

“A Labor of Creativity”
Sept. 5, 2010 Calvary sermon by Brian Henderson

Text: Psalm 139: 1-6; 13-18

I will never forget being in the Eastern State Penitentiary for the first time. Don't worry...I was just visiting as a tourist...not as a prisoner or inmate. If you don't know, the Eastern State Penitentiary is an historic prison in Philadelphia, PA. When it opened in 1829 it was a model for prisons worldwide.

Influenced by the Enlightenment and Quakerism, the penitentiary attempted to reform or to bring to repentance its prisoners through solitary confinement or *refinement* which it was believed would lead to true penitence. Hence the term, penitentiary.

The Eastern State Penitentiary was officially closed by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in 1971. In 1997, it was opened to the public and is now being preserved as an historic site to see.

I'll never forget the first time entering into this massive, stone facility. Intentionally, the architects designed it to look from the outside like an intimidating and fear-filled prison facility but on the inside, it's built to resemble and feel like one is lost inside a massive church or monastery. A profound juxtaposition.

The long abandoned cell blocks now smell damp and one can see how the passage of time has greatly deteriorated their once strong, fortress like strength. It was quite an experience to step into a cell and to see what it was like.

It was even more moving to run my hands across the wall wondering about whom once resided in this isolated

space. Tick marks on the walls made by prisoners nearly two centuries ago for the number of days spent inside some of these cells can still be seen.

What impressed me the most...and what has stayed with me from my visits...is how the Eastern State Penitentiary was designed so that wherever a prisoner was...the prisoner was made to feel that he was constantly under the eye of someone.

The design of the earliest cells allowed for a small skylight to bring in the natural light of the sun each day into the cell. The tour guide explained that this skylight was symbolic of “the eye of God” and that it was hoped that prisoners would sense God was always watching them. This was part of the reform or penitentiary philosophy undergirding the prison’s design.

The eye of God and a sense of God’s presence. From one perspective...this is what Psalm 139 seeks to get at. Scholars have suggested this psalmist speaks or prays as one who was wrongly accused...wrongly accused of what...we’re not too sure...

This person probably wasn’t a prisoner per se...rather...it’s suggested that the psalmist was perhaps accused of not being as faithful to God as one could be...

Hence the wording near the end of the psalm...
Search me, O God, and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me...

With beautiful and imaginative imagery...the psalmist takes lengths to describe how the Divine—how God—is with her or him...and how God knows her or him.

O Lord, you have searched me and known me...you know when I sit down and when I rise up...even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely...

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?

For you knit me together in my mother's womb...

Like the skylight in the cells of the Eastern State Penitentiary, it's as if for the psalmist, the eye of God looks down and sees all...God's presence is always present and so the psalmist takes comfort in this and trusts that if there is anything God sees that is not right or good or appropriate in him- or herself...then she or he will know and in turn will act or think or speak differently and with better and more moral and faithful intentions.

You see, Psalm 139, if read in its entirety, speaks to the “omni-“ theological understandings of God: God's omnipresence, omnipotence and omniscience—God's ability to be always present, all-powerful and all-knowing. At one level...isn't it reassuring to think of God in such a way...and at another level...I believe we *can* think of God this way...and believe *in* God this way.

The ancients of old quoted God as saying, “I will never leave you nor forsake you...” And Jesus' words...Jesus who was named Emmanuel...said, “And remember, I am with you always...even to the end of age.”

But yet...there's a question that remains...at least for me...maybe for you too...if God is all that we say God is...if God is all-knowing...how can an all-knowing God forget? Or as someone else once asked: “How can an all-knowing God no longer know what God once knew?”

Especially...when we confess those things in life that we do not want to repeat or do again...does God forgive us and forget the details of that for which we've been forgiven? *I hope so.*

I know it's difficult if not impossible as humans to forgive and forget...but does God?

This is a difficult question, isn't it? I have to wonder if the psalmist wondered about this question?

Isn't it an interesting thought to consider...to consider that God is faithful, forgiving *and* forgetful? Maybe this ought to encourage those of us who with age become more forgetful. ☺

God is forever faithful, forgiving and forgetful.

As we gather around our Lord's Table today to receive communion, may we pray with the psalmists of old:

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.

Or as another psalmist prayed...may we pray:

Create in us clean hearts O God and put a new and right spirit within us.

As prisoners at the Eastern State Penitentiary contemplated the eye of God looking down on them...as the psalmist of Psalm 139 grappled with the power of God's presence and knowledge...so may we today consider the power and presence of God in our lives...

For the love demonstrated to the world through our Savior Jesus Christ was indeed a labor of creativity...a labor of love...that I would suggest only a faithful, forgiving *and* forgetful God could share.

For the elements before us...the bread and the cup...help us *remember* God's faithful, forgiving and *forgetful* ways. And for this...may we all say, "Thanks be to God." Amen.