

Psalm 8: Knowing Our Place

Psalm 8 *What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?*

Proverbs 8:30-31 *...I was daily God's delight, rejoicing before God always,
rejoicing in God's inhabited world and delighting in the human race.*

Psalm 8 is about knowing our place as human beings. To "know one's place" has two meanings. First, it is a call to humility, to know our limits, to know what we are not as well as what we are. For instance, it is not "my place" to tell someone else how to live her life. On the other hand, there is a marvelous strength, energy, and power that comes from "knowing our place" in life. We can discern and occupy our place, our niche in life, with a sense of clarity about who we are and what we have to offer, the gifts we have and what we are called to do. Psalm 8 speaks of both these dimensions of finding and knowing our place.

*O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.*

The sovereignty of God. God is God, and I am not! When we are truly aware of the world of which we are part, we sense a Power and Presence that is the origin, energy, and destiny of life. We call it "God", yet we must know that using the word "God" does not mean we can own, control, or fully comprehend the reality to which that word points. The name of God is majestic through all the earth. It is the same as the Lord's Prayer: "Hallowed be your name." The name of God is God's sacred, holy presence and essence. For Israel, the name of a person contained or expressed the essence or character of that person. To name something or someone is to establish a relationship. When we name our child or our pet or a place, we establish and claim a relationship. However, God's name is majestic, beyond owning or controlling, held sacred throughout the creation. This means that our fundamental spiritual attitude toward God is one of awed reverence, or what scripture calls "fear". It is speechless wonder as we become aware of God in all of life.

God's glory is set above the heavens, unreachable, and yet shining upon and through all of life. Ps. 104 puts it this way: "You are clothed with honor and majesty, wrapped in light as with a garment." These opening sentences set the tone for us: God is a reality beyond our reach or control or complete knowing. God is not a reality to be domesticated the way it happens in so much of religion, where God becomes "my" God, our nation's God, a tribal deity favoring our own little group. The psalm, I think, expresses our deepest spiritual need--to be aware of the presence and yet the "beyondness" of God, creator of heaven and earth.

*Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark
because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.*

The psalms speak often of the creation constantly praising God. When I have asked people through the years where they most clearly experience God, frequently they answer when they are out in nature. And what has the church done with that? Become defensive. Oh, that's nature worship. You can't be a Christian just out in nature. You have to be in the church and inside a particular building. You have to accept this or that creed or set of beliefs. The church has ended up with a belief in God as creator, but without a spirituality that is really connected with the creation. No wonder we end up with groups claiming the Bible gives a scientific explanation of the world--creationism--yet do not put themselves on the side of preserving and protecting that very creation. There has been a terrible disconnect in our religious tradition between what we hold as doctrine--the world as God's good creation--and how we live as part of that creation. The horrific irresponsibility in the Gulf of Mexico is made possible by a religious tradition that has abandoned its own truths.

There are many reasons for us to live reverently within the creation. For us as people of faith, at the top of the list is that the creation tells us of God. That simple. When we diminish and destroy the creation, we silence little by little the voiceless voice that is constantly praising God and pointing us to God. I think this is behind these words about the bulwark God has founded out of the mouths of babies and infants. What do little

children do? They speak from their hearts. They cry when they are hurt or in need. They go and laugh when they experience delight. When given the chance, they tromp around in nature with delight, finding endless wonders, a leaf, a stick, a mud puddle. They have no problem being what God made them to be. It is only as they grow up that we turn them into something else. Anthony De Mello puts it this way: "Happiness is our natural state. Happiness is the natural state of little children, to whom the kingdom belongs until they have been polluted and contaminated by the stupidity of society and culture." De Mello means happiness in the most profound sense. It has to do with the world being the way God made it, with us being the way God made us. It is something that we already have but has gotten covered over and distorted by all the stuff we buy into that is not about who we really are.

The point is that out of the mouths of little children comes the truth about life, about God. Even the forces that are in opposition to God and the way God created the world to work don't stand a chance. There is no need to get all worked up about evil forces and fretting over whether or not God's purposes for life will win out. It's a done deal. All we have to do is listen to what is coming out of the mouths of babes and infants, what is coming out of the wondrous world in which we live. Jesus believed this very deeply. What did he say? Let the little children come to me. Get out of their way. The kingdom of God belongs to them. They know what it is about. It's you adults who have gotten lost, who don't have a clue even when you immersed yourselves in religion. And, why are you upset and anxious and fearful about where your next meal is coming from or whether you will have the right clothes to wear and all of that? Contemplate the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. Do they fret? Are they anxious? They are just being who God made them to be. They don't have a problem with that. Learn something from the creation that is all around, and of which you are a part. You can wake up to the truth of your own life.

