

Stars, Camels, and Other Improbable Wonders

Psalm 8

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Happy Easter! Christ is risen! Christ is risen!

No, we're not in a time loop; last Sunday was the one we call Easter, and this is not that—but Easter is not just a day. It is a whole season of resurrection, of appearances, of Jesus being a little bit of a beautiful gremlin as He teaches the disciples the next step of living as this thing called Church in the world.

It's also spring, sort of—we are in Michigan, after all—and that is a season of resurrections, itself. I'm not particularly a fan of spring, but I appreciate watching others appreciate the bursting flowers and the trees waving shyly at each other as the robins and sparrows chirp their seasonal hellos. Spring is a good time to pay attention to the fact that we live on a planet that is, quite frankly, impressive.

One part I do like is that I'm an early riser by inclination, which means that as the days get longer I get to see the full impact of the sunrises. I often make a point of watching them, even on cloudy days, just for the meditation of seeing the new day as the planet turns this side toward the sun. They've been beautiful this week, the sunrises, with the different layers of lavender and creamsicle orange and blushing pink melting into each other over my neighbor's house.

In fact, that beauty of nature is one that often comes up in my conversations with people about where they find God. The answer is so often “in nature,” because nature can be deeply awesome—in the original sense of “full of awe,” not just “really rad, yo.” Many folks who look at the sunrise, or see a dragonfly skimming across a pond, or listen to the thunderous power of the ocean breathing against rocky shores, say, “Here, here is God. Here is God's majesty,” even though most people don't tend to use the term “majesty” all that often.

The psalmist, too, looks at the splendor of his world and is bowled over by it. “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, / the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,” he writes, and doesn't continue “oh wow” but kind of does. Psalm 8 is a hymn of praise, the first in the psalter, and is actually the only hymn addressed entirely to God.¹ There is no moment of addressing the congregation, or one's enemies, or even the stars and the sheep; this is all a conversation with God, the marvelous and creative God Who built the world and invited us to be part of it.

For all that creation is devastatingly fantastic, though, it's also deeply weird. That same sunrise yesterday that made me wax poetic about the nature of color also gifted me the amusement of a skunk trundling along the back fence as it searched for a way to cross under, at one point startling a robin into chattering hops away. Skunks move in such a strange, almost undulating way, like their bodies and legs aren't in agreement as to how “forward” should work.

¹ [Commentary on Psalm 8 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2013.

And when I was in Israel recently, I had the adventure of briefly riding a camel—which, I can tell you right out, was absolutely *nothing* like riding a horse. Camels are deeply strange creatures that are built to survive the intensely dry heat of the deserts and, as such, are all practicality and very little grace. Their necks curve like animatronic dinosaurs in patterns you can't predict, and there are essentially elbows in their thighs that make getting off the ground a three-step process. (Very bumpy when you're part of that; I nearly slid down that neck, which was mortifying.)

This, too, is awesome; this, too, is part of God's wondrous creation. It's the stars and the majestic sunrises and the beautifully thunderous ocean—but it's also the bizarre camels and the trundling skunks, the half-hearted ferns slumped against exasperated oaks. All of this speaks to God's majesty and, says the psalmist, to ours. "When I look at your heavens," writes the psalmist, lost in wonderment, "what is man that you are mindful of him?"

It's important to remember here that the psalm wasn't originally in English—none of the Bible was, but this particularly is Hebrew poetry. "Man," here—translated "human," sometimes, to make explicit the gender neutrality of it—is *a-DAH*,² the same word that gives the first human his name. "Adam" is related to the Hebrew word *Adamah*, which means "dirt" or "mud" or, appropriately, "earth." (In fact, the names of both Adam and Eve are linguistic puns, which should absolutely be part of every conversation we have about the creation stories in Genesis and what the authors were trying to do with them.)

Here, in this psalm from around the first millennium BC, the psalmist is juxtaposing the height of God in the glory even *above* the heavens with mud-folk, earth-people. "*Adam*" means "humanity's finitude and fallibility," writes Professor Jerome Creach. "The human is from the earth, not from the heavens."³ What are creatures made of clay to the God of all things? Not even "who," but "what"? How are we special enough, beautiful enough, to merit notice?

