

Sermon: May 22, 2016 – Trinity Sunday - Psalm 8
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

Last week, on Pentecost Sunday we heard about the Holy Spirit coming upon the Church, like fire, like wind, like the divine breath breathing life into us. In the weeks before that we heard the wonderful stories of the risen Christ walking with the disciples, with the promise that Christ still does so today. This week, then, designated each year as “Trinity Sunday” it’s time for us to hang out for a while with God the Creator, the *first* person of the Trinity.

What better way to ruminate on our connection with God, and God’s connection with the world, than in the majestic surroundings of the Bow Valley, and with the ancient words of Psalm 8?

A recent Bible translation for dramatic reading called “The Voice” calls the 8th Psalm a hymn “based on Genesis 1 [which] celebrates not only God’s majesty as Creator but also the unique place of human beings in [God’s] creation.” Indeed, I think it’s virtually impossible to read the 8th Psalm without imagining the story of creation in Genesis right beside it and in particular, these verses:

Genesis 1: 26 Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth”.

Psalm 8: 5-8 Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. 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.

These two scriptures have been famously, tragically, regrettably used to justify the decimation of creation and entire civilizations – but the more time I spend with them, the more I believe that the Divine purpose expressed through them is completely different from the self-justifying ways they have been used.

The Biblical story of creation, like all stories about our origins, was written long after the fact in order to explain, lament and celebrate who the people had become by the time the story was written down. Think of the way that we write a family history: as we dig around on ancestry.com, as we find press clippings that mention family members, as we rifle through letters written by our great-great-grandfather to his parents back in the old world, we do so with our feet planted firmly on the ground of today. If we are too selective in our searching, looking only for things that align with our current self-understanding, we might miss the actual story; if we have no boundaries to our search, however, we might not see the themes that are there, or common character traits that seem to assert themselves generation after generation.

The first chapter of Genesis – and following it, the 8th Psalm – is that same kind of project. The ancient stories of creation could have found their way into written form as early as the days of King Solomon or as late as the days of the exile – so it could have been the glory days of Israel, or days when they were just hanging on. Either way, the people wanted to know what kind of God was with them. When I listen to the 1st chapter of Genesis, and especially in the way it is reflected by the 8th Psalm, I hear a story that wants us to understand the amazing **power and majesty** of God, from whose imagination all of this emerged. I see a celebration of the stars and the sun and the moon as handicrafts of a **creative** God. I feel the **kinship** of all creation, each plant and hill, each fish and bird, each reptile and mammal crafted by the same loving sovereign.

And then there is this hierarchy, presented to us by the 8th Psalm as a paradox: “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 [humans] a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands.”

The Psalmist affirms that humans have been given “dominion” over creation, making us virtual Lords over the beasts of the land and the fish of the sea...yet at the same time owns how infinitely small and insignificant we humans are in comparison with God. While posed as a question, it’s clear that the Psalmist is humbled by the outlandish idea that God would give us this kind of authority, given what tiny specks we are in the grand scheme of things.

What comes clear to me, the more I sit with this Psalm, is that neither the Psalm nor the creation story ever intended to give permission for us to act recklessly toward the land and creatures around us. Quite the opposite, in fact. We are encouraged to survey the diversity and beauty of creation, and understand this magnificence as the manifestation of God's goodness and glory. There is an inherent understanding that all living beings, whether they walk on two feet or fly through the air on wings, are creatures of the one God. And there is a genuine sense of surprise that God would give us mere mortals any authority over and within that, and the Psalmist encourages us to remain surprised, humbled, filled with gratitude, at this position of responsibility. The "dominion" given us is something carefully named by God with the assumption that we will treat our fellow creatures with respect; that we will love the world as God does.

But the funny thing is, this whole section appears to be giving permission where nobody would actually be seeking it.

I cannot imagine a human culture that would feel the need for "permission" to engage in agriculture. The growing of grain, the harvesting of fruit, the production of milk and eggs and meat are things that humans learned to do, and before long learned that the kinder you are to the land and the livestock, the better things are for everyone. The reality is that humans *had* dominion over the earth, regardless of whether or not God or anyone else actually gave them that permission or endorsement. What the Psalm and the story of creation do, then, is place our role as tillers of soil and custodians of animals within a bigger framework. We are reminded that our lives and actions are lived in continuity with a divine creative process that reaches back to the dawn of time. We are reminded that we are, at best, lease-holders on this planet, we neither made it nor own it. And, most importantly, we are reminded that we are not God. While the 8th Psalm may appear to endorse our desire to do whatever we want with this planet, note that the opening phrase and the closing phrase of the Psalm focus on God, not us.

So if the overall framework sets our relationship with the earth within these big understandings of God, how might that speak to us today? If we understand a complex relationship between God, creator of all, and us humans, creatures given a specific role as caregivers, monitors and guides, what do we say about the where we are at the moment?

While it is not news to anyone that where we are at the moment is a precarious place, with month after month setting new global heat records, the words I hear this morning are words of encouragement for those who are helping us move toward a more faithful and sustainable relationship with the created order.

