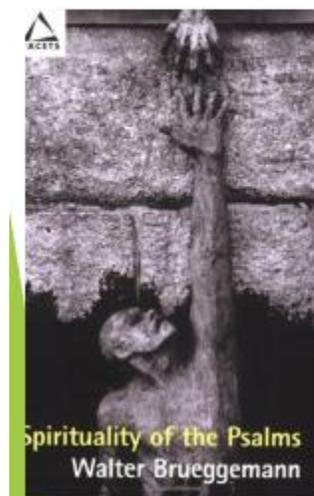


May 24, 2020 Psalm 8
Psalms of Orientation

The Lord be with you. As Liz said, we are taking the next three Sundays to spend a little time in the Psalms. You may have thought over the years, as you were reading them, “Is there not some structure, some rhyme or reason to this group of hap hazard writings?” That thought at least has crossed my mind. And yes, while you can divide and organize them into categories and subjects, perhaps another way to think about them is in terms of movement.

“The life of faith expressed in the Psalms is focused on the two decisive moves of faith that are always underway by which we are regularly surprised and which we regularly resist: out of a settled orientation into a season of disorientation, and from a context of disorientation to a new orientation.” (p. 9)



Old Testament scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann in his little book “Spirituality of the Psalms” suggests that perhaps a way to look at the Psalms is in the form of experience and movement from orientation to disorientation to reorientation. And when you think about it you realize that this is really what happens in life. We go through times in life where there are definite seasons, where there is the stability or orientation to life that feels pretty calm. And then there are times, seasons of life that are marked by disorientation / instability. Something happens and we are thrown completely off kilter. And then gradually, we move back toward stability. Sometimes these seasons last a long time. Sometimes they are brief. But I think Brueggemann is on to something here. The Psalms reflect life and more specifically, a life of faith as one travels through these different experiences and moments of orientation and disorientation. And as I think about my life, I realize that I have travelled through them more than once.

We are taking Brueggemann’s observation and using it as a frame of reference for these next three Sundays. Today I would like to think a little bit about the first category, orientation. Next Sunday Arnold Roth will lead us as we look at a psalm of disorientation and then the third Sunday, our congregational coach, Ron Guengrich will speak to us on reorientation. I hope that you might be blessed as we reflect on our lives of faith in light of these three very different types of Psalms that we experience at different points in our lives.

So for today, a Psalm of orientation. A couple of questions as we begin. Like first, what exactly is a Psalm of orientation? And perhaps the simplest way to answer that is to say that it is a psalm that

reflects profound gratitude and praise to God for a world that is well ordered, reliable and life giving. It results in profound trust as God presides over it. That's the big picture and we see it throughout a variety of Psalms.

And probably the first thing that comes to your mind are the psalms that contains imagery of nature. And you would be correct. The world is God's way of bestowing blessing on us. We encounter God's own Being in Creation and there is an orderliness to it. It sustains life providing for the needs of the day. And here are a few examples.

Ps. 8: "when I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers...."

Ps. 104: "God set the earth on its foundations..."

Ps. 145: "You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing...."

Another would involve our behavior. It is not so much Israel's "law" as it is our response as people as we pay attention and participate in God's ordered way of creation. And here would be a few examples.

Ps. 1: "the one who meditates on the law of the Lord is like a tree planted by streams of water yielding its fruit in season...."

Ps. 15: "Who may dwell in God's sanctuary? (list of behaviors that honor / live into relationships as God intended).

Ps. 24: "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it...."

Ps. 119: "I run the path of your commands for you have set my heart free...."

Another example of Psalms of Orientation would involve what we might call Wisdom Psalms which are more instructive in tone and Psalms of Well Being which refer to God in more subtle ways. So for example,

Ps. 14: "The fool says in their heart, 'there is no God....'"

Ps. 37: "Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for God...."

Ps. 131: "My heart is not proud O Lord.... my soul is still and quieted within me, like a weaned child with its mother..."

All of these point toward a world that is reliable and life giving. God has ordained it this way and is presiding over it.

Now, the second question I have would go like this. Is orientation an outcome of privilege? And this comes from the realization that I grew up in a stable family with a Christian faith that was important. And in so doing it has made it easier for me to see and experience God's orientation. It has led to choices that I've made that move toward orientation which has led to an ease of speaking of orientation as a sure thing. It is my experience.

