

# November 29

## Lesson 13

## Created, Loved, Known

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**Focal Passage:** Genesis 1:27; Psalm 139:13-18

**Background Text:** Same

**Purpose Statement:** To respond in awe and gratitude to the powerful God who created us and the loving God who knows us

### Genesis 1:27

God created humanity in God's own image,  
in the divine image God created them,  
male and female God created them.

### Psalm 139:13-18

<sup>13</sup>You are the one who created my innermost parts;  
you knit me together while I was still in my mother's womb.

<sup>14</sup>I give thanks to you that I was marvelously set apart.  
Your works are wonderful--I know that very well.

<sup>15</sup>My bones weren't hidden from you  
when I was being put together in a secret place,  
when I was being woven together in the deep parts of the earth.

<sup>16</sup>Your eyes saw my embryo,  
and on your scroll every day was written that was being formed for me,  
before any one of them had yet happened.

<sup>17</sup>God, your plans are incomprehensible to me!  
Their total number is countless!

<sup>18</sup>If I tried to count them--they outnumber grains of sand!  
If I came to the very end--I'd still be with you.

**Key Verses:** "You are the one who created my innermost parts; you knit me together while I was still in my mother's womb. I give thanks to you that I was marvelously set

apart. Your works are wonderful--I know that very well" (Psalm 139:13-14).

Some time ago at a retreat for pastors, the leaders instructed us to find a partner. The person sitting next to me and I chose each other as partners. That was easier than getting up to go find someone else. We didn't know why the leaders wanted us to partner up. They then instructed us to look into each other's eyes for about ten minutes. We switched roles, so that each of us had the opportunity to be the one looking and the one being seen. All of us in the room felt quite surprised by these instructions.

At the end of the exercise, the leaders asked us to share how we felt about the experience. We all had to admit that it broke new ground to look into another person's eyes, even for a few minutes. Then the leaders asked us to summarize the experience with one word. My partner chose the word *holy*.

You'll have to trust me on this one, but it wasn't my character that led my partner to declare the experience holy. Rather, breaking down the barriers and examining the "windows to the soul" of another person seemed holy. We keep one another at a distance most of the time. We find it difficult to let other people in. The exercise broke down the defenses we put up. That experience of vulnerability led my partner to feel a sense of holiness.

Be honest. What happens when parents bring a new baby into the church for the first time? A crowd surrounds the child, with competition (mostly from women) to hold her or him. As one comedian used to say, "If it's a boy baby, you almost want to warn him, 'Enjoy it now because in a few years, you'll get nothing.'" The cuteness, innocence, vulnerability, and uncomplicatedness of babies may be much of the attraction. We know that babies who do not feel cuddling or hugs don't develop correctly.

In Psalm 139, the poet marvels at God's intimate concern for him at the time when he was just forming in the womb. The psalm begins and ends with the idea of God knowing the psalmist. At the first, the psalmist acknowledges how thoroughly God knew him.

At the end, the psalmist invites God to examine him for the purpose of his personal and spiritual growth. Within the psalm itself and in the combination of the psalm with the text from Genesis, we can reflect on God's transcendence and nearness.

These two concepts are especially important as we enter Advent, the time during which we wait expectantly and hopefully for the transcendent, "holy other" God to come close to us in the person of Jesus. This lesson and those in December lead us to think about the relationship God wants to

have with us and how God's sending Jesus makes that relationship possible.

## God's Transcendence

The Bible consistently affirms God's power, holiness, and glory. These qualities place God above the creation, separate from the creation. This is what we mean by the term *transcendence*. The Creation story in Genesis 1 emphasizes God's effortless way of willing the creation into being. When God spoke in the Creation narrative, what was said, happened. God appears in this passage as above the fray. Nothing can resist the divine will.

The transcendent God dwells among the heavenly council, other beings who occupy the celestial realm. In a conversation, God decided to create humanity in "our image" (Genesis 1:26). Genesis does not tell us about these celestial beings who dwell alongside God. This image adds to the sense of God's distance from the creation. God lives in another realm.

The verse about God creating humanity in the divine image has generated much commentary and reflection. Some commentary has suggested that this image refers to a role that humanity plays in creation. Humanity represents God. Other commentary has suggested that the image refers to an inherent characteristic of humanity.

