

A Song of Serenity

A Reflection on the Psalms

Text: Psalm 8:1

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Human experience is uneven.

It may seem that for some it is always Summer, and for others it is always Winter, but it would be more accurate to recognize that for most of us human experience is varied; it is dynamic, in flux, and it contains both light and shadow, good times and difficult times.

The Psalms are a beautiful reflection of human experience as it is lived consciously before the face of God and, if we are honest in letting the Psalms speak to us in the full spectrum of these experiences, they will have a word for us in every season of our lives. They will bring to expression the depths of our experience, whether that be of joy or sorrow, of pain or pleasure.

Walter Brueggemann in his study of the Psalms suggests that the whole range of human experience, which comes to expression throughout the whole Psalter, can be diagrammed as a movement. There are three life situations which are easily identified in many Psalms and those life situations are true to our common human experience. There are Psalms of *orientation* which express confident trust in the good order of Creation, reflecting the seasons of wellbeing; there are Psalms of *disorientation* which reflect the struggle of the person in conflict and confusion, the dark night of the soul; there are Psalms of *new orientation* which give expression to the joy and gratitude felt because of the surprise of grace which has effected healing and brought wholeness to life again.

Most of life is lived in movement from one state or condition to the other. Human experience is uneven; we are always in process; life is fragile and we are vulnerable to the slight tilting of the axis of the heart, which can move us from settled confidence to disarray, and again, from disarray to the healing of grace.

Each condition of our human expression finds an echo in the songbook of Israel. Psalm 8 is a song of serenity, singing the confident trust of one who is

experiencing reality, the world and life as well ordered, well structured, reliable and harmonious. The Psalm ends as it begins with a paean of praise to the majestic greatness of God, Who has created and Who sustains this well ordered world.

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Thy name in all the earth!

The psalmist stands in awe of creation, of the wisdom with which all has been ordered. How great Thy name means how gloriously Thou art manifested in the whole created order. Here is an expression of buoyant faith, of a sense of wonder, of a joyful acknowledgement of God Who has brought about the harmonious symmetry of all of reality. Here we have a confident, serene settlement of the faith questions. The Psalmist has found a place to stand, a place to set his feet. Since God is trustworthy and reliable, there are some things that are simply settled. One can go on to other things because there is a kind of untouchable core of trust that moves one beyond doubt and anxiety.

Life is good because God in His goodness has created a good and hospitable space in which one can live and move and have one's being. There is an elemental certitude that forms a solid foundation on which to rest one's life.

Such is the conviction of the poet who penned the eighth Psalm. Let us look at the heart of faith's conviction as it comes to expression in this song of serenity.

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Thy name in all the earth!

Exclamation point; so the Psalm begins, so it ends. Worship, praise and adoration of the greatness of God form as it were the brackets, the boundaries within which the psalmist contemplates the identity and dignity of the human person. At its heart, the Psalm is an affirmation of human power and authority, which is grounded in and bestowed by the eternal God. In this Psalm, doxology at the beginning and end form the context in which the dominion accorded to the human person is celebrated.

There is a proper order and a careful balance in the contemplation of our place in the total scheme of things. And what is that place?

We are placed *over creation, under God*.

The prepositions are critically important.

We are placed over creation. The psalmist celebrates this fact.

In the beginning we find him feeling extremely small and insignificant as on a clear night he contemplates the stars and the moon and the vastness of the deep, dark reaches of outer space. Within him runs the question,

What is the human person that Thou shouldst remember him, mortal humanity that Thou shouldst care for them?

The eternal God Who spoke and brought the worlds into place, Who spoke again and hung the stars in place – that God behind and beyond the vast Creation must be so majestic, so awesome that One can hardly believe that One so mighty and magnificent would bother about the frail and fragile human creature who lives beneath the stars, so vulnerable to the overwhelming might and mystery of the natural world.

That is the psalmist's initial reaction as he lies on his back, staring into starry space. But then he contemplates further; he goes on to realize,

Yet Thou hast made him little less than a god, crowning him with glory and honour.

The psalmist was no doubt familiar with the beautiful first chapter of Genesis, the Song of Creation. There, too, in poetic fashion the wonder of God's creative work is celebrated and the crown of that work, the pinnacle of God's creative genius is the creation of the human person in God's own image. God made us like Himself – that is the daring biblical affirmation, and therein the greatness and the dignity of the human person are proclaimed. The Bible will have nothing to do with the denigrating or scorning of humanity. Rather, it proclaims loudly and clearly the greatness of the human person.

God has committed to us rule and authority.

Thou makest him master over all Thy creatures; Thou hast put everything under his feet.

Again the Creation chapter from Genesis comes to mind. The human person is charged with responsibility for the good Creation; to be the steward of Creation, to care for it, preserve it and make it fruitful.

And so, as God is to the whole created cosmos, the human creature is to the good earth. The vastness of cosmic space, which the psalmist could only guess at but we know to be beyond our contemplation, which in the beginning seemed to dwarf him and his sense of significance, is now brought into perspective. Now the very wonder of Creation points to the pinnacle of Creation itself, the human person who, godlike, contemplates the whole and takes responsibility for it.

That is what the Psalm celebrates: human dignity, power and authority bounded by the eternal God Who willed it thus and Who grounds the whole structured reality.

The human person – over creation, under God, finds thus his dignity, her destiny.

