

Rev. Dr. Benjamin J. Broadbent
The Community Church of Sebastopol - United Church of Christ
2nd Sunday after Epiphany – January 17, 2021

I. Invocation

At two different moments in my life, two women told me exactly what I needed to hear.

The first was my grandmother, Evelyn.

I stayed with my grandparents overnight when I was interviewing for my first ministry position.

When I left their house that morning on my way to the interview, my grandfather gave me some important advice that I've since forgotten.

But I remember what my grandmother said next: "Be yourself, dear."

The other moment happened a few years ago when I was in my doctoral program, in a course on African American Preaching.

One of the participants in the class, Pastor Stacey, who serves a large, primarily African American congregation in Chicago, must have sensed that I was trying too hard on one my preaching assignments.

During the feedback session, she looked at me and said, "Be Who You Be."

Be yourself. Be who you be. Those two moments were simple yet profound.

I submit to you that the whole human project is a journey to be who we be, to find our purpose, to understand what it means to be human, and to live into that understanding.

In this morning's scripture, the psalmist's prayer is the beginning of an answer to the question of what it means to be human.

"O Lord, you've searched me and known me."

Those 9 words in English translate only three in Hebrew:

Yahweh. Kah-kar-TAni. Wah-TEH-dah.

Living One. You searched me. You've known me.

According to these 3 words, humans are ones who have been searched and known by the living one who brought all things into being and into relationship.

What does it mean to be "searched and known" by the Living God?

When we search ourselves, do we discover what God has searched and found?

Is it possible that we are not who we think we are?

Is it possible that we are far more in God's eyes than we are in our own?

II. Confession

On this weekend commemorating the life and prophetic ministry of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we might recall what it was that brought Dr. King to Memphis on the day before he was assassinated in 1968.

He was there to support the Memphis Movement, a movement of sanitation workers, fueled by the deaths of two of their own who had been crushed in the back of a trash truck where they had sought shelter from a storm.

In an essay by Raphael Warnock, I learned that "They were there because black sanitation workers were prohibited from riding in the truck with white workers."ⁱ

This tragedy sparked a response by local black churches and the now historic and iconic signs reading "I Am A Man."

Simple and profound words.

Words that echoed Sojourner Truth's prophetic and exasperated question in 1851, "Ain't I A Woman?"

We live in a culture where it has been necessary for some humans to state to other humans what is obvious to God, that "I am a man," that "I am a woman too," that I am human, that "black lives matter."

Here we are, living in just such a culture and at just such a time.

Who are we humans and what is our purpose?

This is the question Marilynne Robinson asks in her essay, "What are we doing here?"

Here short answer is "beauty." We're here to seek out and to find and to create and to share beauty.

"The beautiful persists," she writes, "and so do eloquence and depth of thought, and they belong to all of us because they are the most pregnant evidence we can have of what is possible in us."ⁱⁱ

Beauty in our shared humanity. Simple. Profound.

Scientist, teacher, and citizen of the Potawatomi Nation, Robin Wall Kimmerer, answers the question of human purpose from an indigenous perspective.

As people who receive every gift for our survival from the earth itself, Kimmerer says, the unique gift humans have to give is gratitude.

In her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer writes, "Imagine raising children in a culture in which gratitude is the first priority..."

When we do this, every day, [gratitude] leads us to an outlook of contentment and respect for all of Creation."ⁱⁱⁱ

Beauty. Gratitude. Simple. Profound.

III. Assurance

The writer of Psalm 139 begins with an awestruck statement: "O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

In these verses God is revealed to be one who searches and knows.

This view reflected an ancient understanding of God as one who is all-knowing, who examines all the contours of human life, from our daily routines to the contents of our hearts and the thoughts in our heads.

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

This is not the personal, interior God, but the majestic God of all creation who nonetheless cares to know the inner and outer workings of every aspect of the beloved creation.

God, in this psalm, even travels into death with us, a comfort in this time of pandemic death at a scale scarcely imaginable.

"If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, the depths of the earth, you are there."

And this verse I love as a vision of death, "If I take the wings of morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast."

The God of this psalm is a God that pursues the psalmist, and by extension, pursues every human being to the farthest limits of existence.

To know a God who knows us this intimately is to know that you are loved.

It is to know that God knows your flaws and imperfections and loves you because of and in spite of them.

It is to know that you were made to be a blessing to others.

It is to know that God knows you more fully than you know yourself, which means there is always more to you that God is intending to reveal.

It is to know that being known by God is enough to make us human, and that every human is a mystery worthy of dignity, equality, and respect.

Later, in the person of Jesus, we get to know more about the God who first knew us.

In Jesus, we find out that God so loves the world that God will pour out the fullness of God's life on behalf of all creation, beginning with the last and the least, bringing down the mighty from their thrones, revealing the idolatry of the privileged, and restoring fullness of life to all who would seek God's kingdom first.

IV. Resolve

There will be an inauguration this week.

Inauguration suggests a new beginning.

That this inauguration is being held under the twin storm clouds of pandemic isolation and the threat of white supremacist violence should sharpen our question: What is the purpose of being human?

I would suggest to you that each one of us are in the position of Queen Esther this week, pondering the words Mordecai directed to her, that she has been placed here “for such a time as this.”

As we enter this week of inauguration, let us claim our human purpose:

To be fully human.

To be who we be.

To be purveyors of beauty.

To be givers of gratitude.

To be searched and known by God, and to seek to know others whom God so loves.

This inaugural week, being who we be, let us catch the spirit of these words by UCC pastor Otis Moss III:^{iv}

May we make America – America as a quilt to warm the bodies of the homeless and timid.

May we make America, where those who kneel and those who stand find a seat at the table of democracy.

*May we make America, where liberty covers the Muslim and the Methodist,
the Baptist and the Buddhist,
the Hindu and the Holiness,
the Jewish and the gentile,
the atheist and the Asian,
the Indigenous and the immigrant,
the Presbyterian and the Pentecostal,
the Latino and the Lutheran,
the queer and the Quaker,
the urban and the suburban,
the rural and the Reformed,
the southern and the Sikh,
the wealthy and the impoverished.*

Carrying it forward, may this vision of our common bond and the beauty of our differences, become our purpose here and now, and wherever we go, even if we “take the wings of morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea. Amen.

ⁱ Raphael Warnock, “Let My People Go: The Scandal of Mass Incarceration in the Land of the Free,” Harvard Divinity Journal (Autumn/Winter 2020), p.23.

ⁱⁱ Marilynne Robinson, “What Are We Doing Here? Essays,” (2018), p. 33.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robin Wall Kimmerer, “Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants,” (2013), p. 111.

^{iv} Otis Moss III, “May We Make America,” Sojourners (January 2021), p. 29.