

"A Little Less than God"

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Psalm 8/1 John 4:7-12
 Scottish Heritage Sunday
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I am quite thrilled to be participating in my first Scottish heritage Sunday, and grateful for the gracious invitation to be part of it even before the planning committee knew my ancestry. I can understand how it might be a bit of a sensitive issue inviting the new pastor to preach on Scottish heritage Sunday before knowing where he comes from. I don't know that it happened this way, but I can imagine early on a bit of an edgy conversation within the planning committee. "Well, do you think he has any Scots' blood in him?"

"Don't rightly know for sure, but have you seen how many times the lad uses the same tea bag? He thinks it's a cat with nine lives...cup after cup after cup...same dried up tea bag. He must have some Scot's blood in him somewhere." Indeed, I do. My father's side of the family is all Scots and Irish - Gilmore's and Meguiar's - proud of it.

On this Scottish heritage Sunday, when I hear our text for today, Oh Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth, I picture the Psalmist sitting in the Scottish highlands, overlooking the misty glen, a rolling pastoral scene; or I picture him on the Isle of Iona, the great abbey behind, the ocean waves crashing on the rocks below and before him. He sits there marveling at the power and the beauty, the wonder, and mystery of it all. Oh, I know that the Psalm was written a long time ago, and it came from a man living in the desert of Israel, a man who probably never ventured more than 50 miles from home in his entire life. That's just how sedentary life was back then. Yet, he is able to look at his own little corner of the world and proclaim God's name majestic in all the earth.

It's a grand claim, one he is bold to make – in all the earth. After all, he's never seen the Scottish highlands, or made a pilgrimage to Iona. He's never wandered my home town, seen the fire flies dancing in and out of a central Illinois corn field at dusk, a display of nature that rivals any Fourth of July fireworks. He's never seen Long Island Sound, or traveled the winding, rock-fenced roads of Connecticut. He's never heard the chatter of monkeys and watched them laugh and play in jungle tree tops. He's never seen kangaroos hopping along in the Outback. How could he say in all the earth?

I'll tell you why...because he knows his Bible and he has his faith in God as the one God of all creation. "In the beginning," Genesis 1 tells us, "God created the heavens and the earth..." God looked out over the creation that God had made and declared it good. Everything that is is from God. So the Psalmist didn't need to travel in order to say in all the earth. He didn't need to talk to nomads, to folks who had traveled, even in a limited capacity. In a worshipful, prayerful mood, he just knew it. You can sit on a bench in Waveny Park, or on your front porch wherever it is that you live, or in your high-rise city apartment, and look out over your corner of the world and by faith, just know it. All of us can proclaim in worshipful tones... in all the earth.

It's all about creation. It is one of the things I appreciate so about Celtic Christianity. Our forebears in the faith saw and knew the majesty and power of God reflected in all that is made. How majestic...how excellent is your name...Well, the Psalmist is already in this reflective mood and then in the desert of Israel the darkness descends, camp was made, a fire built, lambs tucked safely away in the sheepfold, and the psalmist's attention turns to the heavens, to the night-time sky. One of the most startling things about moving to New Canaan has been how dark it is here at night. I mean really dark - very few street lights to speak of. I encourage our distinguished city guests to make a night time pilgrimage to this place. Here there are no lights competing with the wonders of heaven. Sometimes you just have to get out of the city in order to see the bright lights of God. I look at the moon and the stars...how long has it been for you? Just gazing at the stars in wonder? A few years ago I was in Brazil where I saw the constellation the Southern Cross for the first time. It's one of those constellations you can only see from the southern hemisphere. It was wonderful. I felt like a kid, seeing the big dipper for the first time.

Have you ever helped a small child to see the Big Dipper, to spot it for the first time? It's one of the great joys of parenthood, of being a grandparent, or just being an adult with any kid, for that matter. It's not easy; children's eyes just seem to go everywhere. You point and say, "There it is, see the four stars make the little cup and that's the handle; do you see it?"

"No."
 "Well, look harder."
 "I see the moon."
 "No, follow my fingers. Do you see it?"
 "Daddy, did you know that your hands are dirty. Mommy's gonna make you wash 'em."
 "No, stop looking at my hands...up in the sky..."

And then that final time when she says, I see it...I see it. That's important, because we don't want our children to be like some of the rest of us, so small of mind and thought. When I consider the moon and stars...who are we that you think so much about us? We're so little. The universe so big, the heavens such a grand expanse and here we are so small. You know that one of the dangers of living in a small community is that you see the same people every day. And sometimes there isn't much diversity amongst the folks we see. In situations like that, we can develop a prejudice, if

we're not careful, always seeing the same, look-pretty-similar-to-us-kind-of-people. And you know what? You can live in a big city and live in a small world. Some people do it deliberately, keep their world small. If I live in a small pond, it looks like I'm a big fish. If I have a small world then my own ideas and opinions get to always be paramount.

