

Sermon

Psalm 8

Hope Church – June 11, 2017 (Trinity Sunday)

Text

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

You have set your glory above the heavens.

Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.

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.

You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

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

Sermon

I don't know about you all, but the last year hasn't made it any easier for me to think well of human beings. Some days I wake up and read the news and talk to people in our denomination and then walk around all day feeling like a cornered puffer fish, inflated, terrified, stretched tight, all spines and poison and warning. Some of those poisonous puffer fish days I spend doing my chaplaincy work on the pediatric ICU at the University of Michigan hospital, and that is not a place that would be high on anyone's list of

places to go when your faith in the goodness of human beings is wavering. That's where the drownings, the suicides, the car accidents, the house fires go. That's where the victims of child abuse end up. About those patients, "I could a tale unfold whose lightest word / Would harrow up thy soul" [Hamlet, I,v]. Suffice it to say that you don't go to the PICU for comfort when you're already feeling despair about the things human beings do to one another.

General Synod most definitely turns me into a poisonous puffer fish. It always did. I remember even as a child those days when my dad would return from a long and contentious Synod, put down his suitcase, and spread himself out on the couch with an arm over his eyes. "How was Synod?" we would ask, and he would make this noise: "Auuuuggggghhhhhhhhh." Growing up I always thought of Synod as a shadowy place where all the conflict in the world is concentrated and bottled and stacked in rows upon rows upon rows in a vast warehouse where it could be shipped out to the churches in bulk. As an adult I've never been to Synod as a delegate, but I've watched it and followed its conversations and decisions, and I'm convinced my metaphorical instincts as a child were bang on correct. General Synod is where we go to be unkind to one another. We arm ourselves for war every year, and somehow every year war is what we get, no matter how much words like "love" and "spirit" and "God" litter our language about it. War is what we export to the classes, and war is what the classes send back the next year. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.

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

What are human beings that God bothers with us? On my cynical days, human beings are nothing but horrible monkeys who band together to hurt other monkeys. Our instincts, honed by evolution and hormones and millennia of unjust and brutal history, tell us to fear and distrust anyone who is different from us, and the process of overcoming those instincts is far more laborious and painful than just giving in to them. What are human beings? Human beings elected Hitler and Trump and Putin, who are all human beings themselves. Human beings get drunk on power and narcissism and ravage the earth from the comfort of their golf courses. Human beings leave nooses in the Museum of African-American History. Human beings stab good Samaritans to death on trains in the name of their right to harass Muslim girls. Human beings shoot a twelve year old Black boy before looking to see that he has nothing but a toy in his hand. Human beings poison the water of entire cities to save a few dollars.

In a universe populated by so much that is beautiful, in a universe where there are moon and stars and trees and lakes and mountains and birds and good dogs and pods of dolphins leaping through the waves for the pure joy of being alive, in a universe full of those things, why would God spend any time caring for the very human beings who are killing that same earth by degrees every day? This is the question I ask myself on

poisonous puffer fish days, and it seems like I have more and more of those days every year. This is the question I'm not sure I can answer for you today in any way that doesn't feel like a cop-out. It's *the* question, and honestly I wouldn't have raised the question here except that it's been consuming my brain these days to the point where I can hardly think about anything else.

Yet. Yet.

"Yet," the psalmist says, "you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands."

O, my poisonous puffer fish soul, we are not allowed to ignore that "yet," much as we would like to sit in our despair and our anger and cry out lament and fury until the sun burns out in the sky. We are not allowed to ignore that "yet," much as we would like to build our little poisonous puffer fish fortress—all spines and poison and warning and wide, terrified eyes—against the battering cruelty of human beings. Human beings are good at building that kind of fortress, the fortress that fear builds against the enemy and the avenger. It's the illusion of safety that comes through strength, through weapons. The voice that nudges us to build that fortress is the same voice that lures the

super-rich to build gated mansions in the mountains where they can defend themselves against both angry mobs and the warming, rising seas. That is not the kind of fortress that God builds:

“Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.”

The babes and infants in my hospital are not the people I would choose to patrol the walls of my fortress to keep me safe, I don't care how loud they're capable of yelling. If the mouths of babes and infants make up the might of God's fortress, then the point of God's fortress is not spikes and poison and warning. If the mouths of babes and infants make the sound of God's dominion, then God's dominion has nothing to do with weapons or control or even strength. Have you ever seen a more vulnerable creature than an eight month old baby? Little pudgy floppy balls of baby fat and round little toes and faint smudges of hair and their eyes wide with wonder every moment they're awake, drinking in the world around them at a pace no adult could ever match. They watch your face with their whole bodies, and with their whole bodies they strain toward the learning they need to communicate, to begin to make their way in the world. If God's power is built on the face of an eight month old baby, then we cannot expect God's power to smite anyone, and we've been thinking about dominion all wrong.

