

Trinity Sunday

June 19, 2011

Psalm 8

“Small Wonders”

the Rev. Michelle Slater

A member of the congregation brought me an opinion piece from the *National Post* this week, by the writer George Jonas. In it he claims (I suspect tongue in cheek) to have had a dream in which he was God. He writes, “It was a bit weird, even for a dream. I sat in a celestial electronic office, going through my mail. My mail was piles and piles of prayers ... written in tongues of every kind ... I was disappointed, though. Frankly, the prayers were embarrassing. Most supplicants seemed like a royal pain in the keester.”

“Things look different from the other side, I suppose, but viewed from God’s vantage point, human beings aren’t very attractive ... I’m not talking about supplicants praying for long life, health, money, whatever. If people haven’t got something they need and don’t know how to get it, they’ve no choice but to pray for it.

“It isn’t [beggars] who embarrass me as God; it’s people who pray for faith. Specifically, those who demand to see my ID, so to speak. These good folk want to believe, but would feel silly if they believed in a God who didn’t exist — why, Christopher Hitchens might mock them — so they ask for a sign. It isn’t much, they say. A sign should be a breeze for a deity. No need to lay out anything new and expensive. Any old trick will do. Just part the Red Sea again, God, and whoosh! We’ll be happy.

“There they were in my dream,” he writes, “the aspiring faithful, demanding documentation ... Hey, God, we want to believe. Let’s see your birth certificate!

“Oh, ye of little everything. You want to see my ID? How about the universe?

“A sign, you say? Will a galaxy do? How about gamma rays, the structure of the eye, $E=MC^2$, a black hole, a pollinating insect, a homing pigeon or a Bach fugue? How about the Milky Way or the Taj Mahal? How about conscience? Consciousness? How about feeling the need to believe? A ‘sign’ of God’s existence is existence itself.” (*National Post, June 15, 2011*)*

“A ‘sign’ of God’s existence is existence itself.” This *National Post* writer claims that God’s work, God’s very existence, is shown by the wonders of creation all around us, as well as by the intricacies and mysteries of the human being itself. Without even meaning to, it seems, he was rewriting our Psalm for today, Psalm 8:

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

You have set your glory above the heavens...
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?

Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honour...”

The psalm evokes feelings of awe, awe in God's mighty works, and of humility, as we come to grips with our own small but wonderful place in them. Perhaps you have known such a moment, a time of being overwhelmed by the glory of the world around you, or awestruck by the diversity and complexity of one small part of creation, or humbled by the realization of our smallness and insignificance in the face of the billions of stars in the night sky.

I know I can vividly remember one particular moment in my own life, of feeling the humility and awe that the psalmist describes. I was on Long Beach near Tofino, in a wet February, on an afternoon when the sun had broken out. I walked with a friend along the pounding surf, out to where the low-lying tide had exposed a wonderful huge rock, covered with starfish and sea anemones. I squatted down to have a look at a purple starfish, and suddenly it struck me, that the purple star fish had only one calling from God to fulfill: to exist. To be. To be the starfish that God created it to be. I wondered what it would be like to live like that — that unselfconsciously, that freely — and I often return to that experience in my mind. I felt, all at once, at one with the starfish, and the sea, and the rocks, and all of creation, and yet also felt immensely humbled, knowing I had only my own small part to play, my own small life to live, in the glory of all of creation.

In other words, it was a moment when I stopped, and looked, and listened, and took in the world, in that very moment. A time when I could truly see, comprehend, take in, one of God's small wonders and be awed by it. I think it can best be described as a state of "mindfulness", of being attentive to something other than oneself. The state of being fully present to the other — in this case, to some particular part of God's creation.

It's the same word the psalmist uses to describe God's relationship with us: "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?"

It's a rhetorical question that the psalmist poses, not expecting an answer from God, but somehow lifting up both our human sense of insignificance when confronted with the created universe, and the utter miracle that God has chosen to have a special relationship of caring with us, with humanity. The psalmist holds together the paradox, that the Creator of all, the One who set the sun and moon and stars in their places, is also deeply attentive to each one of us, each of us a "small wonder" in God's eyes.

