

“The Spiritual Practice of Ableness”

Psalm 139:1-14

June 28, 2020

God, investigate my life;
get all the facts firsthand.
I’m an open book to you;
even from a distance, you know what I’m thinking.
You know when I leave and when I get back;
I’m never out of your sight.

You know everything I’m going to say
before I start the first sentence.
I look behind me and you’re there,
then up ahead and you’re there, too—
your reassuring presence, coming and going.
This is too much, too wonderful—
I can’t take it all in!

Is there any place I can go to avoid your Spirit?
to be out of your sight?
If I climb to the sky, you’re there!
If I go underground, you’re there!
If I flew on morning’s wings
to the far western horizon,
You’d find me in a minute—
you’re already there waiting!
Then I said to myself, “Oh, God even sees me in the dark!
At night I’m immersed in the light!”
It’s a fact: darkness isn’t dark to you;
night and day, darkness and light, they’re all the same to you.

Oh yes, you shaped me first inside, then out;
you formed me in my mother’s womb.
I thank you, High God—you’re breathtaking!
Body and soul, I am marvelously made!

Here ends the lesson. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

I was sickly as a child, wracked with asthma that frequently sent me to the emergency room of Denver's Presbyterian Hospital. As a result of my episodes, I was unable to run or participate well in gym class, especially on tumbling days and on Field Day at the end of the school year.

My hero during this time was my brother. Two and a half years older than me, I looked up to him as a steady caretaker. When an attack would grip me in elementary school and I would be in the nurse's office on a cot, she would often call my brother out of class to come sit with me, for in my panic, he was able to calm me by breathing along with me as he had been taught to do.

"Breathe in. Hold one, two, three. Breathe out and smile. Repeat." Most times this worked. Occasionally, I would have to go to the hospital. Once, my Principal even took me there, because there was no time to wait for one of my parents to get to the school.

Living without breath is terrifying. I have so much empathy for the people suffering with COVID-19, because when you can't breathe, panic is the natural response and that just makes it worse. My brother would say to me, "C'mon now, calm down, concentrate on breathing slow and deep. I want to shoot basketball with you when we get home."

He'd encourage me to be *able*. He'd act all put-out (or maybe he was) to be taken out of class and having to take care of me. He'd tell me I could fix my own labored breathing if I wanted to. This fostered in me the will to pull out of my emergency, the calm to get atop my panic. I am grateful to him, because today I live my life according to this credo: I would always rather be the hero of my own story rather than the victim of it.

"Body and soul, we are marvelously made!" exclaims the Psalmist. "You see me even in darkness, God, for to you, darkness and light are the same."

(*paraphrased*) What a wonderful affirmation this is that God walks with us in these dark days of disorientation: pandemic death and fear, civil unrest and election frenzy, not to mention the dramas and traumas of our own piddly little lives that pile on top of everything that everyone else is dealing with!

We need to feel God's presence amidst the displacement we are experiencing from established norms and routines, and the Psalmist assures us it is there: "I look behind me and you're there, then up ahead and you're there, too—your reassuring presence, coming and going." Psalm 139 gives us strength to be *able* to bear up under the pressure, to face our fears and our national failings, and to live as heroes rather than victims of our emerging story. When we know that God is with us, we can so much more than we can alone.

The Peanut Butter Falcon, our featured film this week, introduces us to a unique young man who is differently abled. Zak is 22 years old. His parents abandoned him, not wanting to care for a boy born with Down syndrome. The State of Louisiana, having no other convenient option, warehouses him in Britthayven Nursing Home, of all places, where staff refer to him as "Retard" and ignore his need for socialization and intellectual stimulation. When Zak complains about being there, it is as though staff are singing to him the words from the song that we heard together just a few minutes ago, "What's Your Problem, Child? Did someone not love you? Were you not enough? Did you not belong in their eyes? Why don't you fit in? Why don't you add up? What's your problem, Child?"

Zak is there at the nursing home for two and a half years in an unfolding tragedy bordering on abuse because, as we soon learn, this special young man is very *cap-able* of living outside the facility in a family that will love him.

Zak has high hopes and dreams: fascinated with professional wrestling, he fancies himself enrolling in Saltwater Redneck's Professional Wrestling School in Florida. He just needs to escape from where he is confined and make his way there. Zak dreams up elaborate schemes for running away and enlists other residents to help him. As we learn who Zak is, we learn at the same time that he is much more *cap-able* of taking care of himself than people realize—then even he realizes.

With the help of his crusty old Bruce Dern roommate, Zak successfully breaks out one night. He is free! There's just one problem: he escapes by greasing himself up and squeezing through the bars on his window (yes, bars on the window in a nursing home), but he has on only his jockey shorts. He runs away from the facility as fast as he can in the middle of the night without clothes, shoes, money, supplies, food and water, or a map. He literally has nothing with him but the underwear he has on.

Zak is doomed to fail again. Or maybe not. The angels tend to him! God is in front of him and behind him, spurring him on to be the hero of his own story, to find just how *able* he really is! While the authorities are blaming his keepers for his disappearance and fearing the worst for *themselves* if he is not soon found, captured and returned to the nursing home, Zak and his new friend Tyler are out in the great Louisiana outdoors discovering just how *cap-able* he truly is.

