

The Mystery of Our Beginnings

Scripture: Psalm 139:1–6, 13–18; Genesis 1:6–8, 14–19

Introduction

At precisely 9:37 P.M., December 6, 1966, at Jameson Hospital in New Castle, Pennsylvania, after conception, nine months of gestation, a spaghetti dinner at the home of friends of my parents, a relatively short labor, and an uncomplicated delivery, I began my life on this planet. That was the day I was born.

I have the privilege of sharing my birthday, December 6, with jazz pianist and composer Dave Brubeck and American poet Joyce Kilmer, born 1920 and 1886 respectively. Notably also, after the resignation of Spiro Agnew as Richard Nixon's vice president, Gerald R. Ford was sworn in as vice president of the United States on December 6, 1973. None of those coincidental occurrences has meant much to me, however, I have always found it a bit ominous that my birth date is only a day before the anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Since childhood I've been aware of Pearl Harbor Day's date relative to my own birthday.

Because of my birth date, my astrological zodiac sign is Sagittarius, also known as the Archer. Astrology is that ancient system of belief, still in practice today, that holds that the locations of the sun, moon, planets, and stars either have some influence on or can predict life on our planet. Among the multitude of sources—books, periodicals, and online services—the general characteristics of Sagittarians are described in much the same way: They are “fun loving, friendly, philosophical, intellectual, straightforward, . . . optimistic, and sometimes have a naïve belief that everything will turn out fine despite any obstacles. . . . Sagittarians also value frankness and honesty, and their comments can sometimes be blunt.”¹

It has only been in recent years that I have even been able to remember what my “sign” is, let alone recognize myself in the generic list of astrological characteristics. Yet a few years ago a friend of mine who knew my zodiac sign started to make comments about my behavior, personality traits, and general characteristics. The comparisons she made to other Sagittarians she knew seemed only accidental at first.

1. From “Sagittarius (astrology),” Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2004, <http://encarta.msn.com> ©1997–2004 Microsoft Corporation. All Rights Reserved.

While the daily and more prescriptive horoscopes of the newspapers or my MSN Homepage often seem so random and general that they could apply to anyone, I have been repeatedly surprised by the high degree of consistency of general characteristics and tendencies within myself and among others I know who have the same sign. What do I do with such information?

My response will be influenced by any number of factors. In my own life the response is informed by my identity as a practicing Christian, as a theological thinker in the Reformed tradition, as a modern, and as someone who lives in a culture where for some people horoscopes and astrology hold a tremendous amount of meaning and significance. Am I to join the church's long-standing suspicion and opposition to anything outside its own sources of knowledge? Am I to assume, as a modern, that any consistency is merely coincidental? If I find too much consistency or meaning, does that mean that my belief system is inadequate, or worse, wrong?

An approach, a response, that offers a way into and through, rather than around or away, is needed. And, thankfully, such a response is not far away. In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s own Confession of 1967, there is a small but significant phrase that states,

The Christian finds parallels between other religions and his own and must approach all religions with openness and respect. Repeatedly God has used the insight of non-Christians to challenge the church to renewal.²

While some might argue that astrology is not a "religion," it is certainly, for many in our contemporary world, a belief system by which people order their lives and worldview.

Maybe, then, the questions might become more of wonder and awe at the connection and comprehensiveness of God's creative power and continued activity in the world, and most especially, of the intimacy of God's knowledge and love of us. In other words, could it be that the God who created the heavens and earth, the God who stretched out the heavens and cast the stars and planets into their order, is the same God who proclaims to us in Jesus Christ that we are known and loved so intimately that, "even the hairs of your head are all counted"

2. *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.*, Part I, *Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2002), 9.42.

(Matthew 10:30)? Could it be that the God to whom I belong, and whom I worship as a Christian and as a Presbyterian, is able to order creation and even my birth in such a way that every aspect of my life points to a benevolent creator and sustainer? Should it be surprising that others on this planet perceive the same God's ordering of creation but explain God's presence and action in the world differently from the way I understand it?

Biblical Reflection

Psalm 139:1–6, 13–18; Genesis 1:6–8, 14–19

In Psalm 139, the writer portrays God as one who knows him (or her) personally. No fewer than 7 times, the psalmist uses the verb “know,” (also translated “discern” or “acquaint”) and only once is it used in reference to what the psalmist knows about God. The other 6 times speak of the psalmist's understanding and assurance of what God knows about the psalmist personally. While Psalm 139 is often said to witness to God's all-knowing (omniscient) character, that claim seems to be a distortion of the plain meaning of the text. In other words, the psalmist doesn't focus on God's knowledge of the vast expanse of the world's events—even if God indeed has such knowledge. Rather, the psalmist's wonder is directed at God's intimate and personal knowledge of us.