But it certainly has not been everyone else's experience. If injustice and instability and abuse have been your experience and contradict this orderliness, how do these psalms connect? Do they connect with you? I don't have a good answer for that. Because I'm coming at it from a very different place than others I've known. If this seems like a weird thing to say in a sermon, this is just me trying to grapple with scripture and wanting to be careful that scripture is not at my service, justifying what I believe, but rather that I am at the service of scripture and what God might be trying to say through it in this moment.

In other words, I don't know everything. But I do welcome the wisdom that comes from folks who have encountered God in the midst of a different experience than mine. And I'm serious. I would welcome those conversations. Having said that, let's look at Psalm 8.

This psalm starts out with some familiar words. “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name.” There are several images in this psalm that I find intriguing, but I wonder, is there something that jumps out at you as you heard the words this time?



Perhaps it was the image of the heavenly night skies. If you get away from light pollution to dark sky country, it truly is amazing what one can see. Cheryl and I enjoy being up in Northern Michigan and the UP, camping along Lake Michigan or Lake Superior. You have set your glory in the heavens. ...the finger work of God. It is pretty phenomenal, pretty breath-taking. Is that what captures your attention?

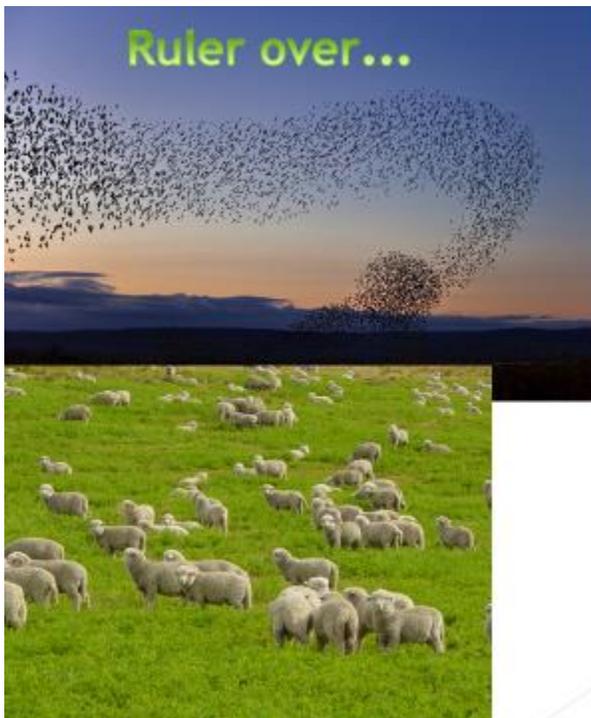
Through the praise of children



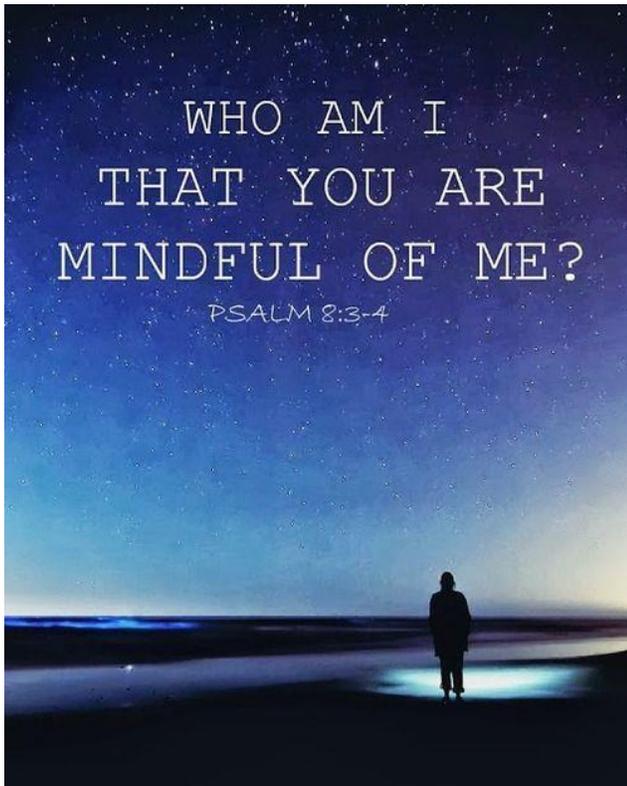
Or is it the line about the praise of children and infants...silencing foe and avenger alike. There is an image for you. I wonder what exactly that means.



