

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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#selfiewithGod

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How are you and God getting along these days? What kind of dialogue do you share with one another?

God waits for us to say absolutely anything. A simple “hello” starts the conversation. Maybe an occasional “thanks”, or better yet, offer a “look what I did,” as you give God the credit.

Talking with God should be as easy as connecting with a long-time friend. Not always profound and deep, just a continual banter to remember, and this means for you to remember, God’s presence, God’s care, and your God-given potential in life.

God invites us to talk to God as if a soul mate.

If prayer is too formal, what about texting God a selfie from your smartphone? Capture an image of yourself with a smile, a goofy face, a tear, or with a backdrop to mark a moment in time when you are aware of God.

That spark of wonder, about yourself and God, might be akin to what inspired a writer long ago to compose this psalm. Before I read, please pray with me.

God of all truth, who can stand before you?

We judge by outward appearances, but you examine our hearts.

We see what is on the surface,

but you discern the beauty planted deep within.

*In these ancient words of scripture, point us to your eternal truth
so that your creation shines from each one of us.*

Amen.

Listen to the conversation this writer has with God.

Psalm 139:1-6,13-18

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.

You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.

You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it ...

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.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.

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.

How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!

I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end—I am still with you.

Research indicates someone between the ages of 18 and 34 will take 25,000 selfies in a lifetime. Sounds crazy.¹ Each second, 1,100 selfies are posted to the social media site, Instagram.

¹ Laura Bostwick, "Millennials Will Spend 38 Hours Taking Selfies This Year — Here's What to Do Instead," *FinanceBuzz*, April 3, 2023
<https://financebuzz.com/impact-of-selfies-study>

That means by the end of this worship service, almost 3 million selfies will be added to our digital universe.

Art critic Jerry Salz defines selfie this way:

A selfie is a “fast self-portrait, made with a smartphone’s camera and immediately distributed and inscribed into a network, (a selfie) is an instant visual communication of where we are, what we are doing, who we think we are, and who we think is watching.”²

Although I am exploiting the novelty of the selfie, some of you may never take a selfie. A selfie represents one of many medias to express and explore ones’ own self. So exchange “selfie” with a self-portrait, posed portrait, autobiography, memoir, family photo album. or any of the myriad ways we record and share who we are.

A selfie is a convenient way to say, “I am here” and “my life matters.” Selfies reveal something of our human nature. Through them, we explore our individuality. We also create relationship with others through them.

² Jerry Saltz, “Art at Arm’s Length: A History of the Selfie,” *New York Magazine*, February 3, 2014, accessed June 20, 2018, <http://www.vulture.com/2014/01/history-of-the-selfie.html>.

To understand one aspect of selfies, theologian Craig Detweiler holds up an Ancient Roman myth of an extraordinarily beautiful young man named, Narcissus. While walking in the woods, the nymph Echo sees him and immediately falls in love. Aware of her presence, Narcissus asks, "Who's there?" Echo responds, "Who's there." Taking a risk for love, she steps out with arms wide open, vulnerable, and unguarded.

At that moment, Narcissus yells, "Hands off! May I die before I give you power over me," as if being in a relationship requires him to surrender power.

In many ways, he is correct. To be in a relationship with another person removes him from being the center of his universe.

Rejected, Echo retreats into a cave, her bones fade, and she becomes only a thin voice of her former self. Being overlooked and ignored, heard but unseen, is a devastating curse.

Nemesis, the God of Revenge, decides to punish him.

While out hunting, Nemesis makes Narcissus become thirsty, very thirsty. He finds a glassy pool, but before he reaches towards to drink, he gazes at himself, and falls in love with the reflected image.

Wanting more than a drink, he reaches into the water to hug himself. He hears a voice, “O foolish boy, why vainly seek to clasp a fleeting image? That which you behold is but the shadow of a reflected form and has no substance of its own.”

When he realized he could never hold this object of his love, loneliness and despair set in. In some versions of this myth, he wastes away to nothing. In another version, something snaps him from self-absorption. Seeing nothing beyond the fleeting image of himself, he takes his own life.³

If the myth of Narcissus were written today, rather than a glassy pool, he might delight in posing for and posting selfies, pursue accolades measured in likes and retweets on social media. If he felt the images were less than perfect, he could photoshop or enhance it.