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?*

When Kaye and I were on the Oregon coast, we took a hike one day. The trail led us through old growth forests of massive and towering moss-covered trees, and a lush carpet of moss and ferns. I told Kaye I felt as though we were in Jurassic Park! The quiet majesty of the forest contrasted with the thundering wildness of the Pacific shore we from which we had walked. Yet it was the same thing, the same awareness of being part of creation that relieves us of our self-importance and self-centered view of life. The trail ended at a giant spruce tree. Our sense of awe received a huge exclamation point. The tree is five hundred years old and stands over two hundred feet tall. It presides over the forest like a silent sentinel, the oldest and largest member of the forest community.

If we are aware of the world in which we live, if we can see past the artifice and superficiality of what we humans have manufactured, all the self-important structures and activities and endeavors, if we look at the moon and the stars that God has created, gazing into the infinite depths of space, then we will arrive at the most important spiritual question: Who are we that God even is aware of us, much less cares about us? It is a question that gives rise to a deep humility, a sense of our smallness that brings with it a kind of healing. The fever and anxiousness and striving that comprises so much of our living can fade away as we wonder at our place in the vast complexity and mystery of the world, of the universe.

*Yet you have made us [here I change the pronoun to make it more personal]
a little lower than God [or, the angels] and crowned us with glory and honor.
You have given us dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under our feet, all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air,
and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.*

These verses echo Genesis 1, where God creates human beings, male and female, and gives them "dominion". This biblical idea has fallen into disrepute in recent decades because it has been misunderstood and misused. It does not mean domination of the natural world to the point of destruction. Dominion does not mean using the world for our own ends regardless of the effects. It does not mean that the world belongs to us as property, to do with it as we wish. The better word is "stewardship", which means that we are entrusted by God to care for and to use wisely the creation of which we are part. It does not belong to us, is not our property, but is placed into our care and keeping. We violate that trust at the risk of the world itself and our own lives, as we are, I hope, finally learning.

This part of the psalm reflects an understanding that our place in the creation as human beings is unique,

not better, not superior. We are an integral part of the world around us, yet we have a responsibility to live within the world with a sense of awe, respect, care-taking, and responsibility for the world's well-being. The genius of Psalm 8 is that the first part of the psalm is essential to the second part, and the other way around. Our humble and awed awareness of our own small lives within the whole expanse of the universe readies us to understand that we are, at the same time, crowned with our own glory and honor, and we are entrusted with the care of the earth and its creatures. And our "dominion" cannot be rightly understood or lived out unless it is steeped in and shaped by deep humility and awareness of our place in the whole of creation.

Some years ago, I was in the midst of an extremely stressful set of circumstances. Each day presented an overwhelming challenge just to get through, just to put one foot in front of the other, so to speak. It was during the winter, and I took to walking at night around our neighborhood. On clear nights I would look up at the black winter sky, studded with the myriad lights of the heavens, the "moon and the stars that God had established". I am not that familiar with constellations, but I knew Orion. I looked for it each night, and began to draw a certain, unexplainable comfort and strength from that constellation. It seemed to stand tall and strong, and conveyed to me a stability and sense of solidity that I needed.

What I experienced during those days and those nighttime walks was exactly what the psalmist was talking about. The circumstances of my life brought a keen awareness of being set within an expansive world which is ultimately a mystery and beyond my control. I certainly felt my smallness. And yet it was not the smallness of being reduced to nothing. There was also an emerging awareness that, though everything felt so chaotic and out of control, though my life is so minute within the great expanse of reality, I was yet made a little lower than God, crowned with glory and honor. I would still be able to find a way of living through these circumstances with dignity, wisdom, patience, and peace, and with a deepened sense of humility, of the limitations of my life. I would be able to take up, with a humbler spirit, the responsibilities to be met and the decisions to be made.

The psalm ends where it began. And so we come, again and again, through the sometimes overwhelming experiences of our lives, to the awed and humble awareness of the life that is around us and in us:

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