “I Have a Dream” speech in Washington D.C. in August of 1963.

⁴ Psalm 139: 5-6

⁵ Psalm 139: 18

- If he had not felt God’s courage and confidence, he would not have been able to launch the major voter registration drive the “Crusade for Citizenship.”
- If he had not felt God’s courage and confidence, he would not have been able to defy death threats, march in Chicago’s Marquette Park as bricks were thrown at him, speak out against the Vietnam War, and stand with the Memphis sanitation workers.

The Lord’s peace always frees us ... frees us to do God’s will. It awakens us to God’s purpose. It also frees us to die for what we believe in. Dr. King knew this all too well as he preached on the night before his own death.

“Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind.

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountaintop. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!

And so I'm happy, tonight.

I'm not worried about anything.

I'm not fearing any man!

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!”⁶

As we awakening to our purpose – we realize we are marked as God’s very own, “we are searched and we are known.” How precious those thoughts are, “we are known.”

- We are God’s special people who are called to be together in this time and place;
- We are not called to decide who we are;
- We are already claimed;

⁶ Delivered on April 3, 1968, Mason Temple (Church of God in Christ Headquarters), Memphis, TN

- We are called to discover – to discover **A-NEW** our meaning and purpose; and
- We are called to that discovery process together.

This is such a crucial time in the life of this congregation, it's a time of awakening, it's a time to begin anew the discovery process, a time to explore and to follow God's leading, as you claim your high calling as God's people. Awakening to your purpose is **HERE** and **NOW** – it is **NOT** something you need to decide, **IT IS** something you need to do, **IT IS** something you need to discover, and do it together in **UNITY**.

Listen to these words from Dr. King:

“If you want to be important, **wonderful**,

If you want to be recognized, **wonderful**,

If you want to be great, **wonderful**,

But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be a **servant**.

That's a new definition of **greatness** and what I like about it is that by giving that definition of **greatness** it means that **everybody** can be **great**, because everybody can **serve**.

- You don't have to have a college degree to **serve**.
- You don't have to have to make your subject and your verb agree to **serve**.
- You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to **serve**.
- You don't have to know Einstein's "Theory of Relativity" to **serve**.

You only need a **heart** full of **grace** and a **soul** generated by **love**, and **you** can be that **servant**.⁷

God does not free us from troubles and toils; God doesn't free us from our struggles and pain. God knows that we're bound to hit potholes, even sink holes, along the road to the Promised Land, and that we'll need God's presence and power to stay on the right path as we seek to discover what God has in mind for us and for His church.

⁷ Excerpt from a sermon by Dr. King, "The Drum Major Instinct" Feb 4, 1968

Like Martin Luther King Jr., we are never going to be free from adversity, from walking “through many dangers, toils and snares.” But we are always free to serve God in every time, every place, and in every situation. As we continue to discover our own individual purpose and God’s purpose for us as God’s community of faith;

May our freedom be used to do the will of the one who is our King, Jesus, the Christ, in whose name we live, and move, and have our being.

Can I get an Amen?