

A LITTLE LOWER THAN ANGELS

Psalm 8

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on Trinity Sunday, June 5, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 8

To the leader: according to The Gittith. A Psalm of David.

*O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

*You have set your glory above the heavens.
Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.*

*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?*

*Yet you have made them a little lower than [angels],
and crowned them with glory and honour.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their 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 seas.*

*O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

Two weeks ago, in a sermon entitled “The Source of Courage,” I related that after a series of losses as a young adult I remember being once asked:

“What does your faith give you *above* all else?”

The word that came out of my mouth was the word *perspective*. When I was in the heat of a troubling time, I would say to myself:

This will *not* last forever.
You are going to *survive* this.
God will get you *through* this and *out of* this.

This is why one of my favorites passages of scripture is found in Psalm 139:

*If I make my bed in Sheol,
You are there...
[Even there] your right hand shall hold me fast.¹*

The *perspective* I described is that of the *presence* of God helping us *survive* the worst of times.

I.

Today's Psalm offers a different dimension to *perspective*.

Following five consecutive psalms that implore God's *help* and *support* in crisis, Psalm 8 *bursts forth* with a ringing *affirmation* of the *vaulted status* we have been given as human beings:

*You [O God,]
have made [human beings]
A little lower than [angels],
And crowned them with glory and honour.*

“A little lower than angels.”

Using words from the Creation Story in Genesis,² the psalmist then proclaims the *tremendous responsibility* we as human beings have been given for the *stewardship* of the entire Creation, all living things within it, including one another:

*You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
You have put all things under their 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 seas.*

This status and responsibility is “*divinely sanctioned*” – “*You have made them a little lower than angels...*”; and it assumes that we have the *capacity* to live up to it: “*You have given them dominion...*”

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In addition, the psalmist opens the psalm with a *sense of wonder and humility* before the majesty of God:

*O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!...*

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;*

¹ Psalm 139:8-10.

² Genesis 1:28-31.

*what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?*

And in the end, the psalm circles back to this same affirmation:

*O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

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I have shared with you before that my wife Maggie grew up in El Paso, Texas, where beauty is found in the sky: the cloud formation, the sunrises and sunsets over the mountains in the distance. She likes trees but they sort of get in the way of that beauty. Whenever we go to northern Maine, as we will later this summer, she will get up in the middle of the night, throw a wrap on, go outside to look at the skies: the northern lights, the stars, the Big Dipper, the Little Dipper.

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established...*

Like the psalmist, her sense of the *vaulted status* of human beings begins and ends in *humble majesty* before God.

*O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

II.

In a beautiful essay on the 20th century poet W. H. Auden, Baylor professor Alan Jacobs writes that for Auden, we human beings live simultaneously in *nature* and in *history*.³ Auden's poetry, Jacobs says, provides:

a vision of what it means to live
with *other embodied creatures* in the *polis*
[the human city, the human community].
To live not just *in nature*, but also *in history*.⁴

In one of his poems, Auden labels this duality – “*to assume responsibility for time*.”⁵ Created by and under the sovereign God, filled with awe at fingers of God moving across the created order, given custodial responsibility over all of creation and its creatures, we humans are placed here “*to assume responsibility for time*.”

- “You have made them a *little lower than the angels*”
- “You have given them *dominion* over the works of your hands”
- “You have put *all things under their feet*.”

³ Alan Jacobs, “The Love Feast,” *Harpers*, April 24, 2022.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ W. H. Auden, “Their Lonely Betters,” 1950. Available at <http://www.thebeckoning.com/poetry/auden/auden4.html>.

This is our role and responsibility as human beings. This is the *perspective* we bear *as much* if not *more* than God's being with us in times of trouble and torment. "*To assume responsibility for time.*"

III.

But even *before* the psalmist marvels at the vaulted role humanity has been given, the psalmist makes a mysterious claim, hard to understand:

*Out of the mouths of babes and infants [the psalmist says]
You have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
To silence the enemy and the avenger.*

People who study the Bible and its original languages ponder what this might mean.

- The psalmist may be saying that the voice of infants itself has the power to silence human foes, human threats? Sometimes it does. Sometimes the cry of children will silence the fractious shenanigans of adults.
- The psalmist may be saying that infants and children have the capacity to recognize God's majesty in all the earth – even more than adults. Sometimes they do. You may remember that Jesus quotes this passage defending the purity of infant voices against that the less pure religious authorities who were opposing his cleansing of the Temple.⁶
- Or maybe the psalmist is proclaiming even at its earliest stages of development, human speech has the power to stand down evil.

