

# SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## “Inside Out: What It Means to Be Made”

**Dr. Jay Howell**

**Psalm 139:1-16**

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Today we begin a new series called “Inside Out.” And whether you’ve been here every Sunday for the past fifty years, or whether today is your first time in a church ever, you have at one point or another grappled with that question: who am I? Questions of identity, questions of purpose. For some of you, maybe they’re not so pressing questions, even if they used to be. But for others of you, you may be feeling a nibbling in your soul right now, drawing you to ask those questions, and for some reason, if those questions brought you here, you’re not completely certain you can answer them fully on your own.

I don’t claim that I can either, but my hope is that in some way we’ll hear how the Gospel of Christ meets every question of identity and transforms it.

And as we approach some of these early questions, we first come to a word from the psalms that, honestly, folks respond to very differently. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*O LORD, you have searched me and known me. <sup>2</sup> You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. <sup>3</sup> You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. <sup>4</sup> Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. <sup>5</sup> You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. <sup>6</sup> Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. <sup>7</sup> Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? <sup>8</sup> If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. <sup>9</sup> If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, <sup>10</sup> even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. <sup>11</sup> If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night’, <sup>12</sup> even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you. <sup>13</sup> For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. <sup>14</sup> I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. <sup>15</sup> My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. <sup>16</sup> 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 139:1-16*

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Holy God, Creator of all, we praise you for we are fearfully and wonderfully made. Help us to know and see your workmanship and purpose in all you have shaped within us and around

us, and guide us to hear your Word as the good news it is intended to be. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

In 1983, the radio waves were taken by storm by what would become the biggest global hit of the year. The world's biggest band had produced the world's biggest song. It started with the lyrics: "Every breath you take, every move you make, every bond you break, every step you take, I'll be watching you." Some may recognize it. "Every Breath You Take" by The Police.

It was thought by many to be a love song, a song about one person's unending commitment to another. It sounds like a love song. You know, it's pretty, and it soared in popularity. It even started making the rounds at weddings, often as the choice for a first dance.

Eventually that got back around to the band and to Sting, the band's frontman and the writer of the song. One couple even met him and told him straight up, "Oh we love that song; it was the main song played at our wedding," to which he thought, "Well, good luck." And at one point he got concerned enough with how folks were hearing and embracing the words of the song that he went on record saying it's "a nasty little song, really rather evil." Because it wasn't about love. He said, "It's about jealousy and surveillance and ownership." I mean, it does say, "I'll be watching you," over and over again.

Not the first time this has happened, a pretty sounding song actually having some stalker-y vibes to it. "Crash Into Me" by Dave Mathews, not a love song, it's about a peeping tom. "You're Beautiful" by James Blunt, not a love song; it's about a drug addict stalking someone on the subway.

I realize it's possible I may be indicting a few folks' own weddings, so if "Every Breath You Take" has a close personal significance for you and a special someone, don't worry. Your marriage isn't doomed. It's just a song. You can interpret it anyway you want, but you gotta admit, it does sound kind of creepy, doesn't it?

And that's kind of the reason I bring it up. Did anybody else get some of those same creepy vibes when we first started reading this psalm?

"O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away," in the first verse. "You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me," in v. 5. "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence," in v. 7. I mean sure, you already heard where the psalm was heading, so the cat's out of the bag, but imagine you're hearing this for the very first time, would you hear those opening words as comforting or creepy?

I mean, you remove the word "Lord" at the very beginning, and substitute the word "Ghost" instead, and this fits right into some kind of Edgar Allan Poe story about a ghost haunting

someone. For some, it might feel like “Every Breath You Take,” just from the other person’s point of view. “You’ll be watching me.”

You read this cold, just the first few verses, you really can’t tell whether it’s meant to be reassuring. In fact it could be disturbing.

It’s not until v. 9 that the psalm hints that all of this knowledge and surveillance, basically, is actually meant as a comfort. “If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.” This constant presence isn’t some 1984 Big Brother thing; it’s a comfort, knowing that no matter where you go or how far you go, the hand of the Lord shall be there to guide you.

So what separates this psalm from “Every Breath You Take” or “Crash Into Me” or “You’re Beautiful”? Why should this constant presence and awareness of the Lord be a comfort, rather than creepy?

Because we were made.

The psalm answers the question without much ambiguity. Why is it good news that this God is with us and knows us so comprehensively? V. 13: “For 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.”

Have you ever given much thought to that, that you were *made*? You didn’t just happen. You were *made*. Changes how you think of yourself, doesn’t it?

It’d be a stretch to say that the particulars of DNA and cell replication were much on the mind of the psalm, but you know, just how does a person come into being in the first place? (Don’t worry, I’m not going into *all* the details.) But y’all know the whole “double helix” shape of a DNA strand, kind of twisty ladder looking thing. Each of the rungs on it is called a base pair, a combination of two different nucleotides—yes, I looked this up. A DNA strand has about 3 billion of those pairs, the “code” in every one of your cells that as cells develop and replicate, they set the instructions for things like, “Make a stomach here,” or “Build bones there,” or “Heal a wound here.” On a purely genetic, biological level, DNA is the blueprint, the assembly manual, for who you are.

