

Created in the Image of God
All Creatures Great and Small 1

By
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from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 8

¹O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens. ²Out of the mouths of babes
and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence
the enemy and the avenger. ³When I look at your heavens, the work of
your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; ⁴what are
human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for
them? ⁵Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned
them with glory and honor. ⁶You have given them dominion over the
works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, ⁷all sheep
and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, ⁸the birds of the air, and the
fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. ⁹O LORD,
our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

The next verses describe God’s work to create the sky and the lights to distinguish night and day, the seas and earth which God fills with vegetation to sustain what comes next:

²⁰And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.” ²¹So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. ²²God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” ²³And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day. ²⁴And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” And it was so. ²⁵God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good. ²⁶Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” ²⁷So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. ²⁸God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” ²⁹God said, “See, I have

given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. ³⁰And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. ³¹God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Writer Anne Lamott says that there are three essential prayers: *Help*. *Thanks*. *Wow*. Both of our scripture readings today fall into the “Wow” category. They echo the kind of human utterances Lamott says are “offered with a gasp, a sharp intake of breath. *Wow* means we are not dulled to wonder. Wow because we are almost speechless, but not quite.” With this one syllable, when we are in awe, we pray, *Wow*, Lamott says, noting that “wow and awe... dance together – this energy, the breath, the glory, the goodness of God.”¹

Today, we begin a summer sermon series on how God is revealed to us through the broad goodness of creation. While people are going and coming, we have found that to have a summer theme provides a sense of continuity to our worship. A couple of months ago we landed on the idea of preaching passages of scripture that include animals, hence the series title: *All Creatures Great and Small*. At its first suggestion, the idea seemed mostly whimsical and fun, but as we pondered the bible stories that came to mind, we began to realize that animals are everywhere in scripture. Their stories reveal profound understandings of who God is and how we human beings find our calling amid a vast creation. From a wily serpent in the Garden of Eden to the hippopotamus in job; from lizards in Proverbs to locusts in Joel; from the mother bear in Isaiah to the hen and her chicks in Matthew; and of course all those pastures of sheep in Psalm 23, Ezekiel 34, at Jesus’s birth and his parable about being lost and found in Luke. Throughout the Bible, the animal kingdom is precisely where the Kingdom of God is revealed.

Today, then, is a preamble to this summer series. Before we begin looking at particular creatures, I thought we might consider two of the Bible’s key *Wow* moments. They help us step back and see life on earth and God’s love for the world in its entire wonder. Both Psalm 8 and the first chapter of Genesis describe the far-reaching, sovereign majesty of God, and how God honors us human creatures with a special role to play within the creation.

¹ Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*, p. 71-88.

These are actually the two passages of scripture that have made trips into outer space. Some of you remember that 1968 Christmas Eve broadcast from Apollo Eight, when astronauts Bill Anders, Jim Lovell and Frank Borman orbited the earth for the first time. A special satellite was sent up the week before in order to transmit a Christmas Eve message from them to the world. Borman tried to draft something himself about peace, but he thought it sounded flat given the conflict of the Vietnam War at the time. He enlisted the help of a friend in government who didn't like what he came up with either. His wife, however, had been a member of the French Resistance – as a young teenager in Paris during World War Two, and she suggested they read the beginning of Genesis. So that Christmas Eve more than a billion people spread across sixty-four countries, with that stunning view in mind of the Earth from the moon, heard the astronauts taking turns reading: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, let there be light: and there was light. And God saw that it was good. WOW!*

Just months later, fifty-five years ago come this July, Apollo Eleven was sent to land on the moon, and we remember that giant leap for humankind. That mission had invited heads of state from around the globe to send a message from the earth, a hope for the future, a word to other life forms should they exist. Those messages were engraved upon a disk the size of a fifty-cent piece and left on the surface of the moon.² Pope Paul the Sixth, as the political head of the Vatican, sent the text of Psalm 8: *O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! What are human beings that you care for them? Yet, you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. Wow!*

² Kim Clayton, "What a Wonderful World," Brick Presbyterian Church sermon on Psalm 8, 11/18/18.