It's important to note that the psalmist never answers his own question because the answer isn't the point. *We are*; we are special enough, beautiful enough, whatever enough, and God *does* notice us. Not only notices but elevates: "you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings / and crowned him with glory and honor. / You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; / you have put all things under his feet". Episcopal theologian Dr. Elizabeth Webb writes that, "Royal language like that previously used to describe God is now ascribed to human beings. The range of our dominion, like God's, is all-encompassing, from the domestic animals that share our labor to wild animals, birds, and sea creatures (verses 7-8). We are made to share in God's governance of the world, to serve as representatives of God's own dominion.

"By the time we reach verse 9, the repetition of verse 1, we know more fully what it means to call God 'Lord' and 'Sovereign,' and what it means to share in that sovereignty. The lordship of God is revealed precisely in God's care for us. God provides for us, desires our good, and enables us to seek it. We reflect God's image in the proper governance of our fellow creatures." We mud-folk, we humans, are made kings—and given the responsibility of kings. "The king who serves in God's image keeps the covenant and observes God's law, not 'exalting himself above other members of the community' (verses 18-20). In our dominion over creation,

² אָדָם, Strong's Hebrew 120.

³ [Commentary on Psalm 8 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2013.

we are to remember the covenant and God’s commands, and not seek our own good at the expense of the domestic and wild world.”⁴

What are humans that God should take note, should care for us? We are the bearers of the *imago Dei*, the image of God, as stewards of this creation, made majestic because of the task given us. We have been tasked with the oceans and the stars and the sunrises, but also with the skunks and the camels and the robins. We have been given the sublime and the absurd and told they are all precious and we are meant to care for them. This is what it means to be majestic, according to the psalmist: that we, like God, glory in this creation and care for it, are mindful of it, keep it safe.

We’re not doing a bang-up job; in case you didn’t know. Storm systems running from Arkansas to Wisconsin are gearing up again even after claiming thirty-two lives in the last month as climate change intensifies weather patterns.⁵ California salmon fishing will be put off-limits for the first time in fourteen years due to low population numbers driven by drought, heat waves, and agricultural damage.⁶

“You have given him dominion...over the fish of the sea”. We are not acting like kings, we who have been given the gift of this world. There’s an entire section in the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* titled “The Natural World,” and I recommend reading it not just because I will always recommend reading the *Book of Discipline*. “All creation is the Lord’s and we are responsible for the ways in which we use and abuse it,” it begins. “Let us recognize the responsibility of the church and its members to place a high priority on changes in economic, political, social, and technological lifestyles to support a more ecologically equitable and sustainable world leading to a higher quality of life for all of God’s creation.”⁷

How do we do that? Some of it is the small things: avoid plastic bags and single-use plastic when you can; walk or bike or take public transit if it’s available; plant trees; turn off lights and faucets when you’re not using them. Some of it is the medium-sized things: lobby your homeowners’ association or city council to let you grow wildflowers instead of having to use time and gas and water on maintaining a grass lawn; support local farmers and gardeners when you can financially do so, especially given the upcoming season of farmers’ markets; use birthdays and holidays as opportunities to give gifts of sustainable materials, especially if the giftee isn’t able to afford such workarounds on their own. (It is an entirely different sermon, Church, how expensive we’ve made healthy and sustainable living.)

If you have the energy and the focus for it, there are the big things: there’s figuring out which companies are lying about their green status and putting more money into fossil fuels instead; there’s writing your lawmakers about not using the Great Lakes for unsustainable business practices; there’s lobbying for better public transit and affordable sustainability measures. If you’re not sure where to start, you can connect with the Creation Care Group here at First; you can also check out what the larger UMC is doing via the General Board of Church and Society, which has named environmental justice as one of its five areas of focus for the year.

⁴ [Commentary on Psalm 8 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2014.

⁵ [Midwest and southern U.S. prep for more dangerous storms : NPR](#)

⁶ [California salmon fishing slated to shut down this year due to low stock : NPR](#)

⁷ BOD 2016 ¶160, pp. 106–107.

“O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth?” ends the psalmist, same as he began it. How majestic is this creation, with the weird camels and the hilarious skunks and the spilled pomegranate sunrises and the oceans licking scouring tongues across the beaches. What are mud-folk that we are not only part of that but given that to care for?

Are we ready to claim that kind of power, with all its responsibilities? It is, after all, the only earth we have.

May we be brave enough to love it even a fraction as much as God loves us. Amen.