Now look at the person next to you. Then look at the person across the way from you. Whoever you looked at, your DNA is at least 99.6% identical, which is a whole other point on its own, just in the scale of everything people have in common. But that remaining .4% is what distinguishes you from another person. It determines how tall you are, what color your hair is, how your muscles connect, even how your brain is wired, so things like personality, learning styles, those are all in the mix too.

Now I'm not saying it's all genetics. It's not all just biological fate. What's the old debate? Nature vs nurture. Not all one or the other. But obviously embedded even on a cellular level, there's something that defines who we are.

So should we think that's random?

Did you know that when you shuffle a deck of cards—like, actually shuffle them, not trying to stack the deck or something—the resulting deck has never existed before and will never exist again? In a 52-card deck, the number of possible combinations for a deck is 8 with 67 zeroes after it. The sheer odds of all the different possibilities mean that every time a deck of cards is shuffled, it is a unique occurrence, and it will never happen again. Do any of you marvel at the creation of a shuffled deck of cards? No. Probably not, right. It's just how the deck came up this time.

The possible combinations of DNA, even just with variables out of that .4%, is 3 with over 600 zeroes after it, exponentially upon exponentially more combinations than a shuffled deck of cards, which already will never be replicated.

When your biological mother and father's DNA came together to produce yours, and then stack on top of that how their biological parents' DNA came together to produce theirs, and so on and so on through the generations, and all the replications and combinations that happened along the way to bring about the particular sequence of 3 billion DNA base pairs that on a biological level define who you are, do we think of that like we would a shuffled deck of cards?

Probably not when you put it like that, but how many of us, in practice at least, can get caught into thinking of ourselves of that little worth, as just a random occurrence?

Francis Collins is a geneticist who served twenty years as the director of the National Center for Human Genome Research. This was the body that mapped and published the full human genome. So that whole 3 billion long sequence of a DNA strand? They mapped the whole thing. The stereotype, of course, is that as a man of science, of research, he would be skeptical about any notions of faith coming into his work if there wasn't some kind of hard evidence to back it up, but the opposite is true about Collins. He said at one point about science, "It's a little glimpse of God's mind. In a way, that's what science is doing. It's glimpsing God's mind and being in awe of it." I can't help but hear echoes of the psalm here: "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it."

But then speaking of his work on the human genome, he noted, "We had now seen the language that God used to speak us into being."

Here we have this geneticist, this person who is intimately aware and knowledgeable, and in fact the person perhaps most responsible for our being aware and knowledgeable, of what

makes us who we are at a biological level, and what he sees isn't chance at work, a shuffling of the genetic deck, but rather purpose.

“For 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.”

I can almost feel obvious, or trite to say it, but has that ever been something that you’ve acknowledged or affirmed to yourself? Has that ever been something that you’ve acknowledged or affirmed to another person? To say, “I was *made*.” It changes things.

Because no doubt at one point or another, we look in the mirror, and we see only shortcomings. We only see how we don’t measure up to this person or that person, or how we don’t live up to some standard that somebody else has set for you or some standard that you’ve set for yourself, or how you wish you were different, that you looked different, that you thought different, that you acted different. We only see how we wish we could be taller, or shorter, or thinner, or thicker, or more attractive, or at least why couldn’t I be as attractive as so and so over there. We only see how we wish we could be smarter or more athletic, or that our personality was more social or less anxious, or maybe at least that we could be as smart or athletic or sociable as so and so over there.

And this is not to dismiss every insecurity we might have about our appearance, our body, our body image, our aptitudes physically or mentally, or even challenges that we or our loved ones face precisely because of our genetics, asking “Why was I made this way?” Those questions, those doubts are valid, and this is not a message saying, “Eh, get over it.”

But I hope you hear this word alongside any other word that calls into question your worth:

You were made, intricately, fearfully, wonderfully made, by a God who loves you. And no matter how far you may run, “If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.”

Over the next few weeks, we will be talking a lot about identity, who we are and what we’re made to be. Some of those weeks will be encouraging, declarations of how God in Christ has made, redeemed, and sanctified us. Other weeks will be encouraging in their own ways, I suppose, but will be honest, maybe tough looks at ourselves and what we’ve become.

But I hope that throughout, we hear the echoes of the comfort embedded in this psalm: “For 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.” You were made, with a purpose, by a loving Maker.

These words have certainly been on our hearts as a family these past eight months. As many of you know, we're expecting to welcome a baby girl into our family at some point over the next few weeks, or later today, for all I know. Somewhere in the mix of all the excitement, all the nervousness, all the worry about all that could happen or go wrong, and it was the same as with Jack and Harry too, is this wonder and joy of discovering who Lilly will be, who she's been fearfully and wonderfully made to be, who she's been formed and knit together to be. And though I'd like to think Frances and I, you know, had something to do with it and we know we'll have something to do with it throughout her life, so much of it is in that .4% that shapes so much about who we are and is completely out of our control.

And so when I imagine who my daughter has been made to be, I do so with wonder, but also a little fear too. Because I know that I will fail her in some way, many ways for that matter. I know that I will not be all things that a parent, a father, should be. And I fear the impact that I could have, same as with Jack and with Harry. But I also hear the assurances of this psalm that no matter where she goes, no matter how far she may run, whenever she sits down or rises up, the Lord's hand is upon her.

And whoever she ends up being, she was made by a God who loves her.

And so were you.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.