

Jeff's Reflection – Oct 3, 2021

When I was in university, I received as a gift a book entitled "The Splendor of the Psalms: a Photographic Meditation". The book contains passages from the Psalms accompanied by photos – landscapes, someone fishing, children playing, the lights of a city at night...

By that time in my life, I had read the Psalms and heard many of them read during Sunday morning worship services, and like most of us, I was very familiar with Psalm 23, but as I read this book, the words that stopped me and the words I went back to whenever I picked up the book, were the words of Psalm 8.

When you have the book open to Psalm 8, the left-hand page is a photograph of a flock of geese launching into flight against a background of clouds, the edges of which are tinged with the reddish orange glow of a setting sun.

On the right-hand page, are the words – at least some of the words - of Psalm 8, in the translation of the Revised Standard version of the Bible. I will read them as they are printed in the book, with a few changes to make the language more inclusive of all humanity:

"When I look at the heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established;

What are human beings that thou art mindful of us, that thou dost care for us?

Yet thou hast made us little less than God,
And dost crown us with glory and honour.
Thou hast given us dominion over the works of your hands;
Thou hast 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 sea.
Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth."

I've always felt that the use of the words 'thy' and 'thou' add a sense of Shakespearean flair to the reading.

Something in Psalm 8 resonated with me then and resonates with me now.

I think many of us can feel some experiential connection with the Psalmist's sense of awe in looking at the heavens, the stars, the moon. We remember times when we were children, looking up in the night sky at that shimmering beautifully mysterious object called the moon. We still take special note of times when it's a full moon, or it's the autumn moon.

Or we can relate to the Psalmist's words when we sit on a lakeshore, or we see a prairie sunset, or we listen to the sound of rain gentling falling on the ground outside our

windows...and we somehow feel that we are part of all of this, that this world, this creation, is beautiful, and awesome and amazing and we want to just sit and observe and appreciate.

As the Psalmist experiences this incredible creation of God, the Psalmist begins to think about this creation; and begins to think about his own place/her own place, in this creation.

Sometimes when I am walking, I am aware of this world, of trees, grass, lake water, geese, clouds, sky...and sometimes I pause and let my imagination expand that awareness, to imagine that I am seeing myself through a camera lens, and the camera begins moving outwards into space, so that I became smaller and smaller and then I am gone as the earth came into view, and then the earth becomes a speck in this Milky Way galaxy as the camera moves further out to take in other galaxies, and then reaches a place at the edge of the universe, and everything is tiny specks in the vastness...

At such moments, in what can be seen, I am not even a crumb, not even a visible particle, not seemingly of any significance in all of this...

And then I realize that my significance is that I am part of all of this- that I am part of all of this that is God's creation, all of this that somehow exists in God, all of this in which God somehow exists.

The Psalmist asks, "What are we human beings that You, God, would pay us any mind?"

The Psalmist doesn't directly answer that question, instead observing that humans seem to have not only a unique but a superior place in this creation – saying that God has created humans as only slightly lower than the angels, than God, than any divine heaven dweller; that God has given humans glory and honour- we are the ones who get to stand on the podium. If every plant and bird and animal had the equivalent to a national anthem, on the final day of creation it would be the anthem of the human race that would be playing, because humans take top spot in God's creation. It is humans to whom God has given dominion over everything else – all creatures and resources.

I read Psalm 8 then and felt uplifted, inspired. It was an affirmation that God loves, cares about all of us humans.

I read Psalm 8 now, and still feel it affirms God's love, but now feel more deeply that it affirms God's love for 'all' creation.

I now want to change the imagery the Psalmist uses -that of God giving humans dominion over all things and putting all things under our feet! The image of someone having their foot on you is not a nice image – it is one of oppression and superiority.

But what if what we affirm is that what is under our feet is also what holds us up, what supports us, what grounds us? So perhaps we can also read these words as a reminder that humans rely on creation; that without the sun, moon, stars, fish, birds, animals, soil

or rocks, we are not grounded, we don't know where we come from or who we are, we have no place to stand; we do not exist.

We do not own creation, we are part of creation, we live in relationship with creation.

And if all creation is God's creation, then we should not presume that God loves only humans – God loves all creatures and all creation; and maybe what is most unique about humans is that being created in the image of God means we have the capacity to love creation as God loves creation.

Think of it this way; what if all creatures on earth – humans, fish, birds, elephants, whales, lions, tigers and bears, were asked by God for suggestions on improving God's creation. I think it possible that all the other creatures might say that the biggest problem with this world is 'those human beings' who keep polluting, filling oceans with garbage, killing for sport, using up resources, decimating forests, destroying the habitats needed for other creatures to survive. All the other creatures might ask God, "Why did You create human beings? Why do You give any mind to them?"

The Bible was written by human beings, so of course it focuses on God's relationship with humans, but in the Bible we also find an awareness of God present throughout creation. Prophetic biblical visions of new creation speak of all creation – sun and moon and mountains and hills and fruit trees and all wild animals and everything that flies-praising God.

Jesus tells his disciples to look at the lilies that are clothed by God. Jesus says, the rest of creation can teach humans how to participate in God's creation.

I think that today's Gospel reading also speaks of our need to change our attitudes and perspectives on how we relate to the rest of God's creation.

Parents bring children to Jesus, wanting Jesus to touch them, bless them, but the disciples speak sternly to the parents and want them to leave Jesus alone. Maybe think the disciples thought that Jesus is too tired, or too busy to spend time with children; that he needs to spend his time doing important things, healing people who were really in bad shape, making an impact in the world.

Jesus disagrees and says something that I think is very Jesus-like. He responds in a way that is annoying to those who like a direct and specific answer, because his response is open to multiple interpretations.

He says that if we want to receive the kingdom of God, we must receive it as a child. If we want to experience what it is to participate in God's creation, then we have to be in this creation as child.

Interpreters have offered many takes on what it means to be like a child in our faith – curious, full of wonder, not needing to dominate, usually the most vulnerable not the

most powerful.

Perhaps receiving as a child means receiving not in order to control, but receiving in order to appreciate and to have awakened within us a sense of thankfulness.

But there is another way to hear what Jesus says: not that we are like children receiving the kingdom of God, but that we are like adults who discover that the God we receive comes to us like a child; that God doesn't arrive as seemingly the most powerful, the most successful, the most dominant. Perhaps God could even appear in our midst as one crucified!

I continue to be heartened and haunted by Psalm 8. The Psalmist continues to invite me into a place of reverent awe as I am aware of the wonder of God's creation: and the Psalmist continues to invite me to wonder about the place of human beings in God's creation;

and invites me to accept that God created us in some way for God's sake, that we and all creation are somehow an expression and embodiment of God's shaping and creating Spirit, of God's love:

invites me to be open and responsive to God loving creation through our humanity:

open and responsive to be an expression of God's Spirit en-fleshed in this world:

open and responsive to receiving God as one receives a child:

open and responsive to being a child of God in this world:

open and responsive to loving creation as God loves creation;

open and responsive to God's Spirit present in all people and all creation;

open and responsive to being a companion of the resurrected Christ and to being God's people.

Thanks be to God. AMEN