

**Sermon, Proper 18, Pentecost, September 8, 2019, Jane A. Beebe**

“My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. 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.” (Psalm 139:15-16)

Psalm 139 is one of my “desert island” psalms, one that I am glad I do not have to live without. I don’t have it memorized yet—maybe on my next retreat. We prayed a portion of it only today. Contained within it is so much beautiful imagery, wisdom, and—to me—comfort, that I am always seeing and hearing something new. This psalm first entered my awareness in a special way about twenty-five years ago. I was planning a sabbatical from my job. Through a serendipitous set of circumstances I ended up spending most of an academic year at Pendle Hill, a study center near Philadelphia run by the Society of Friends. The year before I applied, Pendle Hill decided to advertise in *Episcopal Life*. I read about it, and it seemed the perfect place for me to be. I learned later that I was the only person who had applied to be a resident student on account of that ad, and that it had never been run again.

At the time I had thought I would become an Episcopal nun. I had been in serious conversation with the Order of Saint Helena whose mother house was in Vails Gate, New York in the Hudson Valley. This would be a time, so I thought, to further discern my call and to enter consciously into a time of transition. While I was away from my home in Grinnell, Iowa, I found a college student to house-sit.

She was an enthusiastic attendee at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, my home parish at the time, and her mom was an Episcopal priest. Knowing that I was embarking on a new phase of my spiritual journey, her mother sent me a reflection on Psalm 139. Unfortunately I don't still have this, nor do I really remember what she wrote. What I do remember is that it is what I needed to hear at the time. It was as if she had given me a map to mark the terrain I would encounter, and a flashlight to light my path when it seemed dark. My favorite verse (that we don't hear today) is probably: "...Even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day..." (Psalm 139:12)

Today, though, because verses 7-12 of the psalm are not included, one line in particular stands out for me more than it might otherwise: "Your eyes beheld my unformed substance." The Hebrew word translated as "unformed substance" could have the sense of "incomplete vessel." In the passage from Jeremiah we have a powerful image of God as a potter working at a potter's wheel. The vessel in question is not only incomplete, but becomes spoiled. Yet it still remains in God's hands. The story is not over; there is the possibility that the clay may be reworked.

One of the lovely things about my experience at Pendle Hill was a weekly class on the arts and spirituality. We worked with clay throughout the year, both on the potter's wheel and free-form. It was neat to learn about an ancient craft that results in objects of practical use that may also be beautiful. While pottery can be

broken, it still strong, and when properly fired impervious. We have the Dead Sea scrolls because they were stored in ceramic vessels that protected them from the elements.

I was never more than an amateur potter, yet working with clay taught me a lot, emotionally and spiritually. We had electric potter's wheels so at least we didn't have to learn how to keep the wheel steady with our feet as would have been done in ancient times. However, there is much about throwing pots on the wheel that requires patience and careful preparation. At the same time clay is forgiving. There are many points along the way where, if one makes a mistake, it is possible to walk it back! Clay has to be damp enough to be malleable but not too dry. It is actually possible to revive dry clay by soaking it in water.

Before the clay can be used, it is wedged and kneaded like bread dough to remove any air bubbles. Any air pockets can cause the pot to crack or shatter when fired. Before any sort of pot can be shaped, the clay has to be centered on the wheel. I think this is where the term "throwing a pot" comes in. Having formed a chunk of clay into a cone with a flat bottom, one literally throws it onto the turning wheel. Using one hand to squeeze the clay up, the other hand presses it down. It is hard to describe the sheer frustration of learning this part of the process. Our teacher made it look easy, inevitable. It became clear that a lack of centeredness in my own being led to poor results trying to center the clay. However, every single pot, no

matter the final shape, begins the same way. The sense that the lump of clay spinning on the wheel is finally in equilibrium is a wonderful thing.

Creating the bowl, or mug, plate, or vase has its own set of frustrations. Something amazing would begin to emerge, only to get off kilter and collapse—sometimes many times. Even removing the completed pot from the wheel is fraught with danger. However, as in Jeremiah, this doesn't have to be the end of the story. As long as the clay isn't too dried out it can still be shaped into a useful vessel. We may feel, as the Psalmist does, that God's hand on us hems us in. I like to think of God's hands as the centering hands so that we may shaped into something useful: "fearfully and wonderfully made."

My sabbatical year did not end the way I expected. My vocation to monastic life seemingly evaporated. I grieved. I returned to work. By the end of the next year I had taken a new job as music librarian at Amherst College. God picked me up and threw me back on the wheel. Curtis Almquist, one of the monks at the Society of St. John the Evangelist wrote a compelling homily about texts we often hear in Advent about the "refiner's fire" and the "fuller's soap." To have impurities removed in this way is harsh. As he puts it, seemingly not only *not* good news, but appallingly bad news. Yet it may be the only way to be freed of what is less than genuine in our lives. Br. Curtis sees Jeremiah's vision of God as the Potter in the same way: "We don't place ourselves into the refiner's fire; we don't plunge

ourselves into a vat of fuller's soap. This will be done to us, or for us, to prepare us to meet the Messiah. If life for you becomes a painful crucible; if life for you is exposing everything that is less than genuine, the word of hope is that we will meet God, or God will meet us, in this. This is the way; this may be the only way...And, in the fullness of time, we would know it as a very severe mercy.”