For Narcissus, social media would not be the vehicle to connect with others. He would ignore intimate encounters, as he did with Echo. And, since he cannot risk sharing attention or reveal flaws, he’d constantly curate his selfies to his liking. This would lead to the same tragic demise for those he ignores and himself.

³ Craig Detweiler, *Selfies: Searching for the Image of God in a Digital Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2018), 35-36 and “The Myth of Narcissus,” *Greek Myths & Greek Mythology*, accessed June 28, 2018, <https://www.greekmyths-greekmythology.com/narcissus-myth-echo/>. I am indebted to Detweiler’s *Selfie* to prompt reflection about the dangers and benefits of the selfie craze.

It is a myth, but it is also true. Myths endure because of their stories convey truths about human behavior.

Our faith tradition teaches of other possibilities. The higher and universal truth for all us begins with God.

God created the world in which we live. God created humankind in God's own image. God blesses the diversity of humankind and calls us "very good" for the ways we reflect God's image.

The writer of Psalm 139 describes being enclosed in this divine reality, of being within a mothers' wombs, of God knowing thoughts before words grasp the ideas. This writer feels God infuses every fiber of his being. With humility the psalmist sighs, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me."

If the psalmist could gaze at the same glassy pool as Narcissus, instead of marveling at himself, he would notice God's presence swirling in the water and in himself.

When we realize how little we bring to the table, we start to appreciate God's generosity and God's invitation for each of us to reflect God to the world around.

Consider this ancient psalm the writer's #selfiewithgod composed in prayer and poetry.

It takes just 11 seconds to snap a selfie. But then people tend to belabor another 26 minutes worrying about sharing that image on social media.⁴

Selfies presents us with a choice. What do we see when we see ourselves? Here are the differences between Narcissus' understanding of self and the psalmists.

Narcissus remains bound by his capacity to create. The psalmist's possibilities become endless when magnified by God's ability to create.

Narcissus' selfies brag about himself. The psalmist's prayer points to God's divine imprint and promises.

Narcissus would chase the moment, addicted to pleasing himself, and no one else. The psalmist grows stronger by noticing the collection of portraits created by others, and the breadth and capacity for God to love.

Narcissus craves mountain top experiences for the euphoria. The psalmist patiently waits to receive divine encounters; conscious they often arise when vulnerable, often in dark times.

⁴ Karolis Kiniulis, How Many Selfies Are Taken in a Day," *Eksposure*, July 2, 2022, <https://www.eksposure.com/selfie-statistics/>

Narcissus would photo shop any flaw, fearing shame. The psalmist knows shame is optional in a world when God's grace abounds. We are created to be human and to be renewed by God.

In some ways this is an unfair comparison since Narcissus is merely a character trait, we all may fall prey to, whereas the psalmist was as human as you and me. The psalmist is never free from God. The psalmist is free for and to God.

To explore God's presence strengthens us to take risks, lean into one another, let life blossom as God intends.

When Hailey Wait was an 18-year-old student, she became an influencer on Instagram with 15,000 people who would follow the selfies she posted.

Once she began to develop acne, she raided the make-up aisle at Walgreens for cover-up, which over time, aggravated her skin, making it worse.

After seven months of trying to hide her condition or editing the photos, she stopped: "I realized that my appearance wasn't the thing that made me who I am....which minimized the importance I put on the spots on my face."

Some would have considered what she did next as suicide on social media: she posted photos of her clean face – smiles and blemishes.

She received a few taunts at first. Then the opposite happened as thousands of teens began sharing messages of their own struggles with acne and affirmed her beauty and their beauty. Within a month Hailey Wait had 151,000 followers.⁵

The paradox of selfies we curate is that they may threaten our souls and psyches with narcissism, doubt or alienation; destroying what God created. Outsourcing our self-worth is a dangerous, high-stakes game.

Rooting our worth in God's image of us allows us to rise above comparisons. Snap a selfie. Seek God's presence. Be startled by your divine creatureliness, beautiful and flawed. Accept God's grace for foibles, mistakes, failed attempts.

Ground yourself with the psalmist's wisdom that any self-portrait offers you the chance to show off God to the world. That's how we connect to one another and to our source of life.

⁵ Andrea Cheng, "Yes, It's Acne, but Some Are Cool With It" *The New York Times*, May 31, 2018.



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