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One well-known Hebrew scholar – Robert Alter – even posits the possibility that even these weakest and youngest members of the human community remind *God* of *who God is*. It is as if God – hearing the voices of infants – awakens and arises to take on the enemy and the avenger.⁷

It reminds us that earlier in the Bible, when Moses was an infant in a basket in the bulrushes, it was when Pharaoh's daughter *heard his cry* that she *draws him out* of the water and raises him in her own home in Pharaoh's court.⁸ Likewise, a few decades later, God hears the cries of Moses and his people, remembers the promises he had made to them,⁹ and commissions Moses to lead them out of slavery in Egypt.¹⁰ When God hears *human cries* – especially the cries of *children* – God is moved *to silence the enemy and avenger*.

It is likewise the voices of infants that most remind us of who God is and most remind us of *our vaulted role* under God: "*to assume responsibility for time.*"

⁶ Matthew 21:16.

⁷ Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 22-23.

⁸ Exodus 2:1-10. Verse 10 specifies that Moses' name means "I drew him out" of the water.

⁹ Exodus 2:23-25.

¹⁰ Exodus 3:1-12.

IV.

This is the place where standing beneath the stars and lifting our voices in praise to heaven leads us soon back to earth. It is the place where our worship of the sovereignty and majesty of God leads us to assume our responsibility for God's created world.

- Many of us cannot help but despair over the tone and tenor of the culture wars being fought in countless sectors in our society today. Yet when we stop and think about it, we soon ask: "Aren't these battles at their essence geared to the question: "What do we want our children to experience? To what do we want them to be exposed? What do we want them to know and when?"
- In the concerns we have about the changing of our climate, aren't we ultimately asking: "What kind of *air* do we want our children to breathe? What kind of *water* do we want them to drink? What kind of *earth* do we want them to inherit? What kind of *life* do we want them to have?"
- In all the concerns we have about the world economy – opportunity, inequality, poverty, indebtedness, inflation – isn't much of it is geared to the question: "Will our children be able to aspire to at least the life we have led? Will the children of the world and in parts of our country be able to have at least something akin to what our own children have?" Can they hope for food, water, shelter, medical care, literacy?"
- And of course, in all the concerns we have about safety, violence, school shootings, isn't at heart it geared to the question: "How can we create a world safe for children?"

*Out of the mouths of babes and infants,
you [O God] have founded a bulwark
because of your foes
to silence the enemy and the avenger.*

I once passed by a church marquis whose sermon title posted for the week read "A World Safe for Children." To live a little lower than angels is to live with diligent commitment to the generations that follow.

V.

- This is one reason at Westminster we invest so much of our congregational resources in the staff and leadership to develop children and family ministry.
- This is one reason we invest so much of our congregational resources in agencies of local mission, many of which serve children of homeless families, of immigrants, of incarcerated.
- This is why we invest so much of our congregational resources in ministry for children and youth on the Spirit Lake Reservation in North Dakota. This is why we invest so much of our congregational resources serving what our founding partner in Kenya – Reverend Stephen Chege – refers to as the "vulnerable children" in the Rift Valley.
- This is why so many individuals in this congregation invest so much time and resources as parents, grandparents, adoptive parents, foster parents, choral directors, teachers, coaches, scout leaders, tutors, mentors, aunts and uncles, doctors and nurses, social workers and counselors – all focused on children.

When we assume responsibility for children, we assume responsibility for time.

VI.

And this is why – whether religious or secular – elected officials, policymakers, people on the ground have no choice but to come together across ideological divides concerning the most intense and emotional issues we as a people – we as a *polis* – face.¹¹

- Whether it is cultural and identity issues, the future of the climate, economic opportunity, safety from violence, race and racism – not to come together as adults is to *allow the enemy and the avenger* to prevail.
- Not to come together as adults is to turn away from *infant voices* crying out to us from their baskets in the bulrushes to steward their world to safety.

If we do not come together as adults,
The answers will be imposed on us by authoritarian leaders,
Or evaporate into unbridled individualism,
In which, like in the Book of Judges,
“everyone does what is right in his or her own eyes”
A time of anarchy and violence
That was one of the lowest periods in Israel’s history.¹²

Coming together as adults
Is the only way
In a democratic society
To live into our divinely sanctioned role
A little lower than the angels
And assume responsibility for time:
Our time,
Our children’s time,
God’s time.

Amen.

¹¹ This sermon was also informed by Ezra Klein, “Your Kids Are Not Doomed,” *The New York Times* 6/5/22.

¹² Judges 21:25.