

“How Majestic!”

Psalm 8 (June 12, 2022)

by Paul Matheson

Two weeks ago, Lindsay and I had our first camping trip of the season. We travelled to Grasslands National Park, which is one of our favourite places. It can be a harsh environment, when the sun is baking hot, or the wind is blowing across the land. There’s very little shelter.



But the lack of trees, and the distance from any large city, also gives it some stunning views. There’s the opportunity to see wildlife – deer, antelope, bison, burrowing owls and prairie dogs. And at night, that same wide open landscape offers a clear view of the sky.

One evening there was supposed to be a talk about the stars, but it was cancelled because of cloud cover. So we had to settle for memories from previous trips. Like sitting out in front of the tent, waiting for the sky to darken after sunset. Watching for the appearance of that first bright star. Then the second and third appearing, as if by magic, in sequence.

The stars are always there, of course. But the light of the sun overwhelms them. At night they come into their own. Little by little they begin to take their place, until finally this appears: the milky way, our galaxy. It stretches out toward the edge of infinity. And all this, accompanied by the yelps of roving coyotes, calling to one another. Or maybe they’re singing hymns of praise to the Creator!



“O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.”

The Psalmist too was enthralled with the grandeur of the skies. Undimmed by the glare of modern street lights, and glass buildings powered by electricity, the beauty of the world was perhaps less hidden to people of that time.

It’s one of the reasons we like to get away, Lindsay and I. In a tent, where we’re close to God’s creation. Where we hear every sound and sense every movement of the wind. Where we learn to appreciate the tremendous power of the forces around us and our own vulnerability in the midst of them.



Photo by [Oliver Griebel](#),
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Milky_Way_%2826262681609%29.jpeg



God’s world is full of life! And it’s not just *big* things that remind us of that, it’s *little* things too! Lindsay and I are a good pair, I think. Because I’m taken by scenes of grandeur. I’ll look out at the horizon and be impressed by mountains, or lakes, or rolling hills. “Look at that,” I’ll say.

But Lindsay will be down on her knees (which is not a bad posture to assume, the posture of prayer) and she’ll call me over. She’ll have found some delicate wildflower which I have nearly stomped upon. Some small treasure whose very existence is a miracle. A thing of beauty. Like the flowers that Jesus noticed on the Galilean hills, when he said that even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed as one of these. “Look at this!” she’ll say. “Isn’t it beautiful?”



You don't need to go into space to see wonders. ^{Soil} "Scoop up a handful of topsoil from the forest floor and, with the help of a microscope," so I'm told, you'll find thousands of beetles and insects, and billions of fungi, algae, and protozoa.

Consider also the amazing intricacies of our creaturely bodies, formed from the dust of the earth. The millions of cells, the chemical interactions, the electrical signals of our nerves and synapses. The mystery of our minds.

And the beauty of it all, when you stand back and take a look. Even in those of us who may not conform to some cultural ideal of beauty that happens to be popular in our time. It's *all* a miracle. Every one of us is a miracle!



There's a verse in our Psalm today that makes me smile. "Out of the mouths of babes and infants," it says, "you have founded a bulwark because of your foes." I love Eugene Peterson's translation:

"Nursing infants gurgle choruses about you;
toddlers shout the songs
That drown out enemy talk,
and silence atheist babble."

When I read that I think of my granddaughter, now three months old – can you believe it? She's becoming more attentive to the world, and more vocal. She's learned to gurgle and blow bubbles, and seems to quite enjoy it. Are those sounds some unwritten expression of praise? Does her gurgling join the yelping of the coyotes and the heavenly song of the stars in their adoration of God? And if so, how long before that innate God & human relationship is corrupted in her? I pray it may *not* be so!



Psalm 8 is unique among all the Psalms of the Bible: it's the only one addressed entirely to God. From beginning to end it is a prayer. A spoken word between us and our Creator.

It begins and ends with praise. And it also raises an important question against this backdrop of God's grandeur. We find that question in the very centre of the Psalm:

"When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?"

Set against the vast display of stars and galaxies, who are we? Why should we matter?

Maybe you've asked this question yourself. Because, if anything, I think it may be sharper in *our* time than ever before. We know so much about our universe. Our appreciation of its complexity has grown exponentially. Our ancestors barely scratched the surface of these things. But now, with our technology, we can see objects at such a distance that it boggles the mind. And we can theorize about the smallest atomic particles that form the substance of our being. And so we wonder, "Why are we even here?"



The answer, according to this Psalm, is that God has given us a certain authority and a task to perform.

What are human beings? Well ...

“You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet.”