Biblical scholar W. Sibley Towner offered the following interpretation of the language about the image of God: "Perhaps the Priestly writers had in mind the practice of ancient kings of placing statues of themselves in every corner of their dominions. God, the King of kings, has statues representing the divine self in every corner of the world, but unlike the immobile marbles of the kings, God's statues walk and talk."<sup>1</sup> This interpretation includes the idea of God's transcendence, identifying God as a ruler, and the human responsibility to represent God and divine attributes throughout the earth.

***What does it mean for you to represent God and God's attributes to the rest of the world? In what situations does it help you to think about God's transcendence? In what ways do you need to understand God as strong, powerful, beyond us?***

## God's Presence

The Bible consistently balances the idea of God's distance, God's power beyond our comprehension, with the idea that God chooses to love us, to remain in relationship with us, to remain present within the creation. Even in the Genesis passage, God communicates directly with humanity (Genesis 1:28).

The Creation story in Genesis 2-3 emphasizes God's presence. The Lord God walked in the garden, enjoying the "cool evening breeze" (Genesis 3:8). God remains, in one sense, above the fray; but in another sense, God remains among us.

The poet of Psalm 139 celebrated God's care and concern for one person. In verses 2-12, the poet wrote of how God could follow him wherever he went. He could not escape from God to a far corner of the creation. Even in Sheol (a place of darkness; the place of the dead), God could find the poet.

In verses 13-18, the poet celebrated God's care and attention to him when he could not move, when he gestated in his mother's womb. Even when he was most vulnerable, unable to respond, God loved him.

Not only did God care for the psalmist as an embryo, God took an active part in forming the tiny fetus. In what most likely is a feminine image in verse 13, God created the poet as one knits (or weaves) a garment.

The term translated as "innermost parts" actually refers to the kidneys. In Old Testament thought, the kidneys did more than filter blood. The ancients considered the kidneys the location of thought and emotion, much as we think of the heart doing more than pumping blood. In Psalm 16:7, the term for "kidneys" is translated "the depths of my mind." The poet of Psalm 139 rejoiced that God had given him the capacity to think and feel.

The poet seems to have found it remarkable that God noticed even his bones (verse 15) and that God would remain with him until "the end" (verse 18; an ambiguous term). The psalmist considered God's presence and participation in his gestation as a wonderful and mysterious thing.

Just as church members flock to a baby brought to church, so God took delight in the poet as a fetus, even before he was cute. As a fetus, the poet was helpless, full of potential. The poet celebrated God's closeness and involvement in "knitting" him in the womb but recognized that he could not comprehend God's thoughts (the NRSV translation of the CEB's "plans" in verse 17). God was present with him, but so far beyond him that the poet could not understand God.

A balanced understanding of God recognizes divine transcendence (being above us) and divine presence (being with us and for us). If God were not transcendent, God would lack the power to combat evil. If God were not close to us and present with us, God would not care about us. We could not approach God in prayer and find comfort in God's love.

***In what situations does it help you to think about God's closeness and nearness? In what ways do you need to understand God as caring, present, loving?***

***How does it help you to think of God taking delight in people (including you)? In what ways does it help you understand God's forgiving love to realize that God knows us thoroughly?***

## Worship That Heals

This lesson serves as a transition between our focus on worship and a focus in upcoming lessons on how Jesus' coming makes possible our relationship with God. The goal of this lesson, which celebrates God's power and love, helps us reflect on worship. God's love and power provide the impetus for worship, enable us to worship, and protect our worship. The sense of wonder that the psalmist expressed undergirds all three aspects of worship.

You've probably heard that the word *worship* is a kind of contraction of the term *worth-ship*. We offer praise to God because of who God is and what God has done for us. God created all that exists and then "knitted" us together as individuals and as community.

Pondering the complexity of the creation with its biodiversity and interdependence, added to the intricacy of the human body, can create in us a sense of awe of what God can do. That sense of awe forms one of the foundations of worship. Our awareness of God's creativity can remind us of God's grandeur.

We can join the poet who wrote Psalm 8, extolling the beauty of God's creation. We can feel a sense of gratitude that such a creative and powerful God takes a direct, personal interest in us. If you knit or do any kind of craft or know someone who does, you also know the pride crafters feel in each end product. A sense of wonder and awe, coupled with a sense of gratitude can compel worship from the heart.

