

'Why us?' Sermon first preached by Dr Christine Hoffman at FUMC Palmetto, 30 May 2010

Psalm 8 has been called a psalm for 'stargazers'.¹ This is a helpful characterization for the psalm paints a panorama of nature, humanity, and God. The psalmist, we may imagine, has wandered into nature on a starry, starry night and come face-to-face with God's glory in nature. This prompts him to ask a question: "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" Have you ever asked yourself this question? Overawed by the vastness of the visible universe, you might have felt alarmingly small and insignificant. In Imax theaters now, *Hubble* is showing. I don't think we're going to manage to see this movie (perhaps you've seen it), but I'm pretty sure that if I had seen *Hubble* I would have had this sort of theological challenge. If God is the creator of all this, why should I possibly matter to him? The lens of the Hubble Telescope awakens us to the sheer enormity of God's creation. Our galaxy alone is spread over a 100,000-light-year expanse and is estimated to be one among millions in the universe. The writer of Psalm 8 could see with his eyes only .001% of the billion stars in our Milky Way. But this was plenty to make him ask the question: how can God possibly be attentive to little old me and my concerns?

Today is Trinity Sunday, the date in the church year when preachers sometimes turn somersaults in order to explain how God can be Father, Son and Holy spirit all at the same time. No one is ever going to do that altogether successfully and this morning I'm not even going to try. But the psalm appointed for today, the one which I've just read, does, I think, help us in approaching the subject of the Trinity. With its core question of God: 'What are human beings that you are mindful of them?', it suggests some ways of living our lives that give praise to God, the creator of all, who revealed himself supremely in his Son, Jesus, and who continues to work through his Holy Spirit. Let's see what Psalm 8 teaches us about our relationship to God. I believe it has two major lessons for us.

First of all, it teaches us that God and God alone is in charge. Most of the many hymns of praise in the Psalter begin with a call to praise, such as 'Bless the Lord' or 'Praise the Lord'. Not all the psalms are hymns of praise, of course, so they begin in other ways, but I urge you, perhaps later today, to at least glance at the openings of the 150 psalms, and notice just how many of them begin with 'Praise the Lord'. If you want to do what my husband often does and look first at the end of the book, you might try the last five psalms. In the original Hebrew, 'Praise the Lord' is 'Hallelu' which means: 'Let us

¹James Limburg, *Psalms*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 24

praise' and 'yah' which, incorporates part of the name for God, Yahweh, the name Stephen was talking about in last's week's sermon: 'Lessons in breathing'. The last five psalms, and many, many others, not only begin with 'Hallelujah', 'Let us praise the Lord', they also end with 'Hallelujah'. this morning's psalm, Psalm 8 is, however, a bit different. It is also a psalm of praise but it is unusual in that it does not begin and end with a call to us to praise, but with an exclamation of praise: "O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" So, rather than speaking to other human beings, summoning them to the praise of God, our psalm starts by speaking words of praise directly to God.

If then God is so majestic, what are we? Why should he care for us? Psalm 8 sees both the evidence and the reason for God's especial care for us in his giving us responsibility for other parts of God's creation. Rest assured that God and only God is creator but, says the psalmist, we are made 'a little lower than God'. He elaborates this thought by praising God for giving human beings dominion over the rest of creation, including the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. What do you think of at the moment when you hear the words 'the birds of the air and the fish of the sea'? Well, sadly I think of birds being found covered in oil off the coast of Louisiana. I think of fishermen who have lost their livelihood because of the same oil. What does it mean for human beings to have dominion? Certainly, it does not mean that we are in control of everything. Not only oil but also ash has recently demonstrated this. Do you remember a few weeks back when all air-travel into a number of countries was stopped by volcanic ash from Iceland's Eyjafjallajokull? And then the other week, the ash came back and prevented some more flights. The psalmist is right: we are definitely not in control.

'Dominion' is also spoken of in Genesis 1:26,28 but it is clear from Genesis 2:15 that human rule over the animal world is to be marked by protection and service of the earth. The concept of rule or dominion is borrowed by the psalmist from the realm of royalty. Kings were given responsibility and authority to with that responsibility, but the authority (or dominion) was not to be misused or abused. ...Psalm 8 pictures all of humanity as the kings and queens of creation, bestowed with special divinely given gifts, which we are to use for the care and keeping of creation.² this is the second thing that this psalm teaches us. God is in charge but each of us, as a human being, is God's right hand man, as it were.

