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Sermon 14 June 2020
Psalm Beach 2: Look Up

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

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

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

3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
4 what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals[a] that you care for them?

5 Yet you have made them a little lower than God,[b]
and crowned them with glory and honor.
6 You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
7 all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
8 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

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

- Night has fallen at Psalm Beach. The sun has set. And as we wait here in the darkness, we can feel the cool breeze, the warmth of the campfire. You can hear the sounds of the waves and the shoreline creatures in the darkness. As you look up into the vast indigo sky, you see multitudes of twinkling stars, constellations like the Southern Cross, the moon shining bright, and you think of the planets and galaxies that stretch out into the infinite body of

space. We can't help but be awestruck by the magnificence and mystery of the heavens, and the God who created and reigns over them. We feel at once a deep sense of our own insignificance—we are tiny—humans are infinitesimal in the face of such majesty. And yet, we also feel a deep sense of gratitude, and connectedness and responsibility, even honour, that we should have been given our place in the scheme of creation.

- The poet, Walt Whitman, in his poem “When I heard the learned astronomer,” describes his escape from a tiresome lecture, by rising and gliding out into the mystical moist night-air and looking up in perfect silence. But Whitman was not the only poet to ever find inspiration in the firmament, nor was he the first. Psalm 8 describes a similar experience, and it's this Psalm that we're considering today.
- Now you'll remember that last week we looked at Psalm 16, and we pointed out that at the beginning of the Psalm there was a description. Psalm 16's description told us that it was a miktam of David. And you may also remember that nobody really knows what a miktam is—it might be an engraving in stone, but we're not really sure.
- Well Psalm 8 is also a Psalm of David, but we're not told that it is a miktam. What we're told is that this Psalm should be played or sung “according to the gittith,” or “on the gittith” (gi-teeth)—there's a note to the leader, or the chief musician, there at the beginning of this Psalm that says that. And there are 3 Psalms that have this instruction, Psalm 8, Psalm 81 and 84. And we think that the gittith has something to do with the Philistine city of Gath—some

one or something from Gath is called Gittite, or gittith—the giant Goliath—the one David took down with his slingshot—he was a Gittite—and so we think that the instruction “according to the gittith,” or “on the gittith” is either a reference to a musical instrument from Gath, like a lyre or a harp or something, that the Psalm is to be played on, or a reference to a melody from Gath—but we don’t know which, and we don’t know what that musical instrument or melody would be.

- But what we DO know about Psalm 8 is that it is addressed to God—the Psalmist is speaking to God—and so in that way it is very much a prayer.
- We also know that the Psalmist begins and ends the Psalm in the same way—with the same words. O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! So these two statements provide a kind of symmetry to the poem—like an envelope that the poem sits inside—sometimes this is called an envelope or “inclusio” structure—we’ll see later that the symmetry here is an important element in this Psalm.
- But what the Psalmist says in Hebrew, and we translate as O Lord our Sovereign, is Yahweh Addon-NAY-NU—the root word of Addonaynu is ADON (there’s a word for your Psalm Beach phrasebook) and it means Lord or Master or King—the person in charge, the person reigning or presiding over things—and the word adon has the same A-D, “ad” sound as the word “addir” (also in your Phrasebook) which is the word that’s translated as “majesty.” So there’s alliteration here in the pairing of the words adonenu and addir—and what that word addir means is very similar to what the

English word “majesty” means. The word addir comes from the word adar, which means WIDE or BIG—addir is often used to describe the vastness of the sea, or a broad ship, or a huge tree—and it’s also used to describe kings and nobility—BIG NAMES—the English word “Majestic” is similar—the word “majestic” is related to the word “major” and it comes from the Latin “magnus” so it’s related to words like “magnum” and “magnificent”—and all these words describe things that are “great” and “huge”—BIG THINGS

- And so when the Psalmist says “O Lord our sovereign, how MAJESTIC (addir) is your name in all the Earth,” the implication is that when we look at the Earth—all of it—We see God’s name—God’s majestic name—God’s GREAT, BIG, HUGE, BROAD, WIDE name—written in BIG LETTERS—all over it
- Anyone who has studied art, knows that once you’re able to recognise the work of an artist—once you know the subjects that show up in their paintings, what their brush strokes look like, what colours they use, how their lines are drawn, you can look at a painting and even without seeing the signature, you can know who the artist is—you see a Picasso and know, that’s a Picasso—you can go to the Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow and look up at that magnificent painting of Jesus, Christ of St John of the Cross, where Jesus on the cross is suspended in the middle of a black sky, hanging above the landscape, below him there’s a shoreline and fishermen-- and just by the way it is painted, by the perspective and the subject matter and the way it is put together, you could say, this has Salvador Dali’s name written all over it

