



PSALMS

The Prayer Book of the Bible

Praise the Lord of Creation

Psalm 8

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First Presbyterian Church - Colorado Springs, CO

Jim Singleton with Sara Singleton

Preface

Last night as I was getting ready to preach, I had some kind of mysterious ailment so I went to bed with the sermon unfinished. In case she would have to preach this morning, Sara worked on the sermon after I went to bed. When I got up this morning, I felt better and the sermon looked a lot better than when I left it. It is my first jointly written sermon.

Today we begin a sermon series on the book of Psalms. I am calling the series, "Psalms – The Prayer Book of the Bible." In some respects this series will continue what I did on the Lord's Prayer. I think that we want more and more exposure to prayer – talking to our Lord. Many of us feel quite inadequate about our prayer lives.

I read recently of the aunt who walked past her young niece's room before bedtime. She observed her niece kneeling beside her bed, with her head bowed and hands folded, repeating the alphabet. The aunt asked, "What are you doing?" The niece replied, "I'm saying my prayers, but I couldn't think of just what I wanted to say. So I'm just saying all the letters of the alphabet and God can put them together however he thinks best."

I feel like that sometimes as I ponder prayer – what do I say? The Psalms will help us in this matter. When Jews and Christians have not known what to say they often prayed the Psalms. The Psalms are comprised of different kinds of prayers – all of which teach us something about praying. Despite the range of Psalms, I find three large sets of emotions running through these Psalms.

1) Wonder – the Psalms I'll be teaching in June are filled with wonder for the God who creates us. The Psalmist would often get lost in wonder. I want us to get lost in wonder as well – praising the God of wonder. These psalms are somewhat like the opening line of the Lord's Prayer – "Our Father Who art in Heaven, Hallowed Be Thy Name."

Go to Psalm 144-150. Each of these are psalms of praise. Look at Psalm 145:1 – "I will exalt you, my God the King – I will praise your name for ever and ever. Psalm 147:1 – "Praise the Lord – How good it is to sing praises to our God." Psalm 149:1 – "Praise the Lord. Sing to the Lord a new song." Psalm 150 – "Praise the Lord. Praise God in his sanctuary." There is a whole set of the Psalms which are simply prayers of praise. The rest of June we will look at those.

2) **Crisis** – in any crisis there is often fear and groaning. So there is a whole range of Psalms expressing the feelings associated with a crisis. These Psalms are called Laments. The big words in them are “have mercy – help – deliver.” On three of the Sundays in July we will study those. I think of Psalm 42 - “Why are you downcast O my soul, and why are you disturbed within me?” I think of Psalm 69 - “Save me O God for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths where there is no foothold.”

3) **Thankfulness for Resolution** – “Thank you for getting me out of the crisis. Thanksgiving is a huge part of these prayers. Psalm 136 is a classic example - “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, his love endures forever.”

For the next three weeks we will look at psalms of sheer wonder – psalms of praise. Psalm 8 is the first psalm of praise in the book. It is the only one of 150 Psalms that is a direct address to God from beginning to end. Let’s hear it read.

1) How Majestic is Your Name

Sometimes you can just get dazzled by something you see. A landscape can be so pretty it just delights. It happened to me last week in the Lake District of England. The hills and water and the sheep and flowers all combined to create such a beautiful scene. But more often our experience of being dazzled happens with a sight of something huge. The first time you see Pikes Peak after growing up in the Midwest. The first time you see the Pacific Ocean after living in Nebraska. But of all our regular stunning sights – the night sky may be as stunning as any.

It appears that the writer of Psalm 8 stared into the night sky and was stunned. We who live in cities often miss the grandeur of the night sky – there are too many lights. But get out of the city and look up on a clear night and it is so impressive. So the Psalmist looks up and with no telescope he is deeply moved by what he sees. “Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.” In verse three he is considering God’s heavens, the moon and the stars, which God has set in place. This Psalmist is deeply moved.

Today we know even more about the heavens. We know that those little twinkling stars and moving planets can be enormous things. Had the Psalmist known that he was seeing things that were light years away and millions of times larger than anything he had considered – he might have fainted. Consider these pictures of what is out there. Our earth is larger than several of our planets. But compared to Juniper and Saturn, both visible in our sky, our earth is tiny. Compare all the planets to the sun and they are all dwarfed. Compare our sun to other stars and our sun is tiny. Looking at the really big stars shows how little the others are. And God created all this. There is something enormously large in God’s creation

There is a beauty and grandeur in the sky. Look at Roger Van Heyningen’s painting of God’s glory in the Orion Nebula. “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth.” I love the light that Dale McClure paints that again expresses God’s Glory.

There is a dramatic beauty in the mountains. Look at Kang Lee Brown’s painting. Recall the dramatic beauty of a high alpine landscape with the brisk cold breeze blowing over the crystal mountain lake.

Think of stepping deep into a forest with a carpet of wet leaves under your feet and the clean scent of fir and spruce in your nose. This painting by Bob Simpich draws us there. We want to say with the Psalmist, “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.”