When we ask the question: 'Why us?' it is usually in a negative sense. When we are suffering, we sometimes raise the anguished cry: 'Why me?' Here, however, the

²Rolf A Jacobson in *Psalms for Preaching and Worship*, edit Roger E Van Harn and Brent A Strawn (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2009), 66

question: 'Why me?/Why us?' is asked in a positive sense. What have we done to deserve not this suffering but this privilege, the privilege of a divine role in God's world? This psalm teaches us about our relationship with God with the relationship between parents and children. 'Children want to help their parents; they do not want to be taken care of forever. Children grow in part through responsibility; they do not grow if they are forever the objects of parental sheltering.'³ I read a reflection on this the other day: 'I think of the special joy my own daughter takes when she brings her mother a piece of cake and says, "I helped Daddy make it!" In that moment, you can feel the self-worth dripping off her proud words. That is the message of Psalm 8: God not only knows who I am, God has given me a part in baking the cake that is God's kingdom.'⁴

Often in life, when we instinctively feel the world should revolve around us, our needs and our desires, we have to learn that 'It's not about us'. This is very much the lesson of Psalm 8. It's not about us. It's about God. Yet an equally important lesson of this psalm is that this same majestically creative God has singled us out for special privilege and responsibility. This comes from his peculiar relationship with us as human beings. This psalm expresses an awareness of the limits on human existence, where human function and destiny are not ours to define. This psalm reminds us that human existence can only be defined in terms of a divine purpose and providence. God has dignified man and woman by placing the divine image in them, making them 'a little lower than God' and thus crowning them 'with glory and honor'.

On this Trinity Sunday we think especially of how God the Father is in relationship with God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. We reflect on how Christ alone is humanity as God intended. In the Letter to the Hebrews, we see Psalm 8 quoted and the writer describe Christ as 'the reflection of God's glory', bearing 'the exact imprint of God's very being'. Christ alone is the archetype from which humanity is patterned. We may rephrase the psalmist's question: 'Why does God choose most fully to reveal himself in creation by joining the second person of the Trinity to small and insignificant humanity through the incarnation of Jesus Christ?'

According to Scripture, the answer is found in the Trinitarian life of God and revealed to us through Christ's person and work. The answer is all about relationship. In John's gospel, we hear Jesus respond to Philip's request to 'show us the Father' "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. . .Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?' Jesus explains that the works he does are the works

³Ibid

⁴Ibid, 67

of the Father and the son's work is intended to reveal the person of the Father. We also hear in John's gospel Jesus say the words that are printed on the front of our bulletin this morning: 'All that the Father has is mine.' Isn't that an amazing claim? Jesus does not cling to all that his almighty Father invests in him, that is, full divinity. Rather, Jesus surrenders all this divinity to become fully human, especially in human suffering and human death. Jesus is a frail mortal just like all the other human beings the psalmist speaks of.

Our psalmist gazes up at the heavens, standing in amazement before a God who both could hang magnificent orbs in the sky and also be mindful of humanity. A millennium later, the second person of the Trinity enters our earthly condition through the power of the Holy Spirit. He does this in order to reconcile humanity to our heavenly Father. So in our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus explains the significance of this to his disciples. Hours before his death, Jesus says this about the work of the Spirit: 'He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you' (John 16:14-14). As Christ revealed the Father, it is now the Holy Spirit's task to take what Christ humbly revealed and manifest it through us.

This Trinity Sunday then, we may indeed ask the question: 'Why us?' But like the psalmist, we will find the answer to why God should bother with humanity not through theoretical reasoning but through worshipful awe of our creator. In Jesus, God gives all that he has to us. Each of us can make the astonishing claim: 'All that the Father has is mine', but he we have first to surrender everything to God as our Father. If we regard ourselves the center of the universe, then we cannot enjoy a relationship with God our Father. But if we open ourselves up to the power of the Holy Spirit, such as we celebrated last week at Pentecost, then we can approach God each as his child. We can cry with the humility of a child, as Jesus did, 'Abba! Father!'

'God is so great and we are so small. Yet God in three persons chooses to be known. God chooses a relationship with us that goes on and on and one. Why? Why does a parent choose to love a rebellious child? Why sacrifice riches to help the poor? Why preserve wilderness for the flocks and hers and beasts of the wild when we know land could be put to more productive use? Sometimes we can explain our reasons with scientific evidence, but sometimes there is no reasonable answer. Why does God continually choose to love us, knowing who we are, knowing the smallness of our minds? Do we really need an answer? Or is it enough to respond, "Thank you", "Wow", and "Help me!"?'

In Psalm 8, questions and praise peacefully coexist. It is possible to have questions and

doubts and still believe. Even more, between the questions and praise, there is purpose to life. God has made human beings little less than himself in order to care for all things under heaven. On the day we speak of the mysterious union of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we are guided by this psalm in its lyrical union of questions, praise, and purpose. While three things in one may be difficult to explain, they can be understood.⁵ The subject of our praise is not the creation but the Creator. The subject of our praise is not us, but rather the One who endows us with divine qualities. We should not try to solve the question of God's inexplicable care for humankind but let its penetrating power touch us in such a way that we can live in relationship with this Creator of extraordinary grace. How amazing that we are entrusted with such gifts! Such dominion is cause not for hubris as if it is all ours to do with as we wish but rather for humility. We are given not a manipulative dominion but a spiritual dominion that draws its power from humankind's primary relationship with God. This morning's psalm creates for us a way to find our truest worth and purpose in living lives that by their nature, give praise to God.

⁵James McTyre in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 3, (Louisville, WJK Press, 2010) 36