- This is what the Psalmist is saying about the world—when I look at the world, it has God’s name written all over it, in HUGE, BROAD, WIDE letters
- And, what’s more, God has set His glory above the heavens—Robert Alter translates that as God’s “splendour is TOLD above the heavens” and so we get a vision of the Psalmist looking up into the darkness and hearing the majesty of God spoken of through the silent language of the night sky
- And then we come to a rather obscure line in verse 2: Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger. **In other places, like in the gospel of Matthew, this is translated “out of the mouths of babes and infants you have prepared praise for yourself”**—
- Scholars are not quite in agreement about what these words mean, but it seems to me that they foreshadow the second part of this Psalm—which we will get to in a minute—where the Psalmist asks “what are humans that you are mindful of them” and talks about our responsibilities—because here we have a reminder of our weakness—the way that humans come into the world—we start out as defenseless and dependant—but out of the mouths of babes and infants comes the defeat of the enemies of God—it’s out of this very weakness that the enemy is silenced—I think that the Psalmist is giving us a prophetic glimpse of the way that God’s enemy is to be vanquished, the way that chaos is to be transformed, the way that redemption happens—not through domination or displays of earthly power, but through love that empties itself out—but let’s not get ahead of ourselves.

- What we can certainly see is that in the first stanza of this psalm, the Psalmist sets up a contrast between God's glory in the heavens, and babes and infants on Earth—and this way of pairing God and humanity continues in the second stanza.
- In the second of the three stanzas, beginning with verse 3, the psalmist describes doing something—looking up into the night sky—this has been implied in verse 1, but here the Psalmist is clear and direct—WHEN I look at your heavens, the work of your FINGERS, the moon and the stars that you have established
- So the Psalmist has been talking about God's majesty—God's majestic—big, wide, and far-reaching name in all the earth—but now the Psalmist turns from painting with a broad brush and uses an unusual phrase—the work of your FINGERS—the Hebrew word for fingers is etsba. It's not unusual to hear of the work of God's HANDS, but here the Psalmist is talking about the work of God's fingers—the Psalmist is talking about the attention God gives to the finer points of the universe.
- The German architect Mies van der Rohe is famous for saying "God is in the details" and that's what the Psalmist is saying here—look at the details in the universe—not just the big, vast, broad, majestic elements, but the tiniest details like the moon and the countless miniscule stars in the sky
- You know Pastor Tasha and I like to cook—and we like to watch cooking shows on TV—and travel shows about food in different places and about different chefs—and one thing I have noticed lately—well over the past few

years or so—is that many of the most famous chefs at the most famous restaurants—those with Michelin stars and whatnot—I’ve noticed that when they prepare dishes, whether an appetiser or main course or dessert, very often the presentation is almost absurdly complex and intricate—when I put food on a plate, I usually use a spatula, or a big spoon, and maybe if I’m feeling fancy I’ll sprinkle some parsley or more likely some bacon on top of whatever it is, but that’s about as much attention to detail as I will pay. But these chefs, when they put food on a plate, they do it with surgical precision, each leaf or berry or grain of salt is perfectly placed with these specially-designed tools—so I call that kind of cooking “tweezer food,” because they’re the kind of dishes you have to use tweezers to prepare—delicate and intricate and precise—that’s the way the psalmist is describing God’s handiwork here—the work of your fingers

- Now remember I said that the symmetry of this Psalm is important? It’s got three stanzas, enveloped by the same statement at the top and bottom, so the middle stanza, **the CRUX of the Psalm**, has a stanza on either side—and this middle stanza is symmetrical too, it has two sides—one side, verse 3, sets the stage—it describes what the Psalmist is doing—“ When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established” and then the other side, verse 4, is the question that the Psalmist asks of God as he looks into the night sky--what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?
- So here, at the center of the Psalm, the central question is asked

- What are humans that you are mindful of them—the Hebrew means to remember, to think of, to bring to mind—what are humans that you think of them, mortals –**the Hebrew there literally means what is the Son of Man**—that you care for them? Now that phrase that you care for them—it is sometimes translated as “that you visit them” -- the Hebrew word is paqad—and it means to take care of, to watch over, to oversee, to be in charge of—it’s a lot like “shamar” that we talked about last week, but it has more of an official ring to it—so the Psalmist is asking—what are people compared to your majesty, we’re like babes and infants compared to you—why would you even give them a thought and look after them? But you are a God who is mindful of the details—who pays attention to even the most miniscule element of creation—your eye is on the sparrow, we might say
- And you have made humans a little lower than God—the word there is Elohim—it means God, divine beings, so sometimes it’s translated as “angels”—but it’s continuing that imagery of things above—in the heavens in God’s realm—and things below looking up, like the Psalmist himself—you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour—you have given them dominion over the work of your hands—not the work of your fingers—not those tiny intricate stars in the heavens but the things here on earth—over them you have given humans “dominion.” 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.

- But what does it mean to be given “dominion”? The Hebrew root here is *mashal*: to rule, govern, to REIGN—we’re reminded again of the command in the garden to KEEP—*shamar*—creation—to watch out for, to take care of—but here we have the additional meaning of to govern, to rule over. Humans have been put in charge of, given the responsibility of, taking care of creation. We are stewards of the earth.
- And so on the one hand, a very straightforward, superficial reading of this Psalm allows us to say that this is a good example of what Walter Brueggemann calls a “psalm of orientation.” It is a song of creation that expresses gratitude for the order with which the universe is formed and sustained, the way that the creatures of earth have their place, and above them humans, ruling and reigning, and above them the Almighty who has designed and who cares for all things. God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world. And so this is part of the *tehillim* (the praises) because it is a praise to God for the way things are—or should be, anyway. The Psalmist expresses only gratitude—there’s no petition, no lament—the psalmist isn’t complaining or asking for anything.
- Sure there’s a question right in the middle of the Psalm, but it’s a rhetorical question—it’s not really looking for an answer.
- Or is it?

