



WHAT A WONDERFUL WORLD

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Psalm 8

Kimberly L. Clayton, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

The title of this sermon, “What a Wonderful World,” may leave you wondering if I’ve read a newspaper, watched the evening news, or checked my Facebook feed lately. The world seems anything but “wonderful” just now, right? Internationally, troubles loom from nuclear weapons to a murder in an embassy. Nationally, we watch helplessly as the wildfires spread in California, consuming trees, homes, lives, and even a whole town. The devastation is unimaginable. Election Day has dragged into ‘Election month’ as races are still being decided among a population that is...well, decidedly undecided. The Jewish Festival of Lights begins soon, but this year Hanukkah will be celebrated in the wake of the deadliest attack against Jewish people in U.S. history. Even locally people seem too-easily disgruntled. A couple of weeks ago I was in a neighborhood market when an elderly customer became unhappy with the portion of food placed in his take-out container. He argued, then launched into a verbal assault against the young man behind the counter, who did nothing to de-escalate the situation. There was name-calling, an invitation to fight, the language more peppery than the dish in question! I began to wonder why the whole world seems so angry these days.

Though it seems there has never been this level of trouble in the history of the world, the Book of Psalms reminds us otherwise. In fact, Psalms 3-13 offer an almost unrelenting account of trouble, threat, and danger from enemies without and illness within and sometimes even from God, who seems far too negligent or entirely too slow in setting things right.¹

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



In the midst of that string of embattled psalms, Psalm 8 springs up—a hymn of unabashed praise. An interruption, an eruption that begins and ends with the same exclamation: “O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” Between those matching theological bookends, everything in creation is situated within the sovereignty and majesty of God. This psalm plunges us from the celestial heights to the most intimate of human relationships—from God’s glory above the heavens to God’s glory in the mouths of nursing infants.ⁱⁱ God is so great that the whole cosmos: heavens, moon, stars, are the work not of God’s hands, but of God’s *fingers*. With the merest divine and delicate touch, God sets the spheres spinning in their orbits and even infants respond in babbling praise.

Anne Lamott says there are three essential prayers: Help. Thanks. Wow. Psalm 8 is a Wow prayer...the kind, Lamott says, that is “often offered with a gasp, a sharp intake of breath, ‘Wow’ means we are not dulled to wonder. ...Wow because you are almost speechless, but not quite. You can manage, barely, this one syllable.” When we are in awe, we pray, “Wow.” Lamott notes that ‘wow’ and ‘awe’ are “the same height and width, all w’s and short vowels. They could dance together, --this energy—the breath, the glory, the goodness of God”—If we have not become dulled to wonder, we offer back to God this much at least, “Wow.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Together, the psalmist and Anne Lamott are on to something that is essential to human life generally, but is particularly essential to the life of faith. We spend so much of our time noticing what is terrible and terrifying in all the earth. Sizing up so much around us that does not meet our expectations. We spend so much time looking down at or across at our devices like TVs, smartphones, iPads and computer screens that feed us the latest news cycle all too eager to pronounce the bad news first and last and in between, too. Our sense of wonder, of holy awe, is overtaken by a sense of foreboding, even despair. We can begin to believe that it is the work of *our* fingers that is sovereign. Human power to destroy can take on its own perverted majesty among us. We forget to look up. We cease to look out. To live with the confidence, joy, and wonder of those who boldly affirm that our human lives are bounded within the double exclamation of Psalm 8: “*O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*” And from there, we fail to



affirm that the whole cosmos is bounded within the exclamation, not of the daily news, but the abiding good news: that *God* is Sovereign and it is *God's* majesty that pervades and will persuade all the earth.

Oh, Psalm 8 is not naïve about the very real threat and danger in this world...even those who would threaten God's power and will. Verse 1 begins with the soaring sovereignty of God, but quickly, verse 2 acknowledges that even in God's wonderful world, there are foes: the enemy, and the avenger. Notoriously hard to translate, one Old Testament scholar suggests we read verse 2 backward in order to understand it better. Read that way, then, verse 2 says this: "Because of your foes, to put an end to the enemy and the avenger, you have established strength in the mouths of babes and infants." The word for "babes" here is elsewhere translated as "gleaners"^{iv}—people like Ruth: poor, outsider, the powerless who wait at the edges to gather leftovers in order to survive. Imagine that...the strength God establishes to overcome the enemy and avenger...is found in babbling infants and among the powerless. And the end God has in mind for such foes? God does not want to end their lives, but to put an end only to their hatred and violence. It is their antipathy toward God that will die. May it be so.

Following the shooting deaths at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Squirrel Hill, Jewish communities across the country responded in an astonishing way. They launched an effort called **#showupforshabbat**. Only one week after a stranger entered their place of worship with violent intent, Jewish congregations opened their doors and welcomed strangers. Doug King and I felt compelled to show up in solidarity with them. I know some of you did as well. We worshipped with our neighbors, the Park Avenue Synagogue, for Saturday morning Shabbat services. They welcomed us warmly over and over again. People helped us find our way in the Prayer Book, thanking us again and again for simply being there. Tears flowed.