Tyler is God's *unlikely* angel, for Tyler himself is a mess. He is on the run from bad guys who have evil intentions towards him. He is out of work, without a discernable home, family or future. But there can be no doubt, he *is* Zak's angel. Remember last week's *Wilderness Poem* by Jan Richardson that I read to you? Well, Zak is in the wilderness—literally and figuratively, and

Tyler is Zak's "tough angel, bringing him sweet wine and strong bread; just enough."

In a series of unplanned movements, Tyler encourages Zak to find his ableness. Zak does not picture himself as very *cap-able*, largely because he has been labeled "retarded" all his life and treated like he can do nothing by himself. When daydreaming of becoming a professional wrestler, he wishes to hear the crowds yell out, "Zak is *awesome!*" but he fears being booed instead. Tyler asks him if he will be a bad guy wrestler or a good guy? Zak responds: "I am a bad guy, because my family left me. I cannot be a hero because I am Down syndrome."

The angel in Tyler becomes evident: he says to Zak, "Some things you can't do, and it's true you can't do everything, but you're *strong*, Zak... Do you want to learn or give up your dream?" Zak answers, "I want to *learn!* I want to be a *hero.*"

Zack Gottsagen, the actor who brings us Zak, *The Peanut Butter Falcon*, is a talented, 35-year old American actor who has successfully made himself the hero of his own story. He made history in 2000 as the first student in Palm Springs, Florida public school district with Down syndrome to be fully included in academic life. He has made acting his career, appearing in numerous movies, on stage and television. In 2018, he won the Quincy Jones Exceptional Advocacy Award for being just that: a living hero and inspiration in the Down syndrome community.

In 2019, he brought *The Peanut Butter Falcon* to life on the screen. Film critic Joel Fisher said this about the impact of this differently abled actor's work in the film:

Gottsagen's performance shows that a disabled actor can still have the range that an able-bodied actor can have and still have the presence to drive a film all by themselves. Hopefully other film makers will take notice and follow suit.

In August 2019, Simon Cowell's brainchild television variety contest show, *America's Got Talent*, kicked off its umpteenth season with a potpourri of entertaining acts—musicians, singers, magicians, comedians, aerialists and dancers, and some I don't even know what to call them—some of them amazingly good and some you would rather not waste your time on ever again! In the middle of the audition rounds, a young man's life was dramatically changed along with that of his mother, the judges, the studio audience and literally every TV viewer who was graced with witnessing his true genius. We experienced a phenomenon of *cap-ability* from a differently abled also 22-year old young man by the name of Kodi Lee.

Kodi Lee is a gifted pianist and singer. He also happens to have autism *and* he is blind. In the clip I asked Rosanne to queue up for our Reflection, Kodi's mother, Tina, will tell you that music saved his life, but I think it might just save ours, too. Kodi is marvelously made, just as he is.

In John 10:10, Jesus tells the people, "I came that you may have life and have it abundantly." Jesus reminds us of God's primary and enduring quality—God's unconditional love for all people, for all differently abled people, for *all* people-- no exceptions.

Is Kodi able to see? Not with his eyes.

Is Kodi able to speak in complete paragraphs? Not with his brain.

Is Kodi differently abled? Yes, he is.

Is Kodi a beloved child of God? Yes, he is. He *might* be just the tough angel God has sent to you today, bearing the sweet wine and strong bread that you need this morning; just enough.

The spiritual practice of Ableness is what allows us to sense and appreciate that all people are marvelously made, no matter what anomaly draws our attention to another person's distracting feature. When Kodi Lee was walked out by his mother onto the stage of *America's Got Talent*, all witnesses were attracted to his blindness. When he was asked a question and struggled to form the words for an appropriate response, we saw autism and we heard all the judges say under their breath, "Oh," which we all understood as "Poor thing. He is really disabled." We were ready though to play along. After all, this is *America's Got Talent*, and we are used to being amazed at times and at other acts, we collectively shake our heads and bemoan, "What was *that*? Get that one off the stage, will ya?"

I'll leave it to you to experience your own emotions when you see and hear Kodi play and sing, and when you listen to him try his best to hold it together in the intensity of the moment after his performance. I'm going to show you the whole clip, commercialized as the show is, because it will warm your heart and moisten your eyes, and that's a good thing these days. I'm going to show you how the "oh, no's" turn in to something much more heroic as the scene unfolds.

Right now, I invite you to take a moment and think about your own frailties, those things on or in your body that don't work so well. I'll center on my fused back that goes out on me at its own whim. Think about your own anomalies and vulnerabilities, those things that keep you from being fully abled.

And now, I invite you to listen to the words of the Psalmist who confirms your *essential* self, the one God knows, the one *cap-able* of love; the one *cap-able* of healing; the yourself *cap-able* of compassion and empathy for others; the *one* self you have; the *only* self you will ever have; the *only* self that you will ever need before God, because you are loved unconditionally, just as you are, unique, differently abled from all other people of the world throughout time, *cap-able* of being the hero of your own story:

Oh yes, [the Psalmist delights:]

You shaped me first inside, then out;

You formed me in my mother's womb.

I thank you, High God—you're breathtaking!

Body and soul, I am marvelously made!

May you Believe It Into Being.

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