The psalmist is confident of God's continued presence, care, and compassion in, throughout, and beyond his entire existence—from before birth and extending to events that have yet to occur. The metaphor of being knit together may well be a reference to a Near Eastern mythic belief that humans were actually created (knit together) under the surface of the earth. Yet, even if this belief is implied here, the psalmist is confident that God is in control of such a process.³

Such a confidence would be in accord with the psalmist's understanding and the tradition that shaped the first creation narrative in Genesis. God is portrayed as fully creative, separating the sky from the earth and casting various lights of the sky, both day and night, into a divinely ordered pattern. Even if the tradition that retained and crafted this story was seeking to assert God's preeminence over other ancient traditions that understood celestial beings to have hold and sway over the earth, they still asserted God's primacy in the ordering of the sun,

3. See J. Clinton McCann, Jr., “*The Book of Psalms*,” in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 1236.

moon, planets, and stars. The biblical tradition, since the very beginning (Genesis) has held that God is creator and sustainer of all that lives and moves and has being.

Preparation

Those gathered will

- Reflect on how our faith can offer a relevant alternative to the cultural fascination with astrology.
- Articulate a Christian perspective on our connection with all creation.
- Consider what aspects of Reformed theology expand and exceed astrology's understanding of the interconnectedness of all creation.



Key Questions

- In what ways does the cultural fascination with astrology point to the human longing for a Being who orders the universe and creation?
- How might the Reformed tradition's understanding of God's relationship with creation intersect with popular culture's search for a Higher Power?
- How might the faith community exemplify through its life and sacraments the deeper connections to which human beings are drawn?

Resources Needed

- Yellow or white card-stock or construction-paper stars—approximately 6 inches in diameter. Have at least two for each group participant
- A clear glass bowl, at least 10 inches in diameter, filled half way with clear water
- A piece of dark fabric or felt (black would be best) to cover a table large enough to hold the bowl of water in the center and the paper stars scattered about the fabric
- A book describing the zodiac astrological signs, or copies of a list of general characteristics of each sign, from a Web site
- Bibles—preferably NRSV
- Markers
- A pencil or pen for each group participant
- The children's book *On The Day You Were Born*, by Debra Frasier (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991).

Gathering (15–20 minutes)

Because this is your group's first session together, the opening activity is designed to acquaint participants with one another as well as to begin introducing the first topic. There will be time at the end of this session to discuss and decide how subsequent sessions will proceed. It is important to begin the following activity in a manner that helps facilitate community and provides a point of entry into the topic rather than focusing on the details of subsequent sessions.

As each member of your group enters, the facilitator for this first session should invite each participant to take one of the stars and a marker. On one side of the star ask them to write their name large enough for others to read. On the opposite side, have them write their date of birth and the corresponding zodiac astrological sign. (It would be helpful to have on hand an astrological reference book or handout for participants who do not know their sign and want to look it up.)

Once everyone has arrived and written on their stars, ask participants to pair up. In their pairs, encourage them to share their name, birth date, and whatever they presently know about the characteristics of their astrological sign. (Many participants may know their sign but be unfamiliar with any characteristics attached to that sign. This is another reason to have available a reference book or a handout listing the general characteristics of each sign.) The facilitator may suggest that the pairs consider in what ways these descriptions resonate with their own self-perceptions. They might also discuss any similarities they've observed with other people of the same sign.

Once all of the pairs are finished their conversations (allow about 5 minutes), gather the whole group together. Invite participants to take turns sharing their names and their signs as they place their stars around the bowl of water. (Emphasize this activity as a way of getting to know one another and not as a validation of astrology.)

Exploring the Word (20–30 minutes)

The facilitator either reads or invites someone else to read the children's story, *On the Day You Were Born*, aloud to the group. (Another possible book is *The Whale Rider*, by Witi Ihimaera [Orlando: Harcourt, 1987], pp. 13–23 [chapters 3 and 4]).



In response to the book, encourage participants to reflect on the day they were born. Talk with one another about the impact those events, stories, or superstitions have had on your lives. Consider questions such as these:

- Describe stories of significant events surrounding your birth (family, nation, world).
- What is the significance of your birthday or date, historically, superstitiously, or otherwise?