It is no mystery that these two particular readings were chosen by people of faith to be beamed from outer space. Because they speak to the transcendent power of God to create; they locate us human creatures in a special place of responsibility for God's creation; and from the beginning, they point us to a future that is entrusted to our care.

Now, lest anyone think I may have taken leave of my senses today by focusing on long distance views of the earth from outer space, let's remember the occasions out of which these texts arise. Both were written by a people in exile facing harsh and brutal realities of what was going on in the streets. According to Old Testament scholar, Bill Brown, Psalm 8 arises out of a string of Psalms, from 3 to 13, that picture an almost unrelenting account of trouble, threat, danger from enemies without, and illness within. The surrounding psalms rail at God who seems either negligent or too slow to set things right. These surrounding psalms read like today's newspapers. They recount the deeds of the wicked, people plotting for selfish gain, nations conspiring to do other nations in, foes deriding one another. In the midst of this string of embattled Psalms, ones that Anne Lamott would categorize as help prayers, Psalm 8 sings forth a hymn of praise celebrating God's glory in creation and the God-given dignity of human beings. It offers a confident respite, a reminder in the midst of many trials, that God is still God, and God has endowed us with creative powers to care for what is good and beautiful and true.

God gives us dominion within the creation, for all of its creaturely inhabitants on land, in the sea and in the air. Now, this word *dominion* – has been misunderstood and misused as exploitation, but in reality it means creaturely kinship, human shepherding, protection, and nurture. When the Psalm affirms this vocation IS ours because we have been created just “a little lower than God,” it is echoing the theological intent of Genesis. Made in the image and likeness of God, we have a job to steward the goodness of God. From the beginning, the good vision of the future involves our God-like care.

In her biblical commentary on Genesis, Kathleen O'Connor points out that "The sixth day of creation involves two creative acts, the making of animals and of humans. God commands the earth to bring living creatures of every kind and sees that it is good. God's second act on this same day is to create humans." She writes this, "Because humans do not have their own day but share it with other animals and creeping things of all sorts, the text signals that humans are co-members of a larger community of life."³ The assertion we are made in God's image means we have immense dignity as well as a vocation of relationship to every living thing that moves upon the earth. The future requires us to be co-creators with God. Wow!

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson is a marine biologist who is trying to help people move beyond fear and pessimism about climate change in order to move them toward positive engagement. The titles of her books hint at her mission: a best-selling climate anthology is called *All We Can Save*, and her book coming out this summer is entitled, *What IF We Get It Right?* In a recent interview about the current climate crisis, a reporter leads with current realities: the huge piles of garbage everywhere, rising sea levels, the fossil-fuel based plastic that has so polluted the seas that plastic particles are in our drinking water and in rain, and in the seafood we eat.

Johnson is asked what best motivates people for change when so many of us seem paralyzed by fear and despair. She says, "This is the Number One thing that drives people to do something about climate change – love for the future. The biologist says: "It really does come down to love as an enormously powerful motivator." Then she invites her listeners to think about the love they have for their children and grandchildren, and IF they don't have children, then the love they have for children we see skipping down the street. I would suggest that our biblical texts would add the love we have for the family dog or cat, our love for the birds that sing us awake in the morning, our love for Jesus who was born in a barn

³ Kathleen O'Connor, Genesis 1-25, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary.

and who grew up to tell us stories about sparrows and sheep and fish. The biologist Johnson says, we know how to transition to renewable energy, how to insulate buildings and put-up reflective rooftops, how to improve public transit, how to avoid food waste and how to reduce our consumption. There are a million things we know how to do. But the only thing that will motivate us is love for the future.⁴

You know, it was for the future that back in the beginning, on the sixth and climatic day of creation God started the day this way: creating the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, the wild animals of the earth, and every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. And then, on that very same day, God created human creatures, and said, *be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and care for the fish and the birds and every living thing that moves upon the earth*. You see - being made in the image and likeness of God means - perhaps above everything else it may mean - we were created to be good stewards of the future. God breathed into us a love for the future for the benefit of God's good earth and every creeping thing that inhabits it. No wonder the Bible is filled with animal stories! Just remember that picture of the earth from the moon. Wow! We are in this together.

AMEN.

⁴ David Marchese, "This Scientist Has an Antidote to our Climate Delusions," NYTimes, May 18, 2024.