Martin Luther said, “Let flowers be your teachers and birds your theologians.” Last Sunday afternoon we were crossing the Irish Sea from Scotland to Ireland. On the sea was a bird known as the Northern Fulmar. They can live up to 50 years. They have the ability to dive ten feet under water. The bird spends its entire life out on the ocean, having a wondrous ability to drink seawater. God

gave to the Fulmar an entire desalination factory in its beak - removing the salt from the water, excreting it through a tube on the top of its beak, and then drinking the now fresh water! What a God of infinite variety.

The universe is filled with wonder. On both the macro and micro levels, in both human and non-human creatures, the cosmos teems with life, with complexity, with music, and with movement. There can be two responses. One is to admire this world on its own terms. The other is to look up and praise God. Which do you do?

2) What is Humanity

In a remarkably brief compass of only 70 Hebrew words, Psalm 8 directs us how to think about God, creation, and their relation to us. This psalm compares the creation of the cosmos to the creation of us. The question is asked "what are mere mortals that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" Yet the Psalmist answers his own question – "You have made them a little lower than the heavenly beings, and crowned them with glory and honor. (vs. 5)" Humans are even more important to God than Jupiter or Betelgeuse. I love a picture that Billy Meazell painted showing humanity and the cosmos together. This Psalm puts us together. We are stewards over all that God has created. He entrusts his creation to us. That means the person next to you is rare and precious.

Last week in Oxford I got to stand in St. Mary the Virgin church where, on June 8, 1941, C.S. Lewis first gave a rare address known as the "Weight of Glory." I read the conclusion of this address to our group: "It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friends, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal" (*The Weight of Glory*, 15). That is what the Psalmist is reminding us – as grand as creation is – God has made humans as the crown of his creation.

God delights in his creation. The stars, sun, moon, flocks, beasts, birds, and the rest declare the glory of God. When we look at creation there is something about it that should signal to us who created it. When you look at a painting you can say – "That is a Rembrandt." The marks of his touch are all around. To look at God's creation can trigger in us a delight in what we are seeing: Isn't it lovely!! Or it can trigger emotion about who created it: "Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth."

3) First Implication – We Are in Charge as Stewards

It is very interesting that in the last 5 years, the Evangelical community has begun to recognize this. A whole host of evangelical scholars are urging this kind of respect for the world. And those who think God's mandate that we rule this planet means ripping it to shreds or doing whatever we want are blind! If a famous artist gifted you with one of his sculptures, you would not put it in a precarious place where the kids might knock it over and you surely would not let them color on it with their crayons. Nor would you place it into a closet somewhere and never look at it again. No, you will tend it, keep it, display it, appreciate it, show it off to guests, and protect it from harm. So also with God's world: we rule it because God has given us the authority to do so.

None of this means that we are not allowed to enjoy the fruits of creation. None of it means we may not use trees for wood or oil for cars or water for boating and fishing. But all of it does mean that as we do those things we always keep God in mind, thanking him for the bounties we can consume but also giving careful thought to how we can simultaneously keep alive the works of God's creative fingers. In a fallen world, that kind of balancing act is precarious and often hard.

The Bible everywhere assumes that this care is possible. It is possible to care for this cosmos in a way that will keep the majesty of the Creator on display for all to see. It may not be easy, considering how all-encompassing this task is. But we can do it. Remember: we've been crowned with glory and honor by no less than the Creator himself! *O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

4) Second Implication – God Is Exalted with Praise

This brings us back to where we started – praise and wonder. Finding ourselves caught up in worship by what we see. Remember what you heard in Revelation 4. The apostle John was invited to enter the open door in heaven and it was there that he encountered a whirl of color, sounds, creatures and people, even the entirety of history – falling down in worship and praise. “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.”

Praise the Lord! It is a bodily expression. We may think of raising our hands, and this is appropriate. The word for Praise the Lord in Hebrew is “barach” which is to bend the knee, to kneel in adoration. Each week we are practicing and preparing our hearts for this unending praise.

Eugene Peterson says, “Worship is an *act* which develops feelings for God, not a *feeling* for God which is expressed in an act of worship...” What if we wait until the mood strikes us to praise? We may find that we never get around to it.

Last week the Reformation group went to visit Dove Cottage where the poet, William Wordsworth lived. He was made Poet Laureate by Queen Victoria from 1843-1850. He never wrote a thing for Victoria as laureate though he was paid a large pension and given vast amounts of gifts at Christmas time. He never felt inspired to write, and Wordsworth had a conviction that you had to feel inspired before you could write a poem.

Are you waiting to feel like praising before you act on it? Don't wait. Bend the knee in your heart. Remember, praise is a result of seeing the truth about what is going on in heaven. Do you see it? If the door of heaven is not open to your eyes of faith, can you put your ear on the door of heaven and hear the thunder on the other side? This is what is going on each week as we gather to worship and offer our praise.

Babies and toddlers can worship. They will clap their hands and jump and squeal when they see something exciting and beautiful and wonderful. Will you bend the knee, lift holy hands, and praise the Lord? It is time to sing to our God – to praise the one who made you.

Remember: we've been crowned with glory and honor by no less than the Creator himself! *O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*