

## *The Work of God's Hands*

Psalm 139:1-6,13-18; Jeremiah 18:1-11

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September 4, 2016

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My father for the last 30 years has made a living hanging wallpaper. For those of you not familiar with the profession, hanging wallpaper requires close attention to detail. While his work also requires a physically fit body—he must hoist large sheets of paste covered paper and keep his balance on high ladders—his expertise lies in his trained eye. By simply looking at a wall and its condition, he can tell you what wall treatment will work best and whether a client's plan is feasible. He also has an uncanny ability to see possibilities and ways to complete projects other wallpaperers have botched. While he doesn't move as fast as he once did, he never underestimates his worth. One of his favorite sayings is "I'm slow, but I am expensive."

Having worked a few jobs with my father, including my own home, I have seen how his genius is as much in his foresight as it is his technical skill. On the work site, he knows intimately the products he installs, the existing surroundings, and his customers. Protecting time and costs, he needs to visualize projects in advance and anticipate potential challenges, since jobs rarely go as planned. Before something goes awry, he can tell when it is time to start over and when a project can be salvaged. Other times, conditions change while the job is in progress and he pulls from his wealth of experience to adapt a new vision on the fly.

In today's scripture, God directs Jeremiah to the home of a craftsperson of a different trade, a potter. Jeremiah sees him at work at his wheel. The clay is at the complete mercy of the potter. It rises and falls as he cups his hands and squeezes the clay between his fingertips. When the vessel he shapes does not conform to his expectations, the potter squashes it down and begins to reshape another vessel.

According to Jeremiah, God then gives him words for the people of Israel. God's message is clear and in line with God's testimony elsewhere in Jeremiah: if you want to survive, comply with God's guiding hands and ditch your idolatrous ways. Fail to do so and God will break you down like spoiled clay on a pottery wheel.

Through examples like Jeremiah and today's Psalm we are given a paradigm to see the work of the laborer's hands as the work of God's hands. Whether the metaphor be hanging wallpaper or

shaping clay, we can see them as a reflection of God the creator, the tradesperson who constructs and shapes the world as we know it.

Seeing the world as a thoughtful creation of God imbues it with sanctity. People, plants, animals and land all reflect their good Creator and thus deserve respect and admiration. As our Psalm says, they are all beautifully and wonderfully made putting God on display everywhere you look.

Envisioning God as a craftsperson, actively involved in creation and events, however, can make it difficult for us to interpret the times in our lives that are hard or painful.

For instance, in Jeremiah, God is depicted as unpredictable, calling into question God's goodness. God is not happy with Israel and says, "I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you." God here has enough foresight to shape events while also maintaining a cause and effect relationship between the actions of Israel and those of God. Jeremiah's God says, "At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it." God's process of granting blessings seems unknowable and yet the withholding of blessings is the fault of human beings.

If you are struggling with reconciling this with our Psalm, you are not alone. The Psalmist, echoing earlier passages in Jeremiah, also experiences God strongly as creator. He writes, "It was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." And yet the Psalmist depicts God as being in far greater control of future events: "Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed." This is an unshakeable degree of confidence in providence, meaning the foresight of God to ordain events that are to come.

Grappling with God the tradesperson is most challenging not in the times we feel blessed but rather in the times we feel abandoned. Tragedy has led many people to give up on the notion of a God who shapes, let alone foresees events. Surely, there are moments in your history that felt as if

God was punishing you for your own deeds or those of others. Some events are simply too painful to rewind and consider how God was shaping them. Pondering the dynamic interplay between God's agency, our own, and the actions of others, is messy, much like the work of pottery. The complicated nature of God's providence can make saying, it is all part of God's plan, of little comfort to a grieving person. Reading Psalm 139, we find someone quick to find God foreseeing and responsible for whatever comfort he can muster. Reading Jeremiah, we see individual comfort is of little concern to a prophet unafraid to claim God's judgement for others disobeying God's expectations. For those of us with pastoral sensitivities, we recognize that neither approach may be the best one to help a person heal in a time of brokenness.

The problem with interpreting God's role in moments of crisis is that too often it is intended to offer quick comfort, or, in Jeremiah's case, discomfort. Rushing to find a blessing in a situation simplifies the mystery of God's ways, making God understandable but cruel. Saying, God works in mysterious ways, without probing deeper, makes God arbitrary and cruel.

The healing in discerning how God moves is most effective when we have the benefit of time. In Marilynne Robinson's novels about the fictional town of Gilead, we meet the old preacher John Ames. After losing his wife and daughter in his twenties, he spends the next forty years dutifully caring for his congregation and reading and writing late into the night in his study. By his own admission, it was a lonely existence. Much to everyone in the small town's surprise, he takes a stranger as his new wife and together they have a son in his late sixties. Seemingly overnight he overflows with gratitude and delight because of this unexpected blessing. Wrestling with the connection between his great sorrow and his new joy, he joins her for breakfast early one Sunday morning. With his hair ruffled and face unshaven, he reads to her from his scribbled sermon manuscript, saying, "It is part of the providence of God, as I see it, that blessings or happiness can have very different meanings from one time to another."

He goes on to explain that God is not bound by God's actions to make joy out of sorrow, and we know too little of God to say when She acts one way or another. Nevertheless, with many years between him and the tragedy, Ames has faith that God's transformation of sorrow is providential and therefore a mysterious blessing when it appears.

True mysteries are powerful blessings because of their capacity to be revisited. It is why every Sunday we gather to celebrate the resurrection, naming the mystery that God is always fashioning

new joys for us. It is why we ponder God's Word together and the first Sunday of every month we break bread and share a cup together at the communion table. These mysteries are beyond solving and too important to be neglected. It is in them we catch a glimpse and a taste of our God who helps us see God's self more clearly in the work of Her hands. Scripture and sacraments are the spectacles that help us see how God is constantly in the act of creation, sustaining us and fashioning hope from the remains of despair. They help us to see that our creator loves the world so dearly that She became one with Her creation.

These mysteries of the Church draw us back to the tradesperson. The wallpaper hanger with dried paste caked on his arms carefully measuring, cutting, and lining up the paper so patterns line up perfectly across the seams. The potter with his back hunched over the wheel, his fingers and palms shaping a soggy lump of earth into something beautiful.

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