

REFLECT

A sermon given at First Congregational United Church of Christ in Loveland, Colorado on September 3, 2017 (Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost)

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

You have set your glory above the heavens.

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

³When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;

⁴what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

⁵Yet you have made them a little lower than God,

and crowned them with glory and honor.

⁶You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;

you have put all things under their feet,

⁷all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,

⁸the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

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

- Psalm 8

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Our summer together in the sandbox comes to an end today. So we have a chance to “reflect” on what we have experienced and learned with our themes of joy, flexibility, compassion, illumination, protection, renewal, trust, dream, delight, fresh start, sharing the Word, and light-hearted.

What was most memorable about this summer in the sandbox?

What did you learn about God, yourself, your relationships, etc.?

I chose Psalm 8 for our scripture lesson today because it is a song/poem by someone (or a congregation) reflecting on God and humanity after gazing at the night sky – the moon and stars. You are blessed to live here where the stars can still be seen in their awesome splendor – either in the mountains or the farmlands. Many people now live in places where the stars are rarely seen because of light pollution at night.

In ancient times the night sky was visible to most people – and it was stunning. Even then -- when people believed the sky was a dome over the earth and the stars were lights hung on the dome to mark the seasons and for signs – it was impressive. But now we know that each star is really a distant sun, not unlike the sun around which earth orbits, and which gives us light and energy. Some of those stars are much more massive than our sun, and the light from them has traveled millions or billions of years to reach us. Our universe is unimaginably huge – and old. In fact, the matter that makes up our majestic mountains, the soil that nourishes our crops, and

even our own bodies, was created in the aftermath of the Big Bang that brought the universe into being, or forged in the hearts of stars that long ago died and exploded, scattering their debris through space.

We now know that human life has existed for only a tiny fraction of the earth's history. We are latecomers to this magnificent creation story. One biblical story of creation says that humans were created on the sixth day of creation. Scientists today believe it took billions of years for human life to evolve. We are tiny, both in size and history. The God who undertook this awesome building project has much to look after!

And so it is amazing that, as the composer of Psalm 8 puts it, God is mindful of us, and cares for us. You would think God would have more important things to do than care about us. Our joys and concerns seem so big to us -- right here in the midst of them. But seen from another perspective, they seem to shrink in size. I remember seeing a photograph taken by one of the Mars explorer spacecraft on the surface of the Red Planet that showed Earth in the Mars sky -- looking no larger than the evening star looks here on earth.

We may be relatively small, but we are not insignificant to the God of all the universe. And so the psalmist exclaimed with wonder and praise, "How majestic is your name in all the earth!" As awesome as our universe is, the name of the Holy One is even more majestic and glorious! Because nothing is too large, or too small, to be in God's care.

The psalmist marvels that what comes out of the mouths of babes and infants can somehow protect against God's enemies. This verse has always puzzled scholars because the meaning of the Hebrew in which it was originally written is not clear, and so it has been difficult to translate it into a meaningful sentence. I think what the psalmist was trying to express is that just the unconscious infant cries of joy, and wonder, and hunger, and pain are expressions that reflect God's nature. They are honest and authentic, as God is honest and authentic. And we, often, are not. God's foes traffic in deception, lies, and an unwillingness to be truthful.

So maybe infants know better how to relate to God and to others than we do.

O Lord, authentic One, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

So anytime you are feeling small, and insignificant; not old enough, or young enough to matter -- you do matter. To God.

And anytime you are thinking that other people are too far away, or too poor, or too different from you to matter -- we aren't seeing things from God's perspective.

Not only do people matter; the psalmist makes the remarkable affirmation that God has created us "a little lower than God, and crowned humanity with glory and honor." So much so that we have been given "dominion" over the things that God has made -- the earth and the creatures that inhabit it. We have been given the responsibility to care for them as God cares for them -- as stewards and caretakers.

In the midst of the overwhelming rains of Hurricane Harvey in Texas, many emergency responders and volunteers were helping to rescue people trapped in homes inundated with water. And others helped to rescue stranded pets – because they are also creatures in our care, and family members. Our hearts break for them as we see images of them shaking in fear.

In just that way, we are to be caretakers of the earth and its creatures. Good environmental stewardship is not some liberal political agenda; it is what God created us for. We can use the resources of the earth, but not wastefully. We should do what we can to make earth hospitable for our descendants and for other living things.

God of all life, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

One of the basic subjects of theological reflection is our human nature: Are people good, or evil? The answers of philosophers and theologians vary. Some Christian theologians – like the 16th century Swiss reformer John Calvin – have seen humans as so corrupted by sin that they can't possibly do what is right without God's grace and help as revealed in the Bible. And there are Christian preachers today who echo this view – claiming that some people are deserving of God's punishment. And so many people are made to feel absolutely worthless. It doesn't help when peers echo that message – that we are too fat, or too thin, or not stylish enough, or too geeky, or too queer to even waste space on this earth. It is tragic when people – especially young folks – take their own lives because they are made to feel so worthless. And yet suicide is a serious problem among our youth – especially with those who are trying to understand their own sexuality. The Center for Disease Control reports that lesbian, gay and bisexual teens face much greater risks of violence, homelessness, addiction, and suicide than heterosexual teens. They desperately need support communities where they feel loved and accepted.

At the other end of the spectrum are some liberal theologies that see humans as gods and goddesses themselves, able to know truth and to do what is good and healthy through their own inherent goodness, informed by good education. Indeed, we are blessed with powers of speech, learning, awareness, reasoning, and selfless actions. We have almost god-like powers. A Houston police officer lost his life during the recent floods because he tried to get to work through high waters – because he was needed.

But the psalmist reminds us that we are not God. We are created “a little lower than God.” Our powers are not always matched by our wisdom to use them well.

This is where I am these days -- theologically. Humans are a little lower than God. We have incredible gifts and abilities. We are precious. No matter what other people might say about you, or how you may feel sometimes, you are beloved by God.

But we are also proficient at deceiving ourselves. We can be selfish, and proud, and greedy. People do terrible things to others, believing they are doing what is good – at least for some. The traditional theological term for this is sin. Left to our own devices, we tend to make a mess of our lives and the world. We need God to help us – to save us.

O Lord of Salvation, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

What has your experience in our summer sandbox caused you to reflect upon? Share your thoughts with others over coffee, or on our church facebook page. A living faith is not something we learn as children and keep unchanged for the rest of our lives; it is something we reflect on and perhaps change as we journey through life.

O Lord of our sandbox, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Amen.

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