We preachers often stress, and I hope you often hear, that God loves us: that God loves you, and loves me. But the psalmist explores one particular aspect of love, I think, in claiming that God is "mindful" of us. Mindfulness implies careful attention, that is, attention that is full of care. As one writer puts it, "mindfulness is love that resists distraction. It is a staunch refusal to fall into absentmindedness. It is focused, sustained attention toward the beloved... Mindfulness is choosing to cherish and then choosing — again and again — never to back away from that initial decision.

(Mark Rolls, *"Mindful," in the Christian Century, May 15, 2007*)

And this is the relationship that God has with us, the psalmist says. That despite our frequent inattentiveness to God; despite the fact that sometimes, as the *National Post* writer says, "human beings aren't very attractive"; despite how unimpressive human beings seem in the face of Niagara Falls, or the northern lights, or an 800 year old fir tree; despite all that, the

psalmist proclaims, with wonder and not a little surprise, that God's attention never wavers from us.

"What are human beings that you are *mindful* of them, mortals that you care for them?" the psalmist marvels. "Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet..." Not only is God mindful of human beings, the psalmist proclaims, but mindful in a way that is unique, that calls us to heightened responsibility for the rest of the creation God makes and loves.

For that is what "dominion" really means, doesn't it? "You have given [human beings] dominion over the works of your hands," the psalmist says to God; "you have put all things under their feet." In these days of global climate crises, of environmental disaster, we have come to realize that while we thought "dominion" meant "ours to do with, what we will," that we were wrong. That "dominion" really means, "ours to care for, steward, protect and nurture."

So the psalmist calls us, not only to recognize and marvel at the fact that God is eternally mindful, attentive, care-full, of us. But also to practice that mindfulness with each other, and with God's creation.

And "practice" really is the right word. It takes practice, to be fully present in each moment, aware of our own self, our own body, our own feelings and thoughts, and to also be able to bring our attention to other people and God's creation. So let's start right now, with a short mindfulness practice, that can help open our awareness, of ourselves, and those around us, and the world, and where God is moving in all of it.

Mindfulness Meditation

I invite you to close your eyes, if that is comfortable for you. Sit straight up, back against the seat, feet flat on the floor. Bring your attention to your breath. Simply notice your breath, without attempting to change it. Focus on the sensation of air moving in and out of your body as you breathe. Feel your belly rise and fall, the air enter your nostrils and leave your mouth. Pay attention to the way each breath changes and is different.

Bring your awareness to your physical being. Notice how your body feels today. Scan your body from head to toe, slowly, identifying any spaces that you experience discomfort or comfort. Notice the temperature of your body, the space inside of your body. See if you can feel your heart beat. Notice how your mind feels. If there are any places with an ache or pain, stiffness or knot ... as you breathe in next, send the breath to that place, bringing release, relaxation, freedom.

Bring your awareness to the person beside you ... can you feel their energy, their presence? Can you hear their breathing? Be aware of their living presence beside you, sharing the air you are breathing. Be aware that beside you is a manifestation of God, of the divine light and love, sitting right beside you.

Now, expand your awareness to the rest of this room. Notice any sounds you hear in the room or outside of it ... the fans whirring ... a baby gurgling ... a car driving by ... a hearing aid

buzzing. Notice the temperature, any smells you experience. See if you can get a feel for the space in the room with your eyes closed. Stay here and allow your senses to experience the room you are in.

Now bring your awareness to God ... the God of your understanding ... how has God been present to you ... in the past week? This morning? Right now?

Now, bring your attention back to your body, to your breath. Give thanks for this time of mindfulness ... and when you are ready, open your eyes.

Who are we, that God is mindful of us? We are God's beloved creatures. Thanks be to God! Amen.

*Link to the National Post article

<http://www.nationalpost.com/opinion/columnists/easy+being/4947414/story.html>