

PREACHING PSALM 8

by

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ecology has become a hot topic again, and thus preachers may be reading the Bible for texts to speak to this issue. After examining Psalm 8, we might decide to pass it by; it seems to authorize and even celebrate ideas we cannot accept: human domination and thus human plunder of nature. Not only does the Psalm contain the dreaded word "dominion," it seems to have a hierarchical view of the world: God over humans, humans over animals. So much political incorrectness should either be passed over in silence, or finessed, by reading the first part only on retreats, stopping after verse 4 to contemplate the night sky.

This would be a mistake. The psalm is a powerful prayer, guiding us to the deep mystery of how God has created the human situation and giving us words to speak our awe and praise of God.

2 THE HUMAN SITUATION OF THE PSALM

As we begin to construct a sermon on this text, we should try to understand the exact human situation of the text.

Two dimensions of being human

Verse 4 is a profound question, asked in a mode of awe and wonder; awe at being aware of two distinct dimensions of human existence. The author is awed at the infinity of the world against which a single human seems nothing (v. 1-3), and also awed at the infinite size of the shadow a single human casts in the world by virtue of the power God grants to humans (v. 5-8). Verse 4 refers to both parts of the psalm, despite the habit of translators

of grouping verses 3 and 4 into a paragraph, and phrasing that implies that the question of verse 4 is asked while looking at the night sky rather than in the context of the entire psalm.

However, the psalm demands reading verses 5-8 as part of what provokes the question. First, some versions (NRSV, NJB, Weiser¹) begin verse 5 by translating the "adversative waw"² as "Yet," making the connection of verses 4 and 5 clearer. More significant is the flow of ideas from verse 4 to 5. God is "mindful" of humans and "cares" for them, and verse 5 begins the exposition of the amazing acts of God that testify to this care: creating humans almost like God, giving them glory and honor and entrusting them with dominion over even the works of God.

Standing between two infinities

The aptness of these two dimensions as a description of the human situation is a remarkable feature of the psalm. Written millennia ago, the psalm expresses a basic dilemma that grows sharper with every year. The "infinite spaces" that "frightened" Pascal³ hundreds of years ago were orders of magnitude smaller than what we contemplate. At the other extreme, the infinitely small is now further away than ever. Not only space, but the vastness of time humbles us, as our perceived universe has grown in age to billions of years.

Likewise, our sense of infinite power has also grown. We can change the course of rivers, destroy species, mutate others, edit our own genetic inheritance, bring the

¹ Artur, Weiser, The Psalms. Old Testament Library. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962.

² Bernhard Anderson, "Human Dominion over Nature," in Miriam Ward, ed., Biblical Studies in Contemporary Thought, 35.

³ Blaise Pascal, Pensees, 205.

temperature of the sun to earth in atomic explosions, terminate life itself. And we are hovering on the brink of space, poised to carry ourselves and our power to other planets. And yet, we can still feel powerless against the large structures of economics or politics. We see with Pascal how humans are "A nothing in comparison with the infinite, an All in comparison with the nothing."⁴

The real awe and power of verse 4 comes only with awareness of both of these dimensions; to somehow balance both the infinity "above" us and the infinity "beneath" our feet. A sermon on this text should properly situate and develop this profound awe.

3. WORDS OF JUDGEMENT: OUR IMBALANCE

Doubtless many of you are itching to pile up descriptions of ecological disaster. Wait. When we hold human life up against this psalm the precise word of judgement is not "you have destroyed the environment," but "you are living without awe." Let me illustrate by two examples.

The modern person, enmeshed in bureaucracy, in mega-corporations, asks the human question without seeing the larger dimension. Literally, we live without seeing the night sky, outshown by our artificial lighting, fogged by city smog. We can go through life without conscious awareness of natural beauty, as our lives compress down to what we can see from our cars, and as the works of God are constrained to what we can see from our office desk. In these contexts, the human question returns a small answer. What God has

⁴ Ibid, 72.

made humans for is reduced to what is profitable, what will win the championship, what is good for me.

This limited perspective can lead to domination of the earth because the higher dimensions of our existence are eliminated and we seem alone at the top of the pyramid, master of all we survey, but it may also lead to despair as the human enterprise is stripped of purpose.

However, verses 5-8 are also part of the psalm. And failing to live with consideration of them also leads to a word of judgement.

Consider the human in a situation of oppression or poverty. Here, it is the human's own power that is being denied, as the poor have little control over their immediate environment. Living in shanty towns, or homeless, they lack the dominion over the natural world that is part of true human destiny. Nor is this limited to the third world. Residents of our cities who must bar their windows and retreat from the streets, are denied the dominion over their physical environment that should be theirs. Women lived for centuries as property, or as domesticated pets, without the rights of dominion over their own lives. Still more cruelly, they were called "Queen of the household," as mocking compensation for not being sovereign over their own bodies, time and souls.

