

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for August 17, 2008 in the Old Broad Street Church
Lessons: Psalm 8 and Matthew 14:13-21

WHEN I LOOK UP

It seems natural for people to look *up* for God. Little children look up to their parents for help, understanding, and comfort. An older sister or brother is admonished to be someone the younger child can “look up to,” meaning, of course, admire, respect, and see as a model. Ancient peoples located the home of their gods on a mountain or above the clouds. The heavens seemed closer then, for the vastness of space was unknown, and maybe that sometimes made God seem closer, but I’m not so sure about that. Then as now, life was lived mostly on the ground, and “up” was mysterious and beyond reach of human beings struggling down in the soil of earth.

The psalmist, by which I mean the speaker in the psalm (the person looking up at the clear night sky) feels small but not insignificant. Most of all, the feeling is wonder at the greatness of the LORD, Israel’s covenant God, who is also the creator of the heavens and the earth with all their creatures. The psalmist is not feeling alone in time and space, is not contemplating the unknown and nameless power that placed the stars. There is trust in this looking up. The human tells God, “When I look at *your* heavens, the work of *your fingers*” To God, the stars are small stuff, fine and delicate work done with the fingers. I sense a close correlation here to the child looking up at the parent whose love is trusted. Yes, the universe is vast to me, but not to the God who knows and loves me.

Still, God’s handiwork is impressive – much more impressive than the psalmist seems to herself. Now, wait a minute, did I just say “herself” when the odds are this was written by a man? True, we now know the designation, “a psalm of David,” does not necessarily mean it was *written by* King David, but in those days the author was almost surely a man. But remember, please, that by “the psalmist,” I mean the person speaking in the psalm, not its author. The psalms give us words to speak to God and to ourselves about life. A psalm becomes mine as I enter and share its wonder, its faith, its struggles and complaints with life, its frustration or even anger. The words and images get inside me, and so for a while I become like the psalmist speaking them as a prayer. So, the speaker may be a “he” or a “she.” Sometimes, with the psalm’s help, I am giving myself “a talking to,” as in, “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted with me?” – *what’s wrong with you, self of mine, stand up and live with courage!* But even then, I am struggling with myself *in the presence of God*. I am not alone, talking to myself in a void.

Have you never looked up at the sky and wondered where you fit into the vastness, wondered how a creature so small as you and brief in time could really matter? What does a mere human being mean to the God who created all of that?

“And yet.” Those words lead us to the greater wonder the psalmist feels. We may be tiny and the heavens immense, but God’s eye is on us, and God’s own heart is given to us. David, King David, was called “the man after God’s own heart.” Well, even a king is minute in the universe, and we do well to remember how small and short-lived are the greatest among us. Those who command armies do not impress the One who commands the stars. But God comes close to the one who is hurt, shamed, or lost, and the greatest wonder of this psalm is that God should care so much and invest so much caring in the human creature.

God has given us a position of responsibility in the world, a stewardship over God’s own work. Right here, however, we need to do some serious thinking, listening to each other, and paying attention to the scientists among us. We are in crisis, and the ways out will not be simple, easy, or painless. Chapter one of Genesis (the creation story) and Psalm 8, which is much like it, make it very clear that we are designated by God as stewards of this world, caretakers of creation and care-givers for each other. But we are creatures, too, and ourselves part of nature, and so our needs must be considered along with the needs of animals and plants. We are connected with the other creatures but also connected with God. So, to use a biblical phrase, we are “like God to them,” but we have not acted faithfully “as God” to them. Our “dominion” has mostly been all about us, especially the rich and privileged of the world, including its rich and privileged nations. Caring for the earth and for each other has been of far less concern than taking from the earth and from each other.

Now we are in crisis, and solutions will not be simple. Especially for poor countries, ecological concerns must be balanced with human concerns. So, we will need innovations. Scientists and engineers will need to discover and develop ways out of our crisis that ignore neither the ecological nor the human concerns. To go purist in either direction is to be foolish. Countries will not give up economic development to save a couple bird species, but unless we start taking seriously the inescapable reality that our future is tied to that of the animals and plants and to the whole ecosystem, economic development will lead us to ruin. It is folly to think we can simply leave nature alone, as though we lived apart from the earth. It is also folly to think we can just carry on “business as usual” and expect market forces to save us from the consequences of our greed and carelessness.

Playing religious faith against science is also folly, as Psalm 8 should lead us to realize. Do we think God has given us dominion so we can be selfish and cruel, enslaving the masses of humanity for the wealth of the few who seize or inherit power, ravaging and poisoning the earth for quarterly profits? Do we think God’s entrusting us with stewardship

of the earth has no meaning, no content? Is it just, “Go ahead, do as you please, and I’ll always be there to pick up the pieces and clean up your mess”? Does God want spoiled children? God made this world and loves it. Science only uncovers the ways in which things work here: *What happens if . . .?* and *How will what happens change if . . .?* Do we think that by denying the careful work of scientists, we can have things our way? This summer I inadvertently tested the law of gravity, which is to say I tripped and fell hard onto cobblestone, breaking my camera and nearly breaking my wrist. That was inconvenient, but gravity does not change for my convenience. Ignoring the evidence will not save us from the consequences. Interpreting the evidence wisely and changing the conditions for the better will not be easy and the particulars will require debate and balance (compromise), but we don’t get to make the rules, and ignoring them is becoming increasingly dangerous.

Now, we need to come to heart of the matter. By nature, we look *up* for God, but God has come down to us. That Jesus had compassion for the crowds of people suffering in their poverty, ignorance, and vulnerability to life is the most important thing for us to understand. In him, we are met by God face-to-face and see that God cares deeply about the least regarded people on earth. Jesus makes us stewards of God’s compassion.

Life can be lived as a prayer, a psalm of wonder. It can be lived in conversation with God because God knows how it feels to be one of us, to be a mere human who looks up at the sky with wonder and humility. Every effort we make to respond to God’s love and kindness is truly a loaves-and-fishes affair. We never have enough for the whole job. We never have all the answers. We offer God what we do have and then do the best we can with the brains and abilities God has given us, while trusting God to do more with what little we bring than we can calculate or predict. Certainly, being a church is an ongoing loaves-and-fishes commitment. How are we to make a difference in the world, even in our tiny city, with our five loaves of bread and couple of fish? That’s all we ever have, proportional to the problems that face us: a bit of compassion and too few resources. But when acts of compassion are offered as prayers cognizant of our weaknesses and our own needs and failings, then we will be amazed at what God does with our loaves and fish. Everything we do in faith and hope is (or can be) a prayer.

I believe we need to seek ways to reactivate our sense of wonder. Without it, we feel either too much in control or too overwhelmed by life. We don’t need to control everything, but we do need to appreciate life more and stop trying to speed through it. We can look up with wonder, then look around with greater curiosity, more appreciation of the world and its creatures, more respect for life, and more compassion for each other. This past week, we had three nights of vacation Bible school, with some very young participants. Is there any greater wonder than our children? And yet, what are they, that God cares for them? Amen.