

“Preserving the Gift of Heaven”

Psalm 8
Matthew 6:19-21; 25-33

*What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?*

Ps 8:4

O God, we give you thanks for all that is: the seen and the unseen;
all that you have created and placed before us
to enhance and sustain life:
animals and grain,
oceans and sky,
rain and wind.
But what, O God, are we?

WHAT ARE HUMAN BEINGS?

In September, 1976, at the beginning of the academic year, I walked into a third floor classroom in Classic Hall and took my seat facing a window overlooking the Ohio River. I was a 30 year old third-year Theology major returning to college after a 10 year absence. Half the class thought I was a new professor. They came to learn that I was in fact a minority student of sorts – “a pre-ministerial student supported by the GI bill and a teaching wife, with two children & a dog” working toward seminary.

That particular class was a critical component in my major and **Dr. Coval McDonald** was the professor not me. Returning to an institution of higher learning (this time as a wide awake adult!) was the most enlightening experience of all of my years of education. I will forever be indebted to God for opening the doors and preparing the way for me and my family to pursue the call of Christ in Christian ministry. My years at Hanover College outside Madison, Indiana were formative in so many ways ... not the least in broadening my theological perspective.

My academic journey began in a class entitled “MODELS OF MAN,” as we began studying and discussing the very question raised in Psalm 8 – our “Psalm for the Week” and the focus of our worship, study and exploration this Sunday.

The question? “*Quid est homo?*” as the Latin Vulgate puts it. “*What is man?*”

The New Revised Standard Version widens the language:

*What are human beings, O God
that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?*

It is a question that has been posed by prophet, poet & sage. It's been the focus of writers and philosophers, psychologists and psychoanalysts, physicians and physiologists, sociologist and archeologists. It is a question that has been answered, in part, by each of these human arts and sciences – though never fully by any single discipline – for we humans as Scripture teaches are “*wonderfully and fearfully made*”

We began our Summer Psalm Series singing the **100th Psalm** and making, “*a joyful noise to the Lord all the earth; [and] worshipping the Lord with gladness; as we came into his presence with singing.*” This past Sunday, **Psalm 148** evoked our praise as this song of praise focused our attention on the created order and the praise of the Creator generated by every living thing, and by all things celestial and terrestrial.

This morning **Psalm 8**, the first hymn of praise in the Book of Psalms turns our theological eyes inward, for after praising God's name above all creation, the psalmist asks “**the man question.**”

Unlike, in structure or style, any other hymn of praise in the biblical canon Psalm 8 is the only hymn in the Old Testament composed as direct address to God. **And this direct address finds its sharpened edge in the form a question:**

“O God, we give you thanks for all that is, the seen and the unseen; all that you have created and placed before us to sustain life - the animals and the grain, the oceans and the sky, the rain and the wind. But what, O God, are we?”

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Almost half a century ago, theologian **H. Richard Niebuhr**, in developing his own answer to that question as he delivered the Robertson Lectures at the University of Glasgow, walked his audience through several traditional answers to the question of “what are human beings.”

“In the history of [humanity's] quest after knowledge of himself,” he said, “as ‘one in charge of his conduct,’ we have used several concepts and symbols.

“The most identifying symbol is that of “*the maker, the fashioner.*”

What are we most like? We are those who construct things according to an idea, for the sake of an end.” **Aristotle** succinctly put it this way, “man is the being who makes himself.” In short, one answer to the question of “*what is man?*” is

we are those who make things to fulfill an intended purpose. And the work of human minds and hands are all around us.

“A second grand image of the general character of human life is that of the human being as *“citizen; humanity living under law.”*”

We are those who come to understand ourselves best in the midst of mores, of commandments and rules.” *Thou shalt* and *thou shalt not*s which down through history and in every culture provide the principles through which we either assent or dissent and through which we define peace, prosperity, and the common good ... under the rule of justice.

I have to confess, that until I had been required to read those lectures, published as Niebuhr’s now classic The Responsible Self, I had never heard of these philosophical constructs ... but I was intrigued. They made sense. It was fairly easy to fit my understanding of humanity and human history into these descriptions of human behavior.

But Niebuhr, in his Glasgow lectures, after reminding his listeners of these traditional ways of answering the question “What is Man?,” presented a third way ... one that I have never forgotten, nor ever found wanting, as I moved deeper and deeper into Christian theology, namely **human beings as responsible selves**; “human creatures as answerers, human beings engaged in dialogue, responding and reacting to others,” and to the world in which we live. For it is *in responding* that we seek *what is fitting*, and in seeking the fitting we are engaged in total an interaction with God, with others, and with the world in which we live and breathe and have our being.