- When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
4 what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
- Is this simply humility and gratitude or could this be bewilderment?
- Is the psalmist perhaps literally asking: Why on earth did you put us
in charge? When I look at your work up there, in its perfection and
detail, I wonder why you chose people to take care of things down
here
- Let's look at the two observations the Psalmist makes: First:
- you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.
- But—even though humans were crowned with glory and honour,
made in the very image of God, made just a little lower than elohim—
what happened in the Garden of Eden? What did the serpent tell us
about that forbidden fruit? Eat it and you'll be like God.
- The first time humanity had the opportunity to be equal with God we
grabbed it—we said it's not enough to be a little lower than God—we
want to be like God, we want to be God—and so we grasped at that
fruit, we tried to build a tower to heaven, we take matters into our
own hands and we mess up our relationship with God—but it's not
just our relationship with God we've messed up

- It's also our relationship with all of Creation—creation we were commanded to take care of, to guard and to protect, to govern—we chose to exploit it—to dominate it--it was under our feet so we trampled it, we treated this earth and the fullness thereof as if it were our own and not ours to be stewards of—We asked, Am I my brother's keeper? We didn't just forget to love our neighbours, even our own families—we killed them, we enslaved them, and we enslave them to this day and their blood cries out from the ground
- If the Psalmist who wrote of the dominion of humanity over creation could have seen where we would have come over the millenia, what we have done with the gifts we were given, surely he would have never have stopped weeping—the habitats we have destroyed, the waters we have polluted, the wars we have waged, the populations we have oppressed, the famines we have caused, the species we have erased never to be seen again
- And some us, some of us have the naivete to ask whether humans have any real effect on our world, on our environment, on the living conditions of our brothers and sisters around the world—well when the psalmist wrote this psalm the human population of the world was most certainly under 50 million people—in the entire world--, by the year 1000 it was 275 million, by the year 1600 it was 500 million (that's half a billion), by the year 1800, 1 billion, by 1927 2 billion, in 1960, 3 billion, in 1974, 4 billion, in 1987, over 5 billion, in 1999, over

6 billion, in 2011, over 7 billion, and today more than 8 billion people have dominion over this world just as they did when the psalmist wrote these words--The full depth and reality of our dominion has become more certain through the years. We rule. We possess the ability to destroy or to care for creation if for no other reason than simply because of the sheer number of humans who populate this world.

- If we are tempted to ask God “why don’t you do something about the hunger and pollution and oppression and unrest and division and disease in this world?”—surely the psalmist as well as God himself is asking us the same question—because we have been given dominion--
mashal
- Surely the psalmist knew about the Fall and the Flood—and the countless times humans had messed up and been called to repentance and restoration
- But as we read this Psalm today, as we look back over the years upon years and try to make an account for where we are right now
- Psalm 8 reminds us of our responsibility and of our failure—our two failures—we were made a little lower than God and we couldn’t take it, we wanted to be equal with God. And secondly, We were given dominion over the earth, and we chose to dominate it
- And so Psalm 8 is an important reminder to be humble— you have made them a little lower than Elohim and given them dominion over

the works of your hands-- This is not a reason to boast but a reminder that we have messed up, we have failed and are in need of redemption and we cannot save ourselves

- But there is one who can save us.
- There is one who entered into history as a defenseless babe, a helpless infant.
- There is one about whom another symmetrical hymn was written, a hymn that says he did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but, even though he was God, became a little lower than elohim, and emptied himself, even to death on a cross. Not through domination, but through love.
- There is one about whom Matthew 21 tells us that little children cried out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," --to which Jesus himself replied quoting Psalm 8 'Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have prepared praise for yourself'
- ⊖ There is one about whom the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, God has put all things under his feet, one about whom Paul writes the church at Ephesus saying in Ephesians 1 God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and **dominion**, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. **And he has put all things**

under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

- There is one who is the answer to the question what are human beings that you are mindful of them, the SON OF MAN that you care for them?
- There is one who is an example of what it means to be human, one whose incarnation responds to our human failure to keep and guard and reign over creation, whose incarnation saves and rescues and transforms, bringing new life and a new creation.
- And so this morning when we consider Psalm 8, a psalm of orientation, maybe we can't help but be reminded of our human failures, our disorientation, but we can also be reminded of the one who brings re-orientation, who brings redemption and restoration-- and and when we look up to the night sky and ask what are human beings that you are mindful of them, we can also be reminded to look up to the Son of Man who hung on Calvary's tree for our sake, we can survey that wondrous cross, on which the Prince of Glory died, and we can proclaim with all of creation, Oh Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the Earth.
- May God bless you this week—look up, and be reminded.