I'd like to give a shout-out to the United Church of Canada, for its willingness to study and speak and take stands on social and environmental issues. Check out our RCMUC Facebook page and you will find a link to the most recent work done by the United Church's Public Witness working group. There's a piece on Pipelines, underlining the crucial role of first nations consultations; publicity about upcoming public consultations on climate change; and details of a webinar to raise awareness about the environmental, labour and human rights challenges of being involved in international Mining pursuits. While it's impossible to speak with unanimity in a Church with some 450,000 members, an essential aspect of being stewards of creation is staying informed and speaking up when we see threats. That's not something we do *in addition to* our faith in God, it is something we do *because of* our faith that this world is where we live out our complex relationship with God, the creator and sovereign of all.

I'd like to publicly state how proud I am of the relationship between the humans who live in the Bow Valley, and the other living beings who were here long before we were. Before coming to Canmore four years ago I had heard very little discussion about wilderness corridors; I had known next to nothing about the mating and birthing patterns of Elk, and how important it is to give mama her space when it's calving time; and I could not imagine a community where Bears are known by name – or at least, by number. When a Bear is killed on railway tracks, true sorrow is expressed; when new cubs are born, we just about arrange a baby shower! This community has always had to rely on nature – first of all, on the coal seams beneath the surface, then later, on the rugged beauty that draws people to our environs – and this draws us close, I think, to the love and respect of creation encouraged by the 8th Psalm. There is still diligence needed to ensure that we never allow financial gain to surge ahead of the rights of wildlife, but I applaud the broad, strong support for nature in the Bow Valley.

I'd like to thank those in the wider Church and this congregation who continue to lift up the concept of "stewardship." Quoting from the United Church's outstanding Stewardship website, "Christian stewardship

is everything we think, say and do after we say 'I believe'... Stewardship is: How we spend our time; How we care for our body and make healthy choices; Our priorities around money; How we choose to employ our talents and gifts; How we manage our relationships; How we care for the environment; How we practice our faith." The 8th Psalm and 1st Chapter of Genesis, in speaking of our Dominion over the earth call us to be Stewards of creation, actively involved in decisions made for the best interests of all.

I'd like to express my gratitude to the other world faiths, whose understandings of our place in the natural order help us to reframe our linear world view. From the Hindu cycle of karma and reincarnation, with the soul moving from one life form to another comes a sense of connection between humans and other creatures, and an additional set of reasons why we should never be cruel toward another living being... and from aboriginal spirituality, we gain sacred stories about ravens, eagles, bears, coyotes and salmon. While my sacred text remains the Bible, these other sacred traditions affirm that caring for creation is part of our journey with God.

I'd like to thank the theologians who are calling us to advance our discussions about God and creation and how humanity relates to all of it. Bruce Sanguin, in particular, has developed an Evolutionary Theology that pushes us to merge what we believe as people of faith, with what we understand from the world of science. Bruce encourages us to engage in a process of spiritual deepening, whereby the custodial care of Psalm 8 grows into an understanding that our lives and God's life are expressed and through the ongoing processes of creation which is both beloved and evolving. We see ourselves, then, not as agents doing something to creation, but as elements of creation opening ourselves to God's mystical language of love.

Bruce is among those who challenges the old view of an interventionist God who sometimes intervenes and sometimes stays removed. But rather than rejecting God or relegating God to the sidelines, Bruce goes deep and speaks of our soul's connectedness in God, beautifully stating that "we are all kin in this kin-dom of God." He describes our life's journey as one of ever-increasing empathy, with our own experiences of loss and suffering leading us to be more attuned to the suffering of the planet. While I find my head spins a bit as I engage the work that Bruce and other Evolutionary Theologians are doing, I am drawn by their push to see our life's work as more than just "taking care of things." And while he would not describe himself as an Evolutionary Theologian, I am reminded once more of that great quote I discovered last year by Dr. H. Beecher Hicks: "the task...is not to see God in our stories but to imagine our story in God's, learning somehow to see our humanity in divinity." We are part of a great big, still-moving project with God at its heart.

And as I am naming the important influences on my journey to a healthier relationship with the planet, I'd be remiss if I didn't at least mention my son, Jordan. For the past two years, Jordan has worked on Organic Farms and this year is working on a farm north of Calgary that is both Organic and Biodynamic, incorporating various natural, spiritual and philosophical elements into their practice. As he has learned about the ethical treatment of pigs, chickens, ducks and goats, and sustainable practices in growing vegetables, fruits and grains, it has caused me to think more than once about where my food is sourced and how it was raised.

We are a people, I think, who love this planet and realize that things need to change in our relationship with the land and water and air, the animals who co-habit the earth and the animals who provide us with food. What we are doing now is not sustainable, and there are voices being raised that we must continue to heed.

Within this discussion, perhaps the most important gift we receive from the 8th Psalm, is to remember that in any discussion about planet earth, the first word is God and the last word is God. God's creative presence is found in the created order and my best self is discovered as I learn to live gently within it. These mountains and the creatures who call them home literally surround my life, and as I respect and trust and appreciate what they have to offer, I am drawn ever closer to the one whose glory I see in them. To God be all glory and praise! Amen.

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