

19th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22, or 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time)
October 4, 2015–Davidson College Presbyterian Church (World Communion Sunday)
Genesis 2:18-24

*Psalm 8

*Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12

Mark 10:2-16

Prayer for Illumination—Guide us, O God, by your Word and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace; through Jesus Christ, who is our rock and redeemer. Amen.

All God's Children

Psalm 8 is one of the more lyrical psalms in my memory, and it was kind of a touchstone for me as I grew into the faith in a small Presbyterian church of fewer than 50 members in rural Louisiana. I think it was the old red hymnal, and words from the old RSV were slightly different in the cadences of the RSV. "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth! Thou whose glory above the heavens is chanted by the mouth of babes and infants, thou hast founded a bulwark because of thy foes, to still the enemy and the avenger." I'm less impressed with majesty these days, and it is the evocative nature of the psalm, the invocation of the created order and the human place in that order that draws my attention—"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 your are mindful of them?" (8.3-4a)

Yet, as we read the words in the NRSV, it is the Sovereign who is mindful of humans in this psalm that Walter Brueggemann has called a "song of creation" nested in a larger category of "psalms of orientation."¹ We're short on time today, but we gather for worship today on World Communion Sunday when we have members in both Kenya and Nicaragua reflecting on the future of our relationships in those place and simultaneously receive the peace and global witness offering, a significant portion of which stays in the local community. What is the import of gathering in *this* place, in *this* particular community to ask the questions about our relationships with people halfway around the world and down the street?

We would phrase it differently, but even in the '50s, Martin Luther King, Jr., was struggling with this issue when he wrote in a sermon, "'What is man that thou art mindful of him?' This question flowing from the lips of the Psalmist is one of the most important questions facing any generation. The whole political, social and economic structure of any society is largely determined by its answer to this pressing question." He's reading the signs of his own times not only from the cusp of the civil rights movement but also from the standpoint of the Cold War when he wonders "whether man is a cog in the wheel of the

¹Walter Brueggeman, 1984, *The Message of the Psalms*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 25-28 and 28-42. The specific discussion of Psalm 8 is found in pages 36-38.

state or whether he is a free creative being capable of facing responsibility.”² The question of responsibility looms large for us human beings, for the text tells us that we have been “given dominion over the works of [God’s] hands.” And as a creation psalm, it is crucial to remember that this dominion is delineated in Genesis where the first human is given the task of naming the other creatures. This ability to name is a clear sign of the power of symbolic communication that enables us to shape the world in which we live through words and imagination. We are endowed with the possibility to imagine worlds that are not like this one. Yet we know that our capacity to respond to art or appreciate the aesthetics of creation are matched by our ability to make war or create technology that fundamentally (even if unintentionally) enables the human species to unleash destructive forces on the scale of global climate change.

In fundamental ways, then, Psalm 8 does indeed call us to reflect upon how we’re doing and the significance of our place in the created order. The notion that we are created a little lower than God (or the angels in some readings) clearly indicates that we are created for relationship with this Sovereign whose handiwork surrounds us. And here is one crucial aspect of the connection between Psalm 8 and Hebrews. For this Son who sits at the right hand of God is at once the inheritor of what God gives to the faithful but also as co-creator with God of the “the worlds” (1.2). As the reflection of God’s very nature, the text draws attention to creation and to the on-going work of the Son in “bearing” or “sustaining” the creation into the future.³

What we have here is an expansive view of salvation as an act of on-going creation in a new era where we see God speaking in a new dispensation. Hebrews is typically interpreted as a sermon that exhorts the community who reads it to a type of obedience or an exhortation to follow Jesus who is later cast in the role of the high priest and “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (12.2). But the text focuses on the shared nature of existence between the one who suffered death and those who are offered grace through Jesus’s suffering and death: “For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father.” While clearly some might be tempted to jump to the resurrection at this point because of our prior doctrinal training, but the emphasis here is on kinship with Jesus who claims those who are sanctified as his sisters and brothers. As one commentator translates verse 10: “Now it was fitting for him, for whom and through whom all things exist, to bring many sons and daughters to glory, to perfect through sufferings the one who leads the way to

²Martin Luther King, Jr., 1954, “‘What Is Man?’ Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 11 July, Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project, 175, <http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/primarydocuments/Vol6/11July1954WhatIsMan.pdf>.

³Harold W. Attridge, 1989, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. Helmut Koester, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 36

salvation."⁴ This is the Christ who stands with us, saying in the verse after we stopped reading in Hebrews: "Here am I and the children God has given me." It is a statement of solidarity with those who are created a little lower than God but who are called according to God's purposes.