As this discussion comes to a conclusion, read Psalm 139:1–6, 13–18 (NRSV) in one of the following ways:

- Responsively: The facilitator reads the odd-numbered verses, starting with verse 1, and the group responds by reading the even-numbered verses.
- Round-robin style: The facilitator begins by reading the first verse; then each participant subsequently reads one verse, continuing around the circle until the entire psalm is read.



Consider the psalmist's perspective of confidence that God has been at work in our lives since before we were born. As a group discuss these questions:

- In what ways was God at work in and through your own birth and the events around your birth?
- What connections might there be between God's activity in the world and your own life?
- How might the movement and location of the planets, sun, moon, and stars be a metaphor or physical symbol of the vastness, complexity, and interconnectedness of God's relationship with creation?

Living the Word (15–20 minutes)

One of the significant events, symbols of faith, and signs of God's activity in the world in the Christian faith is that of baptism. In the Reformed tradition (including Presbyterians and others), baptism is practiced with both adults and infants. It is one of our two sacraments. (Communion is the other sacrament we practice. Aspects of Communion will be considered in Session 3.) Simply put, sacraments are human symbols and rituals in which we believe God acts in a unique way to "more fully disclose and seal to us the promise of the gospel, namely, . . . the forgiveness of sins and eternal life."⁴

4. *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I, Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2002), 4.066.

Particularly in the sacrament of baptism, we are

enrolled, entered, and received into the covenant and family, and so in the inheritance of the [children] of God; yes, and in this life to be called after the name of God; that is to say, to be called a [child] of God; . . . and to be granted the manifold grace of God. . . . [Because] God, who is rich in mercy, freely cleanses us from our sins . . . and adopts us to be [God's children].⁵

The church's historical and confessional teaching on baptism is both rich and significant. However, one of the discouraging aspects of many contemporary congregations is that baptism has been effectively diluted into merely a social "naming ceremony." In many ways, we have failed to understand and communicate the deep spiritual, and even supernatural, connection of our own existence to the activity of God in and through baptism.



Consider together:

- How does your particular congregation celebrate baptism?
- What symbols are used in the celebration that demonstrate new life in the community of faith?
- How does the celebration of baptism in congregations convey the significance of God's presence and ongoing action in the midst of community?
- How could baptismal celebrations in congregations begin to better reflect the deeper meaning of the sacrament as well as the significance of the connections among God's people?

Closing (5 minutes)

Invite a participant to read this paraphrase of Psalm 139 as the closing prayer. At the end of the psalm allow for prayers of your gathered community.

*O my Beloved, You have searched me
and known me!*

*You know when I sit down and
when I rise up;*

You discern my innermost thoughts.

5. Ibid., 5.187.

*You find me on the journey and
guide my steps;
You know my strengths and
my weaknesses.
Even before words rise up in prayer,
Lo, You have already heard
my heart call.
You encompass me with love where'er
I go,
and your strength is my shield.
Such sensitivity is too wonderful
for me;
it is high; boundless gratitude
is my soul's response.*

.....
*For You formed my inward being,
You knit me together in my
mother's womb.
I praise You, for You are to be
reverenced and adored.
Your mysteries fill me with wonder!
More than I know myself do You know me;
my essence was not hidden from You,
When I was being formed in secret,
intricately fashioned from the
elements of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance;
in your records were written
every one of them,
The days that were numbered for me,
when as yet there was none of them.
How precious to me are your creations,
O Blessed One!
How vast is the sum of them!
Who could count your innumerable
gifts and blessings?
At all times, You are with me.⁶*

6. Excerpted from Psalm 139 from *An Invitation to Wholeness*. © 1996 by Nan C. Merrill.
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Looking Ahead (5–7 minutes)

As a group, make some decisions:

- If the leadership of the group is to rotate, decide who will lead the remaining sessions.
- If the location is going to change, decide where you will meet on the following weeks.
- Decide how to communicate easily with one another (phone, e-mail, other?).
- If there are going to be refreshments, how will that happen?
- Decide whether participants are willing to do reading or other “homework” during the week. Come to a common understanding of the extent to which you will follow through on outside assignments.

The next session deals with dreams. Be especially attentive to any dreams you can remember. Consider making some notes about the dream to assist your memory.

For Further Study

Watch the movie *Big Fish*, by director Tim Burton, on DVD or VHS. Reflect on the story of the son’s birth and the larger meaning of that narrative for one’s life. (On the copyright laws as they pertain to movies, see note 1 in Session 3 on page 24.)