

A Little Lower Than the Angels **Psalm 8, October 4, 2015**

In the native tongue of the region, it means either “thundering waters” or “Satisfied, as in having a full stomach.” The word is Umpqua. Apparently, originally, it meant the river that flowed down from the Cascades through a particularly striking part of southern Oregon...eventually it became the name of the tribe—Thundering River is for the river, Satisfied is for the Tribe...because, at least in part, the River and surrounding forests and prairies fed by it provided more than ample food for the tribal families who called it home.

There has been more thunder than satisfaction connected with the name Umpqua this last week, when Umpqua Community College became the 40th school shooting incident of 2015, the first to result in mass casualties as 9 students and faculty were killed and seven others injured before the gunman took his own life in a shoot-out with first responders.

We grow weary of the mountain of statistics about this many mass shootings since Sandy Hook and ABOUT that many more people killed by firearms in the US than by terrorists. It can all become so overwhelming, or more dangerously, so banal. It can mire us in man’s inhumanity to fellow children of Eve and leave us angry, frustrated, sad and wondering what, if anything, can be done...and wondering what it is about this nation with more regular church goers than any other nation in Europe and the Americas that this keeps happening. It’s enough to make us ask again the question at the center of this Psalm...

Like the Psalmist, this year we have marveled at the universe around us...as we see salt water on mars and crystal clear photos of Pluto and even learn that in July NASA announced discovery of Kepler 452b, the planet with the closest to earth-like conditions...that is 1400 Light Years or 8.2 quadrillion miles away... As we marvel at a greater understanding of the universe than we’ve ever had...we look at what we are doing to this tiny speck of it and, like the Psalmist, we are tempted to ask God...

“What are human beings that you are mindful of us, mortals that you care for us?”

In asking the question...the psalmist has already figured out at least one answer...by looking around at the creation we can see...right here, right outside, just 8.2 yards away...

What does God see in us? God sees in us beloved creatures who are worthy of...capable of...being given dominion over this planet...worthy of...capable of being trusted with all of earthly creation...

I worry that most often when we think about creation we jump immediately to our failings...to our responsibility for it...and yes, those are essential, important things....but let's pause for just a moment or two to remember that God so loved us...so honored and created us....to be entrusted with the care and nurture of Niagara Falls and the nearly 10 million species of plants and animals that live in the oceans and the Monarch Butterfly and the Great Barrier Reef...and Lake Michigan...They are ours...not to own...but to love and nurture.

The Psalmist reminds us that we have been made in the image of God, but just a little lower on the pecking order than Divine...clarified in the New Testament to remind us that we are a little lower than the angels...How loved we must be, how deep is the trust of the crafter of a billion billion stars to say to us that this infinitesimal corner of the universe is ours to hold and to care for.

God is no foolish parent...God would not give us a task that is beyond our prayerful, thoughtful, sacrificial abilities. And that is where blessing and responsibility meet. But again, before we move to what we ought to be doing...there's at least one more thing to recognize in this great calling to be God's surrogate in the stewardship of our planetary home...

It's a task given to all of humankind...The Psalmist makes that clear...We are **all** entrusted...we are **all** deemed worthy to ALL TOGETHER be the caretakers of creation....and to be caretakers of **all** of creation....and yes that's plants and animals and land and sea...insect and human...for yes...surely we are a part of the very creation over which God has given us dominion.

Could that inspire us into a different relationship with one another and the world around us? If we recognized that a fundamental characteristic with which God has blessed us...a central reason why God loved us into being...is that humanity has both the ability and the joint responsibility to care for one another and the world in which we live. Not to build the tallest skyscraper, not to build the tallest church steeple, not to build the tallest stock portfolio...but to care for one another and the planet we call home...

Doesn't that too change our response to the Christ who eventually came and said that the way that we best accomplish this is the willingness to

surrender our wills to the will of God—to three simple world-shattering principles—love the one who gives you each breath, love every one you encounter as equal agents of God’s blessing to world, and love and respect the being God made you to be.