Comparing Psalm 139 to Job 10 can help us to see how gratitude and wonder can enable our worship. Job used the same term that the psalmist used to describe God's creativity. In verse 11, he says that God "wove" him together (same Hebrew verb as we find in Psalm 139:13 for "knit").

As we know, Job underwent a series of horrible misfortunes. In Chapter 10, he pours out his bitterness at God. We should treat Job 10 carefully. Some of the grief of life certainly breaks our hearts. We should let people grieve as they need to grieve. Sometimes grief takes the form of anger at God. We may feel anger at God, and we should not give ourselves a guilt trip over this anger. However, we must find a way to move past the anger, or it will consume us.

Part of the way that many people heal from anger is to practice lament, as Job did. The psalmist found wonder in the fact that God knit him together. Job used the idea of God knitting him together as a charge against God. In a sense, he said to God, "How could you let this happen to me if you were the one who wove me together?" In times of deep grief, we can feel angry at God, we can be honest with God, but we should seek to heal, so that we can worship God again.

If we read all of Psalm 139, we see that the poet took a dark turn, starting in verse 19. Just as Job

allowed his anger to turn to bitterness (at least temporarily), the psalmist allowed his feelings toward other people to come close (at a minimum) to hate (also Psalm 137).

Recognizing that the God who knitted us together also knit together those who harm us or those with whom we disagree can keep our feelings healthy, so that we avoid hate. The recognition of God's creativity and care for us protects our worship, so that it doesn't devolve into hate. We worship because we feel gratitude to God, but worship can also enable us to feel gratitude to God.

The words of Genesis 1 and the tenderness of this part of Psalm 139 teach us that the God who created the world has a special place for us. Just as my partner and I in the exercise looked into each other's eyes and broke down the distance between us, so God's love breaks down the distance between us and God.

Biblical scholar W. Sibley Towner also said that, in talking about the different ways of understanding the term "image of God," "whatever 'image' literally intends to say about God, it certainly means that the Priestly writers felt that human beings are of signal importance and exquisite value."<sup>2</sup> That understanding of God's granting us a place of importance leads us to Jesus' coming, who became the divine presence among us.

***In what situations have you worshiped God, in a service or privately, when you didn't feel much like worshipping? How can worship help us to heal from our feelings?***

**We thank you, O God, for loving us the way an artist/knitter loves what he or she has created. Thank you for sending Jesus to us as your presence among us. Enable us to be your representatives in creation. When we don't feel like worshipping, enable us to offer you praise as a way of healing; in the name of Jesus. Amen.**

<sup>1</sup>From *Genesis*, by W. Sibley Towner (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); page 26.

<sup>2</sup>From *Genesis*; page 26. The term *Priestly writers* refers to the authors of part of the Pentateuch, who contributed much of the information about ritual and holiness.

## Coming Next Quarter

### Hope

This winter, our lessons develop the theme of "Hope." The writers of the student book lessons are Taylor Mills and Bruce Batchelor-Glader; the teacher book writer is Stan Purdum.

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### The Good News

These lessons continue a unit that began with the last Sunday in the fall quarter, encompassing the Sundays of Advent and the first Sunday after Christmas. They call us to consider the Incarnation and what it means that God sent Jesus into the world in human form, as one of us. Thus, the lessons invite us to think about the relationship God wants to have with us and how God's sending Jesus makes that relationship possible.

### The Hypocrites and the Holy

The lessons in this unit challenge us to examine ourselves in light of the examples we see in the individuals in Scripture. Where do we find instances of hypocrisy or holiness? And how do these tendencies contribute to or diminish our hope? Lesson 5 focuses on John the Baptist, preparing the way for Jesus, the hope of the world. Lesson 6 tells of Jesus commenting on John's ministry and announcing the good news. Lessons 7 and 8 help us think about how the hope Jesus brought functions in our lives. And Lesson 9 looks toward the ultimate fulfillment of that hope, with the full coming of the kingdom of God.

### Holy Living

This unit embraces all the Sundays of February and March; and, as such, it continues into the next quarter. The eight lessons of the unit invite us to think about what it means to be the people of God and to pursue holy living. The four lessons in this quarter help us look at how we deal with one another; how faith is expressed action; the sort of "fasting" God wants from us

(whether or not we abstain from certain foods); and how, in fact, Christians are the temple of God. During this unit, Lent begins, which is an especially appropriate time to think about holiness.