When the psalmist says, “you have made [human beings] a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor,... given them dominion over the works of your hands,” we are prone to overemphasize the word “dominion,” and infuse it with human concepts of power that have nothing to do with the dominion of God. Yes, there are enemies and avengers out there, and yes, we are afraid, and yes, we want to protect what is vulnerable in ourselves and our families with all the might and force we can muster. And yes, the psalmist says that God will silence those enemies and avengers. But God does not call us to silence them with poisonous puffer fish spines, with weapons and walls spiked with razors circling our hearts. Our dominion over the earth is a dominion that was given to us because we are beings who are as capable of wonder as an eight month old baby. We are beings who are as vulnerable as a newborn baby who could suffocate if she sleeps in the wrong surroundings. If our dominion over creation flows out of our capacity for wonder and our vulnerability, then our task is to rejoice in the glory of God made manifest in creation, and to tend to each other’s most vulnerable places. To try to make the world a place where anyone can walk through it with hearts and eyes as open as a baby’s.

When we surrender to our instincts as flawed human beings within a flawed human society, we assume that strength is violence, or at least force. We come to Synod prepared to force one another to conform to our particular vision of what it means to be Christian. And while we strategize and hold our councils and consolidate our power, God builds a place of strength founded upon the mouths of babes and infants. Our

society professes to cherish children--we care for them and tend to them and rack our souls to do our best by them—why can't we cherish each other? Why can't we treat each other as beings who are just as vulnerable and valuable and easily hurt and precious as children? That is what silences the enemy and the avenger that lives in each of us. When the image of God in you greets the image of God in me, when we both as human beings do the work for which we were created and commissioned, the work of tending to each other's vulnerabilities, that which is "enemy" in each of us gets a little bit quieter.

I think the dominion we are given as beings who are just a little lower than God looks a lot like what happens on my PICU every day. Each morning on the PICU the physicians and nurses and social workers and chaplains and others who are in charge of each patient's care move from patient to patient, learning what we can about who they are as people and about the terrifying vulnerability that has brought them to our unit. We tend to their thirst, their hunger in the forms that their bodies can handle. We tend to their pain and discomfort with gentle hands. We tend to their illness with all the wisdom and discernment and collaboration and hard-won skill we have available to us. We tend to their exhaustion, their histories of abuse, their spiritual anguish with all the listening we can muster. We tend to their siblings and their families with everything we know about development and coping and play. We aren't always perfect at it, and we aren't always as kind as it's possible for us to be, and we can't always help, but every morning we try again, and again the next morning, and again the next, tending to our own grief and

stress along the way. On my hardest days, when I see the tears of the nurse as she cares for an abused and battered child, I see the image of God present before me in creation. She's not holier than anyone else—none of us are—but she has found a work that will draw out of her the only strength that does any good in this world: the strength to keep caring, to keep tending to the vulnerable in the face of the worst humanity can do to one another and to creation. She has learned that dominion is not *Wielding Power Over*, but that it is responsibility, is love, is care, is appreciation and praise, is tending, is tenderness.

When the psalmist greets the LORD as “sovereign” in this psalm, the psalmist is making a radical claim about sovereignty itself. God is not sovereign because God is the strongest being in the universe or because God is capable of destroying. God is sovereign because God is Creator, because God has set God's hands to making beauty and crowning it with glory. And if there is any sovereignty in human beings, if we have any claim to dominion on this earth, it is only because our mouths are as capable of wide-open praise as the mouth of an eight month old baby cooing at a flower and then drooling on it with joy. We were all that baby once. We carry that baby inside us always, and it is the voice God invites from us when our instincts point us toward violence. That is the economy of real power in this universe, and to access it we must be suspicious of everything society ever told us was power, just as Christ made himself vulnerable on the cross.

God didn't crown us with glory and honor just to make us look good or to reward us for something we did. God crowned us with glory and honor to remind us who we are, and whose we are, and in whose image we were made, and whose image we see when we truly see each other. Like every other gift God gives us, that crown calls us out of our spiky defended corners and asks us to go out into a terrifying world with hearts as soft as baby fat.

I don't know whether or not our soft baby-fat hearts will be safe out there. I don't think they will be safe. Human beings can be so cruel. Sometimes we show up with our hearts soft and open, and we are met with racism or sexism or homophobia or straight up violence. It isn't fair when one person shows up to the table ready to see the image of God in the other, while the other refuses to return the courtesy. Showing up like that doesn't even always solve the problem. Sometimes our soft hearts go out into the world and promptly get trampled on. Yet I don't know any other way of living well upon the earth. I don't think we can build walls against the other and at the same time see that other as the image of God. Better to retreat when we need to, to draw on the love of God and our communities of support when we are wounded, and to go back out comforted to try it again. Better to have a soft and trampled heart, a heart that God can heal through time and love and tending, than a heart of stone.

So may God soften our hearts. May God walk closely with us through the mess of humanity and the ruin of creation. May God tease wonder out of our grief and love out

of our fear. May God invite praise from our lips and tenderness from our hands. May God bless our tired and terrified puffer fish souls with the will to risk getting hurt and with balm for our wounds. That is my prayer, for you and for me, today and every day.