To justify these sorts of denial of human destiny, one hears "they're happy, they don't know anything else." This psalm tells us otherwise; even if one is from generations of poverty, or generations of patriarchy, the image of God within was destined for other things. A seldom remarked piece of the ecological tragedy is the smashing of the human species.

4 WORDS OF GRACE: REGAINING OUR BALANCE

Describing our misuse of power is easy, but remember that the psalm itself spends not one word attacking misuse, but describes a deeper truth. Thus, our sermons on it should not be the traditional "fifteen minutes of law and thirty seconds of gospel," but should be oriented to strengthening our image of being human. This is also a challenge to those who are prone to preach as if Jesus was the only good thing God ever did. Can we develop graceful words from this text?

What God gave us: Dominion or domination⁵

We have spoken of the power God has granted humans. The first words of grace come from a clear understanding of what that power is.

The psalm terms the human role "dominion" (NRSV, Weiser, Kraus⁶: "appointed him ruler," NJB: "made him lord"), rather than "domination."

Understanding the meaning of "dominion" seems inextricably tied to understanding the meaning of humans being created in the "image of God" (Gen 1:26-8).⁷ The connection between Psalm 8 and Genesis is supported by the Genesis text which also authorizes dominion, by the practice of naming ancient Near Eastern kings as "the image of God," and by the supposition that kings, to mark their claim to dominion, placed an image of themselves in various provinces they rule.⁸ To this we may add the testimony of

⁵ In this section I am particularly indebted to the insights of Robert J. Russell, director of the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California.

⁶ Hans-Joachim Kraus, Psalms: A Commentary. Translated by Hilton C. Oswald. 2 vol. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988.

⁷ See Claus Westermann, Genesis 1-11, 147ff.

⁸ Drawing on Gerhard Von Rad, Genesis: A Commentary, 54-9, and Kraus, Psalms, vol 1, 184.

Ecclesiasticus 17:2-4: ". . . [God] granted [humans] authority over everything on the earth. He endowed them with strength like his own, and made them in his own image. He put the fear of them in all living beings, and gave them dominion over beasts and birds."

Without making too sweeping a claim in this thorny area of exegesis, we may advance two conclusions. First, the grant of dominion is a delegation of authority to rule in lieu of God, not an outright grant of ownership for plunder. Secondly, the human power over nature is not merely a consequence of a fallen human nature, it is part of the inherent purpose of humans: "You have made . . ." ⁹ As Phil Hefner writes, the human is "created with a destiny," a "created co-creator."¹⁰

We will return to this second point, but we must try to do that most challenging act of creation of the preacher: to try to make real for our listeners the new life that God is calling us to. Can we imagine what this life of balance looks like?

Imagining the balance

Suppose you have just been put in charge of some complex, extensive organization. Without training or background, you are now in charge of a large farm, commander of an aircraft carrier, president of a corporation or leader of a nation. As you walk into your new office, large and unfamiliar, as your assistants hasten to serve you, what is the feeling?

Is it not being both large and small? You know you can summon and people will come, you can issue an order and action will happen, you feel the largeness of your power.

⁹ Is the meaning of this grant of power changed, now that we know the earth is not the limit of the universe? Can human dominion be inferred to extend across the universe, or is it limited to this planet or solar system?

¹⁰ Phil Hefner, "Fourth Locus: The Creation," 323ff. in Carl Bratten and Robert Jenson, ed. Christian Dogmatics, 2 vol. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.

But you feel small, you don't know how everything fits together, your orders have unintended side effects, you feel humble amid the vastness of what you must administer.

There are many opportunities to go astray. But, let's not spend time describing how to fail. Try, instead to describe that moment of balance. You keep restoring yourself by remembering both that all you have was given to you, and that is has been given to you and you alone. When the power threatens to pervert you, you remember that you are acting in trust for another. When the power threatens to immobilize you, you remember that you were ordered to exercise it. Is not living with this dual awareness a boundless source of energy and freedom -- freedom of the particularly constrained Christian type?

In the arena of the environment the human aware of human destiny is both free and constrained: free to exercise dominion with all the ingenuity and power available, and constrained to do so constantly mindful that all we have has been given by God to us, to rule as God would.

Against false grace

The words of grace in this psalm need to be distinguished from a false grace now being offered. We are often told that ecological salvation resides in a return to "harmony" with nature. We should stop interfering and follow nature's rhythms.

