

DISCOVER THE MAJESTY OF CREATION

Psalm 8

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The psalmist of Psalm 8 stands under the sky ablaze with stars and asks this question:

"What are human beings?"

Keenly aware of God's presence, the psalmist does not wonder whether humanity is alone. He wonders instead how the God who created the heavens and set the stars in their courses could have any regard at all for mere human beings: "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?"

Confronted with the vastness of the night sky, the psalmist knows his own insignificance. How much more should we wonder at our place in the world, we who have delved into some of the mysteries of that sky? The magnitude of the Milky Way galaxy, let alone the universe, boggles the mind. To take a smaller example, if one were to scale down the size of the Solar System so that the Sun was the size of a tennis ball, the Earth would be the size of a grain of sand about 27 feet away. And the next nearest star to the Sun would be more than 1400 miles away! The Milky Way itself is 100,000 light years across, and is only one of billions of galaxies, each containing billions of stars!

"What are human beings?" Faced with such knowledge of the vastness of the universe, the answer must be, "less than insignificant."

The psalmist, however, gives no such answer to the question. Instead, he writes, "Yet you have made them a little lower than God (or 'the gods'/'the heavenly beings'), and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands."

Psalm 8 describes God as the Creator of the heavens, the moon and the stars, as well as animals, birds and fish. And Psalm 8 says that humans are created to be partners with God in caring for all that has been made.

Psalm 8 also points us to notice the majesty of the world around us.

I just learned that there is an observatory at the Vatican. Listen to what Pope Benedict had to say about the connection between spirituality and science: "The universe is not the result of chance, as some would like to believe. In contemplating it, we are invited to read for ourselves something quite profound: the wisdom of the Creator, the inexhaustible imagination of God, God's infinite love for us...In the beauty of the world, in its mystery, in its grandness...it leads us to the ultimate unique God, creator of heaven and earth."

We know two things for certain about the connection between our spiritual lives and the natural world. One: we know that we are called to protect and care for the environment. It is our job, assigned to us by God, described in many places throughout the Bible.

Second: from our own personal experience, we know that there is a healing property to nature. Spending time in nature is a balm. It lifts our spirits. It renews us. We know it from our own experience, and we know it from observing the life of Jesus. He continually spent time in his boat, or out in the desert, or up in the hills, communing with God until he was ready to be with people again. Jesus knew, as we do, that you can't serve others when your own spiritual well is dry. Nature and prayer was the winning combination for Jesus. It always prepared him to return to people with a spirit of compassion and patience.

Doug and I enjoy hiking, and we have had the extreme privilege of hiking in some of the world's most beautiful places. Some of our hikes have been very strenuous but it never fails that

we are both so exhilarated after a hike. (Sometimes part of the joy comes from knowing the hike is over!) In March, on the day that my friend Charlotte was preaching here, we were having a different kind of spiritual experience as we hiked in the Saguaro National Park in Tucson. We'd gone to Arizona because Doug had a business meeting in Scottsdale, then we tacked on a weekend in Tucson, a place we'd never been. We both caught colds in Scottsdale and neither of us was feeling 100%. We'd originally planned on hiking two days but decided to take it a little bit easy on Saturday and hope we felt better on Sunday, which we did. We packed two liter bottles of water a piece and began the hike just as the sun was coming up. We barely saw a soul the entire morning. Just cactus after cactus after cactus. It wasn't until halfway through the hike, when we merged with another hiking trail, that we encountered other people. Apparently most people didn't think it was necessary to spend six hours in the cactus like we did...by the time we were halfway through, I was glaring at Doug for choosing the longest path, my throat was sore, and the water we were carrying was about 150 degrees, not exactly refreshing. But when we were finished, I was so happy we'd done it. I had seen the desert in springtime, something that was on my bucket list. I'd seen the sunrise over the Arizona mountains. I'd imagined what it was like for the native Americans who lived there for so many generations, without the benefit of air conditioning and ice cold beverages. Nature had healed me, even of my grumpiness. I had seen the majesty of another part of God's creation.

Nate shared with me a fascinating article last week from National Geographic, entitled, "Why You Need More Dirt in Your Life". The first sentence was startling: "It's estimated that children now spend less time outside than the average prisoner." The article is based on a new book entitled The Ground Beneath Us, which talks about how much of our world is being covered by asphalt, and what that construction will mean to us both physically and spiritually. The author says, "There is really such a thing as sacred ground. Literal sacred ground. We need to preserve it." He visited the Platte River region in Nebraska when the sandhill cranes were migrating.

If that area were to be developed, there would be no more migration, and probably no more sandhill cranes at all. Here's how he describes his visit: "There's a bottleneck of their migration, coming down from the North and up from the South, and you get some half million cranes coming through in March and April every year. I got up at dawn to see them. It was something I wanted to see because the sight and sound of these ancient birds, which have been making this migration for eons, is a magical, wonderful sight."

What do we lose when we spend more time on our screens than in our backyards?

Tim introduced me to the writer Henri Poincare who said, "The scientist does not study nature because it is useful to do so. He studies it because he takes pleasure in it, and he takes pleasure in it because it is beautiful. If nature were not beautiful it would not be worth knowing, and life would not be worth living."

God created the world to be not just functional, but beautiful. Jaw-dropping, achingly, awe-inspiringly beautiful.

I wonder if we're doing such a bad job at taking care of nature's resources because we're not spending as much time IN nature? The more we immerse ourselves in the beauty of water and mountains and woods and sky, the more deeply we will fall in love with it all. And the more deeply we are in love with nature, the more connected we will be with the source of it. And the more we will naturally want to care for it. Love works best when it is inspired, at least in part, by natural impulse not just duty or obligation. We will care better for the earth when we spend more time in its rapture.

And the bonus is that the majesty of nature lifts us above all of the concerns of our daily lives and heals us, restores us, so that when we have to come back to earth, we do so with renewed energy. One of our members wrote this to me: "I often find myself caught up in the nitty gritty of daily living, as we all do. Workplace issues, deadlines, problems to resolve, concerns, issues that keep me up at night, cranky people sometimes. All of these can make me feel

stressed. Then I come home and see the beauty of life and creation all around me. Sunshine on my face, the majesty of the giant oak trees in full leaf, flowers each so intricate and unique. It refreshes my spirit and puts everything into context for me. It tells me what really matters. It makes me feel the pure joy and beauty that only God can provide. And before I know it, I feel the worries of the day fading away.”

Several years ago, I was visiting some of our older home-bound members. Two or three members in a row seemed much more stressed and anxious than I’d ever remembered seeing them. I couldn’t figure out what was going on, until the next week. I made one more visit to a woman who didn’t turn the TV off when I came into her living room. It was blaring. She was watching CNN. This was late September 2001 and the news channels were showing the Twin Towers being hit by airplanes, again and again. Many of our homebound people were being traumatized and re-traumatized as they were exposed to the TV news all day long. They were trying to be good citizens and stay informed, but it was too much.

I’m finding that this season of our national political life is similar. Many people are overdosing on the news. I believe in being informed and I believe in staying politically involved and active, but everything in life needs balance. Many people, regardless of their political opinions, are finding themselves increasingly tense and anxious as they see and hear the news.

We won’t be the best citizens, or the best Christians, if we’re only growing more and more stressed and angry and more and more convinced that our own opinions are the only ones worthy of respect.

My advice, to each of us, at any age, is this. “Go outside and play.” Take a walk. Get some fresh air. Watch the birds in the feeder. Let the majesty of God’s creation do its work on you and your spirit.

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