

May 26, 2013 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

### 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.*

John 16:12-15 *When the Spirit of truth comes, it will guide you into all the truth....*

At the beginning of this morning's order of service is part of a poem by the Kentucky farmer, poet, and environmental economist Wendell Berry:

*...And we pray, not for new earth or heaven, but to be quiet in heart,  
and in eye/clear. What we need is here. (from "The Wild Geese")*

A few weeks ago, we heard these words from the conclusion of the Revelation to John: *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away... (21:1)* The writer seems to talk of something happening outside of us, God transforming the world. Berry's poem is about something happening in us, so that we see the world as it truly is. At first I thought these two words were contradictory. Then it occurred to me that today we need to hear the words of the Revelation in light of Wendell Berry's words. When we change, the world changes. When we become new, everything around us is new. When we awaken spiritually, through cultivating quiet hearts and clear eyes, the new heaven and the new earth are right here, and have been all the time.

In Proverbs we read of Wisdom as God's first creation. She is God's co-worker. God delights in Wisdom and she delights in the created world and in humanity. In John's gospel, Jesus tells the disciples that God's Spirit will be with them, to guide them into all truth, all understanding. We are living in an exciting, yet fragile, time of transition in the way we understand our place in the world. Old ways of thinking and living that are destructive to life around us can no longer hold. This change takes more than moral resolve. It takes a spiritual awakening. By spiritual, I don't mean people joining churches or even a particular religion. I mean we human beings waking up to reality, to the sacred dimension of all of life, and understanding deeply how our lives are dependent upon the creation of which we are part, physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. It takes a return to wisdom and to letting ourselves be led into understanding that is deeper, wider, and beyond our ego-centered vision. It takes the kind of inner quietness and clearer seeing that Wendell

Berry speaks of, until we begin to see that we have everything we need, that the new heaven and earth is the world here and now, as it truly is. Change ourselves, change the world.

Psalm 8 is about knowing our place as human beings within and as part of the expanse of creation. To "know one's place" means the humility of knowing our limits, who we are and are not, what we can and cannot do. Yet, there is strength, energy, and power for good that comes from "knowing our place" in life. We can discern and occupy our place, our niche, 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. We can discern how we fit into and contribute to the tapestry of life.

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

*You have set your glory above the heavens.*

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", a word that only points to a reality beyond our control or comprehension. The name of God is majestic through all the earth. It is the same as the Lord's Prayer: *Hallowed, or sacred, be your name*. The name of God is God's sacred, holy presence and essence. This means that our fundamental spiritual attitude is awed reverence, or what scripture calls "fear". It is speechless wonder as we become aware of God in all of life. Contrast this with the ways some religious persons and groups claim exclusive knowledge of God and God's will, and that God is on their side. It is the "God bless our country" or "God bless our team" attitude. These opening sentences set the tone. God is a reality beyond our control or complete knowing, yet filling the universe. The psalm expresses our deepest spiritual need--to live with a sense of awe and wonder.

*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 often speak of the creation constantly praising God. When I have asked people through the years where they most vividly experience God, most answer when they are out in nature. 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 with other people inside a particular building. You have to accept this or that creed or set of beliefs. The church talks about God as creator, but has not fostered awareness of God in and through the 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. This has been damaging not only to the creation but also to our own spirits.

We live reverently within the creation because the creation tells us of God. When we

diminish and destroy the creation, we silence the voices that sing of God, in sound or silence. Thus the words about the bulwark God has founded out of the mouths of babies and infants. Little children speak from their hearts. They cry when they are hurt or in need. They coo and laugh when they experience delight. When given the chance, they tromp around in nature with delight, completely at home, finding endless wonders--a leaf, a stick, a mud puddle. They have no problem being what God made them to be. As they grow up, however, we turn them into something else, as we ourselves were turned 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 being the way God made us. It is something that we are born with, but gets buried and distorted by all the unreality we buy into.

Out of the mouths of little children comes the truth about life, about God. Against such, nothing stands a chance. There is no need to fret over whether or not God's purposes for life will win out. 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 and to those who become like them. They know what it is about. Why are you anxious and fearful about food or clothes and all of that? Contemplate the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. Are they worried or anxious? They are just being who God made them to be. They don't have a problem with that. Learn from the creation around you the truth of your own life, of what matters and what does not matter.

*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?*

If we are deepening in awareness of the world in which we live, if we are seeing past and through 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, or the micro-universe of a flower, then we will arrive at the most important spiritual question: Who are we that God is even aware of us, much less cares about us? This is a question filled with wonder and humility that brings with it a kind of healing. The feverish, anxious 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.

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.

It was 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 "moon and the stars that God had established". I found the constellation Orion, and looked for it each night. I drew from it a certain, unexplainable comfort and strength. It seemed to stand tall and strong, and conveyed to me a sense of solidity that I needed. Someone once shared with me a similar experience. He was in a residential recovery program, and the stresses of recovery and living in close quarters would strain his ability to stay peaceful. Once in a while he would catch the scent of honeysuckle, maybe coming through an open window or during times outside the building. That sweet summery aroma would calm him and fill him with a joy that helped him remain solid and peaceful.

Such experiences are exactly where the psalmist was. We become aware that we are set within an expansive world, strangely comforted that we are very small. Yet it is not the smallness of being reduced to nothing. Instead, we are drawn beyond our ego-centeredness, released from the kind of self-importance that sets us up for so much misery. The small self, the ego is transcended as we become mindful of being part of this world, this universe, this creation. We see that we are so much more than the particular circumstances of our lives at any given moment. Out of this awareness, we find ways of living in all circumstances with dignity, wisdom, patience, and peace, and with a deepened sense of humility. We become able to take up, with humbler and wiser spirits, the responsibilities of our lives.

*Yet you have made us a little lower than God 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". It does not mean domination of the natural world. Dominion does not mean using the world for our own ends regardless of the effects. It does not mean that the earth or any part of it belongs to us as property, as financial assets. The better word is "stewardship", which means that we are entrusted by God with the care and wise use the creation. It does not belong to us, but is placed into our care and keeping. We violate that trust at the risk of the world itself and our own lives.

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. Our humble and awed

awareness of our own small lives within the whole expanse of the universe readies us to understand that we, at the same time, have our own glory and honor, and are entrusted with the care of the earth and its creatures. 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.

The psalm ends where it began. 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!*