Sometimes this desire risks lobotomizing our humanity. As the psalm tells us that the true human situation is inescapable, and inescapably hard. This power to affect and change the world is something inherent in humanity: even in debating yielding of power, we reveal that we have the power to decide our role. This is our destiny.

Job, in personal distress found the lot of humans too hard and hurled these words back at God: "What are human beings, that you make so much of them . . . Will you not look away from me for a while[?]" (7:17-9) Now we seem tempted to repeat them in global despair. "God, I can't stand being human, I don't want to be your delegate, to be in your image!" But God has given us a different destiny; to reject it is rejecting God.

Yes, we should be cautious. We have arrived late to the created world, and our power has grown beyond the pace of evolution of our souls. The psalm directs us to reinforce our caution by neither an idolatry of nature, or a patronizing view of native people as living without facing human choices. Rather we are directed to a respect for the awesome gift of God to humans. As we consider affecting nature, we should do so mindful that God has created it. As we learn from native peoples, what we should learn is how they choose as humans to exercise the power of dominion.

God can use the powerless

Verse 2 has been a thorny point of translation, full of problems of both text and meaning, but a certain consensus seems to exist, as reflected in Kraus, Weiser, and the NRSV which significantly revises the RSV.¹¹ At first this verse is puzzling: "Out of the mouth of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark..." Kraus follows Gunkel in arguing that this verse has roughly the same thrust as I Corinthians 1 and 2: God uses the weak to reveal the glory of God all the more clearly. This is also how Matthew uses the verse (21:16). This verse adds a crucial twist to the psalm. The dimension of awe is now

¹¹ The disparate solutions of the NJB and the NIV testify to the confusion.

multiplied: amid all this vast universe, and the amazing power given to humans, God may reach to the weakest of humans and not the strongest to display God's power.

It is all humans who have this God-given power, not only privileged humans, or the wise, or the rich "movers and shakers" who should exercise power while the common herd follow. How quickly we would be prone to assume that human power to shape the earth was an authorization for land-owners to do whatever they want at the expense of the poor. The psalm says that God may use anyone to work God's will.

5. THE SHAPE OF THE SERMON

Words of prayer

A psalm does make theological points, but does so in a particular way: it is a prayer, or liturgy or both, words to be spoken by us, and in address to God. So, notice the tone and style of the words the psalm puts in our lips. A sermon should be faithful to the text in this way also.

How majestic is your name...

The psalm is framed by words of praise to God: "how majestic is your name in all the earth." This is the first and last word of the psalm, let it be the frame for our words also. Weiser cites I Corinthians 1:31 as comment on the psalm: "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

A sermon on this text should strive to expand and deepen our ability to praise God for the specific things we have been discussing.

First, let us praise God for the contents of verses 1 to 3. By looking at each piece of the world any saying, "God created this," we help change what we see when we look at the world. No longer do we see "nature" but "creation."

Let us develop our praise of God for the world. We praise God regularly for Jesus, and praise God for random benefits of nature such as rain when needed and good weather for church picnics, but a meditation on the psalm should lead us to praise God not just for a list of benefits from nature, but for the creation in all its complexity, beauty and wonder.

Praising God in this way may lead us to see environmental damage as a form of sacrilege, an attack on God's glory. Polluting a stream is like polluting the host of the mass; using the products of the earth to kill is like painting swastikas on a synagogue. Nature is so precious because it was created by God to reflect God's glory.

... your name in all the earth

And now let us praise God for verses 5-8. While generations of believers treasure the moving experience of standing beneath the "vault of heaven" on a clear night and praying these words in awe and mystery, I wonder if, this still preserves the illusion that God's creations are "out there" and that the works of humans are distant and unrelated to God.

To be faithful to the psalm, we should pray it "in all the earth." A preacher can help the congregation to say these words everywhere. When you see the Golden Gate bridge, the Taj Mahal, a cathedral, or any scene where human work has created beauty, say this text with awe and wonder. Pray the words and praise God that God's delegates on earth have such power to create.

Pray this text also as we contemplate the image on TV showing pieces of the earth that could have been plowshares but have been beaten into swords. Say this text while standing on a garbage dump, while driving on a smoggy freeway. And do not be surprised if you become aware of a feeling of pain.

Finally, praise God at the combination of these two dimensions. Praise God for the deepest and most mysterious aspects of being human in a created universe. Our questioning, our desire to know, our desire to build, to create, our joy at beauty, even our visceral repugnance at the earth despoiled, for these things we should praise God.

The grace of this text is to gently call us to a specific type of praise. Psalm 8 can move us to vividly see the awful power God has delegated to us, and inspire us to use this power as God intended. We might paraphrase our Lutheran confessions to describe this text: the psalm not only talks of good works, it shows how they may be done.

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