

# **In the Image of God**

**Scripture: Psalm 139:13-16; Psalm 51:3-6**

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**November 14, 2010  
Morning Service**

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People of God: In the position of a pastor, I end up doing a wide variety of activities, from the excitement of going zip-lining with the youth to the endurance required in sitting through a full day and a half of Classis meeting. But it's in my pastoral work that I can be confronted with extremely different situations in a very short period of time and in almost the same space. That, at least, was the case, two weeks ago, on a Tuesday, when making visits in the hospital.

On the one hand, I was visiting again Catharine. At that time, her condition was very poor. The family was quite concerned about whether she would make it or not. It was that serious. Death was threatening.

But then I could walk just down the hallway and visit with Sharon and her newborn baby, Savanna. Everything had gone extremely well in delivery. The family was very happy. And I could hold another newborn child, giving thanks to the Lord for this new life.

In a very short period of time, in almost the very same space, two very different visits. Two very different pictures of humanity. The one reveals the brokenness of life, the other the newness of life. The one the frailty of life, the other the hope of life. And yet despite these two very different situations, they both reflect the nature of life on this earth. In both places, God was present. In both places, God was needed.

In our two Scripture readings from the Psalms, we also get two very different pictures of humanity. The one is very positive about our creation; the other is very negative about the human condition. They seem to at odds with each other. But they aren't. Instead, they need to complement each other. If you only focus on one, at the expense of the other, then you will get a distorted picture of humanity. Both are true, even if they seem to give opposite messages.

On the one hand, Psalm 139 speaks so eloquently and positively about our birth. The psalmist seems his formation in his mother's womb as an act of God:

For you created my inmost being, you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

What a positive description of our birth. It's a passage of Scripture that is very appropriate to read at the birth of a child.

Just look at Savanna. So small and so dependent upon others, and yet a bundle of love. So wonderfully made. To me, it's the fingernails that are that little detail that impresses me. Perhaps it's because I have the bad habit of biting my fingernails. But a newborns' fingernails are so nicely etched and molded. Just one small detail, but a marvel.

On the other hand, we have the words of Psalm 51. It's a Psalm of confession. It's the confession of David, who committed adultery, and after his cover-up failed, he got the husband killed. That made David a murderer. And in this Psalm he makes his confession. And when he does, he exposes his sinful nature, a sinful nature that was in him from the time of his birth:

Surely, I was sinful at birth,  
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

It's a very stark and dismal portrayal of humanity. It's not just that humanity is capable of adultery and murder, is that we're wired that way from the very start, from our very conception.

This verse won't be used, too often, if at all, at the occasion of the birth of a newborn. What a downer it would be, to read this verse, while celebrating life. We don't want to look down at Savanna and to think that she is capable of being an adulterer or a murderer. And yet when we consider Jesus' words, that who ever lusts commits adultery, and whoever says "stupid" to her brother has become a murderer, then we realize that indeed if she is like any other child, she will be an adulterer and a murderer. And that's not a very pleasant picture to consider.

And so, we have two very different portrayals of humanity—of being fearfully and wonderfully made by God and yet being sinful from the time of our conception—and these pictures are at birth. It's not as if we begin all innocent and pure and then become corrupted and sinful in time. And so, you wonder, how can both be true? How can both the words of Psalm 139 and Psalm 51 describe the same person?

It's because we have all been created in the image of God—fearfully and wonderfully made. But that image has been broken and stained by the fall into sin—so that, we are sinful from the time of conception. But God has

not allowed us to remain in our broken, sinful condition, but in Jesus Christ is restoring us to become the image bearer he intended for us all along.

This is the basic gospel message. This is what is taught through baptism. And so, let's unpack this a little more.

We have been created in the image of God. While the words of Psalm 139, being "fearfully and wonderfully made", are not the same words of Genesis One, they do reflect those words where God said:

Let us make man in our image, in our likeness... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.

This the fundamental starting point in considering who we are as human beings. We are created in the image of God.

This is what distinguishes us from the rest of the world. This is what makes humanity unique. We are NOT just another animal, one that just happened to have evolved from other creatures. No, we are a special creation of God.

But what does it mean to image God? It's not just a something extra, like frosting added to a cake or gravy poured on the potatoes. No, this is the core of who we are. But what does that mean?

Maybe I should ask my Grade 9/10 catechism class, since we just dealt with that topic last week. Basically, being created in the image of God reveals something about relationship and role. Relationship. We are created to be in relationship with God, reflecting his virtues of holiness and righteousness, as well as in relationship with each other, reflecting again these godly virtues. Role. God gave us the task of being stewards of his creation, having dominion over the works of God's hand.

Obviously, much more can be said, but being created in the image of God means being in relationship with God and others, as well as ruling the creation as God's vice-regents. As a result, we can say, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

But sadly, the fall into sin has broken and distorted this image of God. It has affected humanity's relationship with God, so that Adam and Eve hid when they heard God coming to meet them. Ever since, humanity seeks to flee away from God. This broken relationship with God affects our relationships with others. It means we don't fully reflect the godly virtues of righteousness and holiness, but instead the vices of sin come in, like lust and hatred.

Because the image of God has been broken and twisted, humanity tends to rule over God's creation in such a way that we can cause damage to

the environment—from oil spills in the Gulf of Mexico to toxic sludge that reached the River Danube.

Because of the fall into sin, the second question asked to parents in the form for baptism speaks about being “sinful by nature.” It reflects the words of Psalm 51: “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”

But how bad is it? Well, we all retain the image of God. However, distorted and twisted it may become, no matter the great acts of evil a person might commit, every single human being retains being created in the image of God. Even a Russell Williams. There is still a glimmer, a spark of the divine image, in even the vilest person. We all retain being created in the image of God.

But still the damage has been done. Our relationship with God has been severed. Our role in the creation has been abused. And we can't fix the problem. We can't repair the damage. We can't restore our relationship with God. We can't simply rule the creation, with godly virtues, by our own effort.

We need a complete makeover. An extreme makeover. Or to use, a biblical phrase to describe what is needed: We need to be born from above. God needs to be at work in our lives, restoring and repairing the damage caused by the fall into sin.

And thankfully, that is what God is doing in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, we can be the image bearers that God intended us to be. In Jesus, we can have a right relationship with God, developing the godly virtues of righteousness and holiness. In Jesus, we can develop healthy relationships within marriages, families, friends, workplaces, reflecting in those relationships the fruit of the Spirit. In Jesus, we can bring peace and justice to the brokenness of the world, developing the creation, in ways that are sustainable, enjoying the wonders of the creation, as well experiencing the beauty of the earth.

And so, Paul writes in II Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.” Or as Paul writes in Ephesians 6:24, in Jesus we are “to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”

In Jesus, then, God is restoring us to be his image bearers. That means that even if we find ourselves on our deathbed, when our bodies and even our minds fail us, we still retain the image of God. And in Jesus, God still cares for us, having provided an answer to death. Death the ultimate breaker of God's image. But because of Jesus' death and resurrection, those who are followers of Jesus, even death will be overcome. And in the renewed

creation, we will fully reign with Jesus, in perfect harmony with God, each other and each other.

And all of this, being created in the image of God, an image broken by sin, but restored in Jesus Christ, is symbolized in baptism. Baptism reminds us that God still loves us and claims us as his own child. But baptism also reminds of the need of salvation, needing our sins washed away by the blood of Jesus.

And so, both are true. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. Surely, I was sinful at birth. But thanks to be God that because of Jesus Christ, the former statement will win out over the last statement. As we are restored, repaired and renewed in Jesus Christ. Amen.