In response to the question "What are humans that thou are mindful of them?" King asserts that the meaning of what it means to be created in God's image is that we are "designated for and called to a particular relation with God."⁵ And Brueggemann argues that "the New Testament takes the royal vision of humanity and uses it to identify and characterize Jesus, who is the true king. . . . But importantly, Jesus who has power and dominion has taken *the form of a servant* whose *governance* is in the form of *obedience* (Mark 10.43-45; Phil. 2.5-8)."⁶ These theme of reversal of the established order brings us full circle back to the notion of the psalms of orientation. Although these psalms might have been "articulated by the socially successful . . . these same psalms provide a point of reference even for those who share in none of the present 'goodies,' but who cling in hope to the conviction that God's good intention for the creation will finally triumph and that there will be an equity and a sabbath for all creatures."⁷ "O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!"

On World Communion Sunday, we might even begin with the notion of conviviality, which Merriam-Webster defines as "relating to, occupied with, or fond of feasting, drinking, and good company." That works on one level, but I'm drawn as well to the Spanish notion of *convivencia*, which is related to the verb *convivir*, which might simply be translated as "living with." Both this sermon in Hebrews and the actual epistles in the Christian scriptures seem to anticipate an imminent consummation of creation in a second coming. Two thousand years later, it is probably safe to say that we live in the meantime. And we inherit not only the beauty of creation but the task of co-creation with our elder sibling.

The question becomes one of how we live with each other and steward the creation we have been given. There are so many directions we can go. Even as we mourn the deaths of yet more victims of gun violence in our own country, wars and rumors of war rage in so many parts of the world, and the students I work with at the college have lived half or more of their lives under with the United States itself at war—what do we find when we look around us and in the mirror seeking hope and salvation for some type of sabbath rest from

⁴Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 78.

⁵King, "What Is Man?", 178.

⁶Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 37.

⁷Brueggeman, *The Message of the Psalms*, 28.

the journey we are on? We want peace, but what I see are faces of immigrants fleeing Africa to Europe and the ugly discourse about immigration and immigrants in our own country. If our elder sibling bears the very imprint of God's glory and we are the inheritors with him of the future, then our *convivencia* begins when we join with people throughout the world who share the same inheritance in reimagining the world. Almost 30 years ago Willie Nelson sang a song called "Promiseland," and it continues to challenge if we refuse the temptation to look away.

So they came from a distant isle
Nameless woman
Faithless child like a bad dream
Until there was no room at all
No place to run, and no place to fall

Give us our daily bread
We have no shoes to wear
No place to call our home
Only this cross to bear

We are the multitudes
Lend us a helping hand
Is there no love anymore
Living in the Promiseland

Living in the Promiseland
Our dreams are made of steel
The prayer of every man
Is to know how freedom feels⁸

Yes, we can argue—should argue about the meaning of freedom, and justice that Brueggeman elsewhere suggests is “the venturesome enactment of the positive good, whereby human solidarity is maintained and enhance.”⁹ Some 350,000 migrants have entered the EU this year, and we continue to talk about 11,000,000 illegal immigrants in the United States as if they were not people who have hopes and dreams for the future and for their children's

⁸“Living in the Promiseland,” written by David Lynn Jones, recorded by Willie Nelson in 1986, <http://www.classic-country-song-lyrics.com/livinginthepromisedlandlyricschords.html>. [There are other attributions of authorship out there. Music lyrics and ownership are notoriously difficult to run down at times.]

⁹Walter Brueggemann, 1997, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 461.

future.¹⁰ The Organization of Latino American Students (OLAS) on campus sponsored a day last week when they said we should ban the “I-word” because “no human is illegal.” And how can they be if we take our own tradition seriously? No we are all sisters and brothers with this one who leads the way into salvation. The One we remember when we sit together and eat bread and drink from the cup of the new covenant. This is our brother, the perfect image of the Sovereign who is, in the words of our brief confession, “like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home”; the Sovereign who has made us only a little lower than the angels—and given us the freedom to participate in shaping the future.

In the name of God our creator, our liberator, and our sustainer. Amen.

¹⁰General information on immigration can be found at these sources: Why is EU struggling with migrants and asylum?, 2015, *BBC.com*, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-24583286> and The criminalization of immigration in the United States, 2015, American Immigration Council, <http://immigrationpolicy.org/special-reports/criminalization-immigration-united-states>.