I’m willing to bet that if you were to go onto Umpqua tribal lands in Oregon even today and start up a conversation with those who are mourning this week’s tragedy...you would see that they are still capable of looking out across their lands and still able to claim that other aspect of their tribal name—Satisfied...because even in the midst of tragedy...their rituals remind them...that there is enough...Every year the Umpqua participate in a tribal festival where their traditional songs and dances are used to remind the generations of their link to land and to one another...It was just a few weeks ago.

Next week we will perform a similar ritual...at that font...reminding one another...remembering our baptisms...we will remember that there is quite enough love and grace and joy to go around...to inspire us all as beloved to live in that abundance...All this month, we will be reminding one another as we prayerfully consider how together we can take up our God-given calling to joyfully and sacrificially care for all of creation and for humankind through our support for this community of faith and it’s bountiful and growing missions and ministries of praise, compassion, justice, grace, peace.

But before all of that...we are invited to the table...invited with all Christ’s family across time and space, across our own invented boundaries of race, ethnicity and social class...Invited by the God who loved us first enough to create us capable and worthy of serving as God’s surrogates and wet-nurses for this beautiful big blue marble and its inhabitants....and then loved us enough to come among us to not just show us how to accomplish that task...but how our failings....great and small...cannot separate us from the love and abundance that is so imprinted in our DNA as to grant each of us the status of being created in the image of God...just a little lower than the angels...

And what did the angels do in response to God’s greatness and abundant love? They sang...

It’s appropriate then, that this lesson comes in the Psalms...remember, this would never have been read in the ancient days...it would have been sung...sung joyfully in gratitude for the realization of our common calling...

Imagine this psalm for a moment as a song...what might the music sound like? How majestic is your name in all the earth? When I look at all you have done God, it completely overwhelms me....All this week when I would look at this hymn, all I kept thinking was...the person who wrote this was having one of those mountaintop experiences...you know...something life-changing has happened...something almost unimaginably good...or maybe it's just the inbreaking of the overwhelming realization that...we....we humans have been placed in the middle of this....God has chosen us to have the greatest ability to understand...we alone have the ability, so far as we know...on this planet...to appreciate the vastness of the universe... and the minuscule miracle of the atom....and see the complexities involved in its care and nurture...

And this is not something the Psalmist can write a story about...it is a prayer that must be sung...for only music does the feelings and emotions justice...

Singing...songs...are our great human medium for metaphor and emotion....And this is why we sing...it's why we sing in in the shower and the car and the church...Because poetic words coupled with rhyme and meter and pitch and melody and tempo create something...well, something that, in the right moment, can have a hint of God in it...There is a reason the Angels sang when Jesus was born...there is a reason Miriam sang when the people are delivered from Egypt...

Sometimes...words alone just won't get us there...This is why the longest book in our Bibles is the Psalms...Because in moments of joy and moments of deepest sadness....We, like the Umpqua and virtually every culture in history, we sing...and angels sing...Even in the midst of a week like this one...with tragedy and questions about what we can do next...still we are compelled to sing..

It's like that great hymn Christopher chose for the joint choirs to sing at the installation service two weeks ago...

My life flows on in endless song;
Above earth's lamentation,
I hear the sweet, tho' far-off hymn
That hails a new creation;
Thro' all the tumult and the strife
I hear the music ringing;
It finds an echo in my soul—
How can I keep from singing?

Robert Wadsworth Lowry wrote the music that we know so well...but no one really knows where the words came from...Still, like Psalm 8, it sings

to that very deep well within us...that in moments of greatest joy and moments of greatest need...a song can break us open...Scientists tell us that our brains actually hunger for these moments...because whether singing in joy or lament...our brains release Dopamine in almost equal amounts--dopamine that literally opens our hearts and causes blood to flow more steadily...stabilizes our blood pressure...and fills our brain with comfort and positive feelings---even when we are deeply sad....We are hard-wired for songs to feed our bodies and our souls...Just like we are hard-wired to be the caretakers of this planet and one another. In that sense, we are God's song for the world.

How majestic is your name in all the earth, O God, indeed...that you have made us...to be inspired...to be fed here....to feed one another...to sing with our voices and our lives our gratitude and joy and determination to celebrate and care for creation and one another...to celebrate that we can rise above the tragedies and the all-too-common failings of our pasts to rediscover that place in us made in love for love...Indeed, that being the case, how can we keep from singing...