The service was remarkable. It was a somber day with aching loss to be acknowledged. But lament did not get the only word, and certainly not the last word. The bar mitzvah of a youth was celebrated. A young couple soon to be married were brought forward and the congregation tossed sweet treats to them. A



birthday, a wedding anniversary were lifted up. A man was honored for the 70th anniversary of his bar mitzvah. We sang lively hymns, The Torah was carried, danced really, through the congregation. Then, to our surprise, the rabbis invited Doug and me to the front of the sanctuary alongside several dignitaries who had also come. They thanked us, thanked the Brick Presbyterian Church, for our friendship and support. I was asked to lead the congregation in a prayer for our nation from their worship book. For over two hours they celebrated the goodness of God and the gift of life in this wonderful world. It was their bold witness to the sovereignty of God in the face of the enemy and the avenger. They expressed as fully as I've ever seen it what it means to live within the theological bookends of Psalm 8: "O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!"

Seeing the greatness of God amidst the moon and stars of space, we may wonder, with the psalmist, "*What are humans that you are mindful of them; mortals that you care for them?*"

Here in New York City, the Hayden Planetarium once featured a space show that took visitors on a virtual trip to the edge of the known cosmos. As the lights dimmed, stars emerged. The audience zoomed among the stars, viewing the Earth from the vantage point of space. Next was a tour of the solar system, spinning farther and farther out into the vast, infinite darkness, the hundred billion stars of the Milky Way galaxy shrinking to barely visible dots in the dome of the sky. About a month after the exhibit began, one of the producers got a letter from an Ivy League professor. The professor's expertise was studying things that make people feel insignificant. He wanted to administer a before-and-after questionnaire to visitors, assessing the depth of their depression after viewing the show. The professor opined that he himself had experienced the most dramatic feelings of smallness and insignificance after viewing *Passport to the Universe*.^v

Neil DeGrasse Tyson, an astrophysicist and one of the show's producers, was dumbfounded by the professor's reaction. Tyson remarked that studying the vastness of the universe makes him feel instead "alive and spirited and connected."

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Tyson writes: “I also feel large knowing that the goings-on within the three-pound human brain are what enabled us to figure out our place in the universe.”^{vi}

The psalmist is closer to the astrophysicist than he is to the professor. For after a pause of humility, the psalmist goes on to note, with wonder, that God has made us only a little lower than God. We have been crowned, he says, with glory and honor. Divinely appointed to hold dominion over all creation: heavens, moon, stars, domesticated animals and wild ones, too. The air in which birds fly; the waters in which fish swim—all of it given to us, under our feet, such royalty we possess from God, who makes us stewards, not to do with the earth what we please, but to do with it what is pleasing to God, who has dominion over *us*.

Today we tangibly acknowledge that we are stewards of God’s earth and stewards of the resources God gives us. Stewards of the way we spend our time, practice our talents, spend our money. We bring before God and one another our pledge cards, giving back to God a portion of all we have for the work of this church. We are stewards of buildings and budgets, of ministries and missions, but also of the mysteries of God. By making these pledges, we acknowledge God’s sovereignty over all that we have and all that we are. It is a bold act of faith. It is a form of praise. I hope that as each of us releases our card, each one of us does so with a sharp intake of breath and the prayer, “Wow,” uttered in awe and wonder.

The Apollo 11 spacecraft was sent to the moon in July of 1969. Each head state of the nations of the earth was invited to send along a message to the world, to the future, to other life forms should they exist. All of the messages were engraved upon a silicon disk the size of a fifty-cent piece. The disk was left on the moon’s surface. Pope Paul VI, as political head of the Vatican, sent the text of Psalm 8.^{vii}

Imagine that, in the darkest night, shining from the moon, the Psalmist cries out, “*O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*” To be set, bounded, within the sovereignty of God, is to take our place as faithful stewards of all that has been entrusted to us. And to declare with joy and thanksgiving, What a wonderful world!



Amen.

ⁱ Ellen T. Charry, **Psalms 1-50: Sighs and Songs of Israel** (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2015), 41.

Charry actually notes that this observation of Psalm 8 in the midst of Psalms 3-13 is made by William P. Brown.

ⁱⁱ William P. Brown, **Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphors** (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 155.

ⁱⁱⁱ Anne Lamott, **Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers** (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012), 71-88.

^{iv} Charry, 41. (Lev. 19:10; Deut. 24:21, Judges 8:2).

^v Neil DeGrasse Tyson, **Astrophysics for People in a Hurry** (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017), 197-198.

^{vi} Tyson, 198.

^{vii} James Limburg, **Psalms: Westminster Bible Companion** (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 24. Primary source: NASA News Release No. 69-83F