*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 honor.*

James Mays in his commentary on Psalms, reminds us not to read too quickly the phrase about human kind being made “*Just a little lower than God, crowning them with glory and honor.*” Human history is replete with examples our proclivity to inflate that language and to assume the role of God – and if sin is anything, it is surely forgetting who are we are in God’s economy. It is far too easy in our own minds to usurp the role of God.

May’s suggests that language of royalty (i.e., humanity crowned with glory and honor) used in Psalm 8 is a clear indication that the Divine Image we bear is that of, “**officials in the administrative arrangement of the kingdom of God.**” What are human beings? We

are those creatures, under God's dominion that have been given dominion. We are earthly regents of the heavenly rule. Therefore our nature is constituted in and through our relationships, one to another; to God; and to all that God has created.

+ **SUB PEDIBUS** +
under our feet

The psalmist sings praises to God the Creator not only for the works of Creation in which God has placed we mere mortals, but praise to the very God has who elevated us to a level in the created order just “a little lower than God, crowning us with glory and honor and placing **at our feet** (sub pedibus) all of the rest of creation.

In the Institutes of The Christian Religion, **John Calvin** writes, “[The God] who has set the limits of our life has at the same time entrusted to us its care.” Therefore if God has committed the care and protection of life to us, it is our duty to care for it and protect it (Gustafson, 166)

Yet it is becoming sadly apparent that for too many centuries humanity has misread scripture, pursuing life-styles and economies that see the created order as one's personal footstool; subservient; to be used solely for our survival and our satisfaction.

Princeton Seminary's **Daniel Migliore**, states that Christians have taken the biblical injunction to “exercise dominion” over creation to an extreme God never intended, transforming “dominion of care” into domination.

We have long viewed the world as existing primarily to serve the needs and desires of humankind, without considering that the very existence of our partners in creation depends on us, as regents in the administration of the created order.

We've certainly had license to view the world as we have. No less an authority than **Thomas Aquinas** taught that, “*The life of plants and animals is preserved not for themselves but for man.*” Of the animals he writes, “*by a most just ordinance of the Creator, both their life and death are subject to our use.*”(94)

For too long human power and freedom has ignored the interconnectedness of humanity one with another and with our environment, assuming unlimited resources to satisfy insatiable consumption. Only in recent years, as we have come to recognize the limits of creation and increasing demands of human living, are we beginning to move away from classic theologies that have held a pure utilitarian view of creation and its creatures.

Psalm 8 is a celebration of humanity's roll as stewards of God's good creation; it a song affirming our place in God's created order. Creation is a gift, given by a gracious and loving God and we who have been created “a little lower than” God himself have been given the

responsibility of using as well as caring for the gift. More than just makers/builders/users, more than simply those who assent or dissent within moral and legal bounds, we men and women have been created by God as **responsible royal agents charged with preserving the gift of heaven.**

Created a little lower than God yet above and with caring dominion over the created order, we have been given the serious responsibility of caring for Gods gift of creation in fitting ways. The ancients and even the near-moderns could live much looser with creation. Such loose living today has serious ramifications for the future of all and is nothing short of abdicating our God given role in creation.

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Greenville physician and Presbyterian Elder **Stan Von Hofe**, recently asked members of his congregation, "*What is our responsibility to the earth? How are we to survive as a human race if our very life depends on the consumption of what God has given us – and we end up consuming it all?*" And he shared with them a song he recalled, written by Marty Robbins (ironically three years) after Richard Niebuhr coined the phrase the *responsible self*.

Warm are the winds on the desert
 A whirlwind is dancing around
 I stop to survey all the beauty that's here
 When a shadow moves out 'cross the ground
 It's an eagle that circles above me
 And he screams to his friends on the hill
 "Stay close together, move not a feather
 Man walks among us, be still, be still
 Man walks among us, be still"

Everything hides, but I see them
 I've spotted an old mother quail
 I look close and see, looking right back at me
 The eyes of a young cottontail
 I see a coyote sneaking
 As he crawls through the brush on the hill
 And the eagle screams down, "Stay close to the ground
 Man walks among us, be still, be still
 Man walks among us, be still."

Twenty feet high in the side of a cactus
 I see a hole where the butcher bird stays
 If mortals could choose, and if heaven should ask us
 Here's where I'd want to spend all of my days
 Soon will be gone all the desert

Cities will cover each hill
 Today will just be a fond memory
 Man walks among us, be still, be still
 Man walks among us, be still.

<p>What is man? Ask the Psalmist? Jesus answers, “<i>Consider the lilies ...</i>”</p>
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AMEN!

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 Fourth Presbyterian Church
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