It's easy to think so small. But to look at the moon and stars and to know that there are people every hour of every day – remember it is dark somewhere all the time - every hour of every day, there are other boys and girls and adults looking at the same stars, wishing on the same stars, looking at the same moon. Let's be sure to teach our children that. Show them the Big Dipper and the moon and say, "Just think, in Scotland there is some little kid who is looking at the same stars we do, and wishing some of the same things that we do. I know a little kid in Guatemala who during the day often times can be found sifting through the rubbish at the dump just to eke out an existence, but at night when the stars are out... wishes and dreams...and in Pakistan, and Iraq, and in Israel and on the West Bank...same stars, some of the same wishes. I once heard Fred Craddock say that he used to think that the categories of right and wrong, true and false, Biblical or unbiblical, were the most significant ones, and they are terribly important. But maybe there's an even bigger category - the category small and big, big and small. When I consider the moon and stars...O God, why do you even think about us? Why?

Especially when we're so confused about what dominion means. God said, "I give you dominion over land and sea, and all that's in the sea and all the beasts of the field, over everything, I give you dominion." And we don't know what it means. Some people think it means plunder the land – drill and strip mine and deforest and discard wherever you want. Certainly the oil that is pouring into the gulf right now, destroying sea life and fishing beds, and polluting the coastline should give us pause, cause us once again to think about what it means to have dominion. Some people think it means do whatever we can to the earth without asking whether we should because the land is ours after all. That's what they think it means. You shall have dominion.

There are other folks who think that it means you shall accumulate. It's yours, so get all you can, never ask what enough is, and just accumulate. And some never think about the fact that if some get too much then somebody else gets too little. And if you get a great deal, somebody is hungry. That's the way it works. Is that what it means to have dominion?

When I consider the moon and stars, that God has ordained, why does God pay so much attention to us? And the Psalmist says: I know why. God made us in God's own image. When God made the wire-haired dachshund, God said, that's good. When God made the duck-billed platypus and the aardvark God chuckled, and said, that's good. When God made the flowering cherry tree, God said, that's good and so it was with tigers and wombats and horses...but it wasn't enough. And finally God said, I'm going to make something just like me, my very image. I'm going to make something that when people look at it, they're going to say...God. And that's when God made you.

Oh, I know sometimes our actions make a mockery of the very image in which we are created. We human beings created in God's image with such an amazing capacity for love and goodness, for justice and compassion, can be so very small, our darkness eclipsing our light. Torture and terrorism, hunger and poverty, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan - they diminish who we are as human beings because they graphically point out just how far short we have fallen of the glory of God. You take the expression, "You have made us a little less than God," and then look at our world today and it doesn't seem to fit. So far, so far...we have fallen so far short of God's image. It's hard to picture us right now as a little less than God, but once in a while...once in a while.

It's been several years now since I took a group of youth from Lincoln, IL on a mission trip to Tennessee. We pitched our tents in Frozen Head State Park, in order to run a day camp/vacation bible school for underprivileged Appalachian children. It was one of those ill-fated trips from the beginning. A huge storm hit us our first night there and before we knew it our campsite was in the middle of a river. Everything soaked. Midway through the week a mother of one of our campers informed us that if we would stop feeding her child milk products, he wouldn't keep having those messy accidents. Some things it is better to know up front. By the end of the week, we'd had it. Tired, wet, eating ground turkey at every meal, we'd been with the children all day, every day, all week. I don't know if we had run out of ideas or what, but it was kind of a creation theme all week, so the last day we told them to go scavenge around in the woods and to bring something back that reminded them of God. I said to them, "When I blow the whistle you go out into the woods, find something, and when I blow it again, bring it back and tell us how it reminds you of God."

So I blew the whistle and they scattered, and my plan was not to blow the whistle again. But I did. I blew it again and here they came. I said to one little girl, "What do you have?"

"A flower."

"And what does that tell you about God?"

"God is beautiful."

"Well, that's good. And what do you have?"

"A rock."

"What does that tell you?"

"God is strong, powerful."

"That's good. What do you have?"

"Some wild raspberries."

"What does that tell you?"

"God is good. Feeds us, feed the animals."

"That's good, very good."

Then came the kid who had caused more trouble all week than all the other kids combined. He was always there. Didn't want him to be there all the time - each morning we'd see the children coming - Is he there? Yea, he's there. Great! He was always there. I said to him, "Well, what do you

have?" and he was holding the hand of his little sister. I said, "What did you bring?" He said, "My sister." I said, "What's that tell you about God?" And he said, "Uhh, uhh...I don't know."

He didn't know, but he was right...he was right. This ornery little kid recognized there wasn't a thing in the forest that told him as much about God as his sister. That's it – what the psalmist is trying to tell us.

A little lower than God. Now I know that some of us act like garbage sometimes (not the Scots, of course, but others do). Back in Minnesota I looked out one day and saw our garbage cans out on the driveway, stuff spilling out all over the place and I thought, "How ugly, that's really gross." But during the night we got one of those massive Minnesota snow storms and in the morning I looked out at the drive and that garbage had become a beautiful mound for the glory of God. The apostle Paul put it like this: You are created in God's image; you are recreated in Christ Jesus. You are God's masterpiece.

A little lower than God – absolutely – crowned with glory and honor. Thanks be to God. Amen.