This is our purpose in life, according to the Psalmist. It’s not something we invent for ourselves. It’s a given. A vocation, a holy calling. It’s in a different league from other sorts of vocations – like whether you should be a teacher, or go to work at a grocery store. One may suit you better than another. But this is something given to *all* of us.

And it recalls the story of God’s creation of the world at the very beginning of time. God created humankind in God’s image, male and female, and set them in the garden – that beautiful archetypal garden, teeming with light and life and every creature that God had made. “Fill the earth and subdue it,” says God to these humans. “And have dominion over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”



So we have this image of human beings in a hierarchical arrangement. Humans at the top of the pyramid. And other creatures below them. And to say this is quite controversial, as you might realize. Since human beings taking charge of the world have made a bit of a mess.

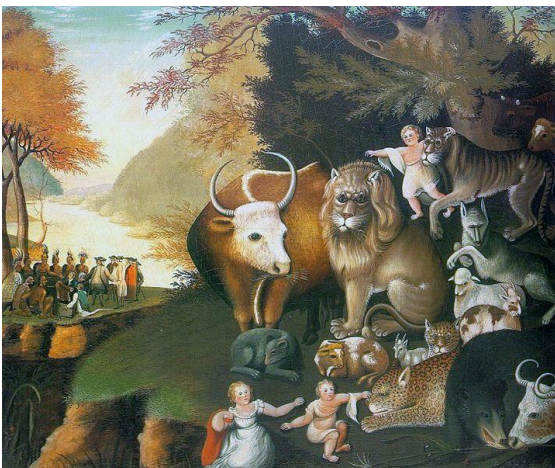
Our dominion, especially in this generation, has looked a lot like domination and exploitation – taking whatever we can get by force, with little care for other creatures that share the planet.

We use God’s creation for our own selfish purposes. And we abuse our far-reaching power to such a degree that it comes back to haunt us too! This approach is not sustainable.



What does it mean to have dominion? I think we need to be up front about this: We *do* have powers, more than other creatures. Ever-growing, awesome powers. Maybe we should acknowledge that and begin to exercise these powers in a more responsible way.

This is a big subject, worthy of several sermons, and much reflection. Our human tendency toward self-centredness does not help us here. This sinfulness – turning toward ourselves, away from God and neighbour – distorts the way we think about our place in the world.



Peaceable Kingdom by Edward Hicks, 1780-1849,
<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-image/act-image-link.pl?RC=53085>

But here are two brief things that might help. First, we need to remember: There are two creation stories in Genesis (Chapter 1 & 2). And if we’re going to be biblical we better pay attention to *both*.

The first story speaks about dominion. While the second reminds us that we are organically connected to everything else. We ourselves are *creaturely*, formed from the dust of the earth, part of an interrelated network that includes plants and animals. And to neglect that sacred relationship puts us all in peril.

And that brings us to the second thing. We are not gods. It should be obvious, but maybe we need to be reminded of our place. The Psalm says, “You have made them a little lower than God.”

If we’ve been given dominion, then, it’s in a *subordinate* role. We’re responsible to the One who made us. We are called to live under the reign of God – a reign of love and goodness, as taught by Jesus. A

reign of justice and peace.

Our dominion does not make us lords. There is only *one* Lord. Instead it makes us stewards of God's creation. Servants who are called to care for the earth on God's behalf. We're called to tend the garden of our world, and ensure its continued fertility and fruitfulness. When we behave in ways that negate that care, we are being unfaithful to our human vocation.



What are you doing to *harm* the earth? And what are you doing to *heal* it?

None of us, individually, is going to fix any of the ecological crises we are facing. But as we commit ourselves to the way of *Jesus*, maybe enough of our ways will change so that the earth can breathe a little easier, and the pressures on the flora and fauna, and on vulnerable people living in parts of the world that don't have the advantages we do – maybe they can begin to flourish.

Maybe we can learn to love God and love our neighbours – all of them.



The Psalm ends on the same note it began. I mean that quite *literally*: the words are exactly the same at the end of the Psalm as they were at the beginning. And they bring us back to a place of awe and wonder. They bring *me* back to my time in Grasslands. They may bring *you* back to another place.

“O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth.”

Where in God's good creation have you experienced that majesty? Is it in big things or small things? Is it here or somewhere else? When have you allowed yourself to join in the praise of our maker?

I mentioned that this whole Psalm is addressed to God. It takes the form of a prayer.



And now, after considering the glory God set above the skies, and the glory that fills creation here below, and the babbling of babies, and the praise of all God's creatures – where does that leave us? I hope it inspires us to be full of praise *ourselves*!

As we gather in this place on a lovely spring Sunday morning, may our thoughts turn away from ourselves for just a moment. May our hearts and souls be lifted to *God*, the giver of life, and Lord of all creation. Glory be to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit – ever three and ever one! Amen.