

“A Psalm for Summer”
 Delivered Sunday, June 19, 2011 (Trinity Sunday)
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Psalm 8

Psalm 8 is one of the most inspirational, majestic, and theologically dense passages in the Bible. In nine short verses it addresses who God is, who human beings are in relationship to God and our relationship to all of creation on our planet and in the universe. The Psalm claims that theology, anthropology and ecology are all intertwined – by its clear affirmation that God, human beings, and the created order are inseparable. And not only that, the power of God’s glory is so much greater than any despair that can diminish the human spirit.

Reading this Psalm on Father’s Day takes me back to wonderful, early summertime memories. We were part of that post-World War II baby boom generation that began to explore in great numbers the country and national parks. Summer trips meant packing six children in a large station wagon, tying our luggage on top and heading out – from Richmond to the West Coast one summer, to Nova Scotia another, once to Cape Canaveral to watch a rocket blast off into outer space. Both of my parents had a wonderful sense of adventure, but it was my father who was particularly interested in nature – who tended a garden and fruit trees in our large yard on the seminary campus, as well as a greenhouse where he grew orchids and other flowers year round. I imagine there is not a botanical garden between Virginia and Vancouver that I did not visit as a child.

Of all our the summertime comings and goings, in the carefree playground of my childhood days, the most peaceful memory I have is going out for ice cream – ten cents a scoop – and then coming home just after dark to an open field beside the house and lying on our backs to watch the stars. To this day, summer always leads my gaze upward to the stars, and memories of my father pointing out constellations, and planets and meteor showers.

*Oh, Lord, our Sovereign,
 how majestic is your name in all the earth!
 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
 the moon and the stars you have established...
 what are human beings that you are mindful of us,
 mortals that you care for us?*

If I were to have one seasonal wish for all of us, it would be that we would each take some time this summer to consider the majesty of God’s creation. Many of us will with a trip to the beach or the mountains or some far flung destination, but even if you are unable to travel – all of us should be able to find time to gaze at the stars, and to think about how great God is and how God has given us a special job to do in the care of creation.

As far as we know, Psalm 8 includes the first words of scripture to land on the moon. The Apollo 11 mission left a silicon disc containing messages from seventy-three nations, including the Vatican, which contributed the text of this psalm. (1) A very fitting contribution I think, because Psalm 8 holds together both the wondrous sovereignty of God and the glorious dignity and resourcefulness of humankind. Addressed to God, this hymn of praise begins with an exclamation: the great, majestic power of God in all creation.

Then suddenly, the Psalm plunges the reader from the celestial order to life on earth. The plot turns from the awe over God's creation to the wonder over humankind's status within this grand earthly order. (2) It recognizes the smallness we feel when we lift our heads toward the night sky, and behold the starlit expanse of space and our own fragile finitude. Nevertheless, humanity's smallness before the vastness of creation constitutes merely the beginning point for the psalmist's reflection. The relative insignificance of human beings is mysteriously matched by an honored dignity granted to humankind by God at creation. We are a little lower than God, the Psalmist says, a little less than the angels; however God is mindful of us, has crowned us with glory and honor, and has given us a job to do to care for the creation.

This psalm does not so much invite us to create the job description for "Human Steward of Creation," as to remind us that our role on the good earth is embraced by the incredible grandeur of God. Our very existence is bracketed by praise.

Garrison Keillor's wonderful monologues on *A Prairie Home Companion* are often about religion, and regularly about how the grace-filled ways of God work through the quirky nature of humankind. In a particularly delightful piece he explained that "car ownership in Lake Wobegon is a matter of faith." In that small town the cars literally say something about the faith of its owner. Lutherans drove Fords, bought from Bunson Motors, the Lutheran car dealer, and Catholics drove Chevrolets from Main Garage, owned by the Kreugers, who are Catholic. The Brethren – Keillor's own people – being Protestant, also drove Fords but distinguished themselves from the Lutherans by attaching small Scripture plates to the top of their license tags. The verses were written in tiny glass beads so they showed up well at night. The favorite was "The wages of sin is death". Keillor's father's car sported a compass on the dashboard with "I am the Way" inscribed in luminescent letters across its face, which he said his father put there to be "clearly visible in the dark to a girl who might be sitting beside him," as if Jesus himself were in the car chaperoning!

But the real champion among the Lake Wobegon Church of Brethren people was Brother Louie, whose four-door Fairlane was a rolling display of scripture – on the license plates – across the dashboard, on the sun visors, arm rest, floor mats, ashtray and glove compartment. Louie's tour de force, however, was the car horn. He found a company in Indiana that advertised custom-made musical car horns. Louie's horn played the first eight notes of the Doxology. It sounded like a trumpet. He blew it at pedestrians, at oncoming traffic, while passing, and sometimes just for his own pleasure. "On occasion, vexed by a fellow driver, he gave in to wrath and leaned on

the horn, only to hear “Praise God from whom all blessings flow.” Keillor notes, “It calmed him down right away.” (3)

Imagine how we might look at the world, if the Doxology of Psalm 8 were trumpeted in all the comings and goings of our daily rounds.

*O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

“We need the biggest dose of God we can get,” writes Marva Dawn, professor of theology at Notre Dame, “to shake us out of our societal sloth and summon us to behold God’s splendor.”

So, here, near the beginning of summer, let us heed the summons of the Psalmist to the wonder of God’s splendor. Find a place to lie down and look up at the stars. Nurture the things that grow in your yard as the person you are – gifted by God to care for them. Regard that fuzzy, furry little beast that roams your home on all fours – as a creature God alone could make – who in the order of things is just a little lower than us humans, who are just a little lower than the angels.

Writer and photographer, Diana Greene, was grieving the death of her father, and in that season of loss – which often can steer a person to reflect on the meaning of life and our place in this world – she became acquainted with her great grandmother. She was clearing out her father’s desk and found Ada Alden’s 360 page typed memoir. She discovered that her father’s grandmother was born in Virginia five years before the Civil War began, and became an award-winning poet. “Many people touch nothing more than the foam of life and even its shifting and iridescence evades them,” Ada wrote. “The suffering of humanity have lain heavily upon me all my life, and while miracle of science may in time overcome almost any physical lack, what miracle can help the crippled spirit? And yet we have within us within us, if we care to find it, something that far transcends the workings of the loftiest brain. My creed is wonder.” (4)

As people of faith who gather around this word, my friends, *our* creed is wonder.

*O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) David Sharrard, “Pastoral Implications” of Psalm 8, *Lectionary Homiletics*, June-July, 2011, p. 23
- 2) William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor*, p. 157.

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3) Garrison Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, p. 122ff, and retold by John Buchanan in "Doxology," Fourth Church, Chicago, 11/24/02.

4) Ada Alden quote from *Divining Ada*, and Diana Greene, WFDD-FM, April 19, 2001.