Professor James Cook of Western Theological Seminary preached on this psalm here some months ago and entitled the message, "The Poem That Puts Us In Our Place," a fine title for the psalm. That is precisely what we have here – a poem that puts us in our place, over creation, under God. We learn who we are and we learn what we are called to do. Identity and destiny are terribly important issues to get settled. To know who I am (and Whose I am) and what I am called to do is to find my place, to get my bearings, to gain a sense of orientation.

In the psalms of orientation there are some matters of critical importance that are settled. One can get on with life because the large questions of human existence are settled. *The God Who in grace has embraced us is the God Who upholds the world He has created and preserves it in its course and will finally realize His purposes of love, bringing all things to consummation.*

Is it important, thus, to believe and to live? Yes, without question.

You will remember the opening scene of "Fiddler On The Roof." Tevye tells us that life is precarious; it is a delicate balancing act, like playing a fiddle on a peak of a sharply sloped roof. And, he asks, how do we keep our balance? He answers his own question - Tradition.

And a great foundation stone of that Tradition would be Psalm 8 with its praise of God's majesty which grounds reality and gives meaning and dignity to human existence, holding out the promise of a final redemption.

The story goes on to portray the three daughters who successively test the limits to greater and greater extent – finally to the breaking point. Yet, even the breaking of the traditions gives a definition of human existence because there was a settled order, a tradition against which one struggled.

Three years ago I returned from the Netherlands where I had spent much time with my mentor, Professor Berkhof, who spoke of the near impossibility of communicating with the youth of the Netherlands who seemed so lost, so much adrift without any fixed and settled points on the compass of their lives. His comment was that one could not offer answers to their disorientation because they themselves did not even know the Question.

And then he said something that struck me and I have shared with you. "The youth of this generation are not the prodigals; they are the children of the prodigals who left home but never returned." The prodigal had a memory of home. The prodigal knew somewhere there was a father, somewhere there was something called home. But those born and raised in the faithless wasteland of the Far Country do not even have a meaning of home.

We are told of today's youth as being without orientation in our own country, as well. The reason often cited is the nuclear threat that hangs over our world. The scourge of drug trafficking is attributed to the meaningless malaise that seems to

characterize the lives of so many. Our culture has in large measure lost its orientation. There are no longer those certainties that can simply be trusted. Life is without definition.

How thankful we can be if we have been given the gift of trust in the good and gracious God Who created and Who preserves and Who will bring all things to consummation. That is an affirmation of faith. It cannot be proved by methods of scientific demonstration. It is *gift*.

To have received such a gift is to cry out with the psalmist,

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Thy name in all the earth!

To have received such a gift is to have a place to stand, to sense a solid foundation from which one can get on with life. To have received such a gift is to have some matters settled, some issues put to rest. To have received such a gift is to be moved beyond anxiety, beyond fear.

Let me underscore the blessing of such a gift: it speaks of the givenness of life, the world, the order of reality. There is no sense of peace about achieving the world or securing the world; no sense of super importance as though one is responsible for the survival of the world. As Bishop Quail heard God say in the midst of a sleepless, restless night: "You can go to sleep now, Bishop; I will stay up."

What a wonderful gift it is so to trust.

But, let me point to a serious error to avoid: That does not mean presumptive trust, nor irresponsibility as though we can simply "leave it all to God." He has given us dominion over the works of His hand. He has crowned us with glory and honor and called us to the responsible stewardship of nature and responsible engagement with the course of history.

But with trust intact, we are free from paralyzing fear, free to plunge into life exercising our best gifts to further God's purpose in the assurance that finally all things are in His gracious hand.

Finally, we must recognize that the Psalm is a song of serenity; it is the expression of calm and confident trust in the great tradition that is ours. *But, tradition must never be allowed to degenerate into traditionalism.* Jaroslav Pelikan has said that tradition is the living faith of the dead; but traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And if the Church has in its tradition a very great gift, it has often sinned by allowing that tradition to harden and to die. Failing to recognize that tradition is living and growing and needs always to be translated into contemporary idiom as it is brought into engagement with the present horizon, the Church has too often acted as though its faith were recorded in timeless statements that can never be interpreted anew. Then in a world like

ours, with the explosion of knowledge, there is no light shed from the tradition on the new discoveries and insights of the present, and to believe becomes adherence to an anachronistic belief system, which no longer illumines human experience.

We have too often offended here; we have lost the best and brightest.

It is not only those who are offended intellectually. There are also those whose lives are not precisely marked by serenity, but rather by severity, whose lives are in disarray. There are those for whom there seems to be no symmetry, no harmony, no well-ordered cosmos.

They, too, have a true insight. For many, there can be no easy orientation. The writer to the Hebrews knew that. Citing Psalm 8, "What is man ...," he concludes the citation with these words:

Thou didst put all things in subjection beneath his feet. (2:8)

But then goes on quickly to add,

But in fact we do not yet see all things in subjection to man.

And then he goes on,

But we see Jesus...

That author knew what some of you know. In this our Father's world there are still many things out of sync. There is yet much to be put in subjection before we exercise our royal rule in the created order of God.

But we see Jesus - he lived, died, experienced the darkness of hell from which God raised him up, giving him a Name above every name!

Therefore, even when I cannot find the light, I cling to Jesus; I live by hope; I appropriate already that which is promised but is not yet. And thus even in life's confusion I begin to hear the melody of a greater harmony and I know one day all Creation will resound with the song of serenity when all God's purposes are realized in heaven and on earth and He is everything to everyone.

Reference:

Walter Brueggemann. *The Message of the Psalms*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984.