Or what about the line that speaks of people like you and me having been made a little lower than the angels and being crowned with glory and honor? I wonder what that looks like?



Or that God has made us rulers over the works of God's hands. Flocks and herds, beasts of the field, birds in the air, fish in the sea; that seems pretty incredible. There is much to choose from here, such incredible imagery. So what stands out for you? What captures your imagination in this Psalm?



For me it is the phrase, and I'm paraphrasing here, "Lord, when I consider what you've done, who am I? Who am I that you would be mindful of me, that you would even care." Or, as the Hebrew suggests, who are we that you remember and visit us? Even more, who are we that you would give us a job, trust us with such a responsibility?

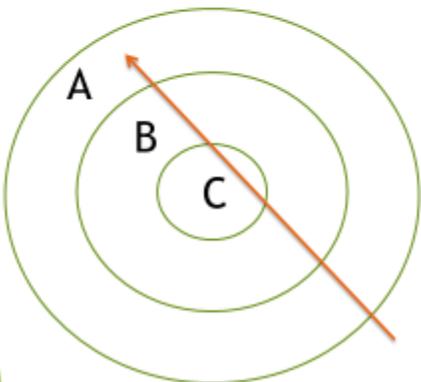
And I phrase it this way, personally more so than corporately because that has been an important question for me at different points in my life, in two different ways. "Who am I?" Dealing with feeling unworthy. Or phrasing it differently in terms of identity, "Who am I? And it leads me to ask the question, "I wonder how we hear this psalm of orientation at different points in our lives?" For example, did I hear these words differently at 35 or 55 than I did at 15? And how will I hear them at 85 if I live that long?

And here is something else. Did you notice the flow of this psalm? The symmetrical structure with which it is written? It looks like this:

- A – Doxology / expression of praise to God (v. 1a)
- B - God's work (v. 1b – 3)
- C - Who am I? (v. 4 – 5)
- B - God's work (v. 6 - 8)
- A – Doxology / expression of praise to God (v. 9)

Flow of Psalm 8

- ▶ A – Doxology / expression of praise to God
- ▶ B - God's work
- ▶ C - Who am I?
- ▶ B - God's work
- ▶ A – Doxology / expression of praise to God



If we were to stand this structure on its head and look down on it I think it would look something like this. Concentric circles with the seeming energy of this psalm starting on the outside ring and flowing to the inside ring and then back out again. There is movement in this psalm. There is a sense of traveling from one thing to the next much like we are talking about the movement from orientation to disorientation to reorientation. Except, this movement is happening all within the understanding and context of orientation.

And maybe that is our first clue. Whether you are talking about seasons of orientation or disorientation, we are not meant to be stagnant. I say this simply because we were created by a God who is not bound by stagnation. And I keep coming back to my question, “Who am I that God was mindful of me? And does that question mean different things at different points in our lives?”

For example, at 15 I am a gangly teenager and I had heard this psalm before, many times in fact as I was growing up in church or at family devotions at the breakfast table. I enjoyed the night skies, the beauty of the stars....and if lightning and thunderstorms were rolling in to cover those star lite nights, even better.



But at 15, God’s crowning glory of making me a little lower than the angels meant having a car with an 8 track tape player. And yes, it wasn’t much of a car, but that was my identity. My faith was my family’s faith. “O Lord, our Lord.” That meant our family. How majestic is your name? It would have been more majestic God if I could have had that ’69 AMC Javelin with the high rise cam in the engine and 60 series tires on the back. But apparently you gave me the wrong father for that kind of car and so here I am with this sensible and boring 1964 Ford Falcon.

It felt like a real injustice at the time, things not going my way. But the first real season of disorientation was a handful of years away yet. And life was good. It was stable. But yet, I was aware that there was more to life than just my car and the identity that it gave me. It came in part from these words of the Psalmist...but also my parents.

James Mays in his commentary on Psalms reminds us that “human beings have an office in the world ... the generic human being is an official in the administrative arrangement of the kingdom of God.” (p. 65). My parents weren’t using a commentary when I was growing up but they surely drilled that into my mind.



Time passes....years. I'm 38 here, our youngest son was just born and I'm feeling pretty confident in my role as husband, father and pastor. Surely I'm doing God's work now. Having outgrown my need for a fast car that gets poor gas mileage, I'm caring for the part of creation that you have given to me God. These things give me my identity. Who am I? This is who I am. They are such good things God. And I'm doing my best. I use this Psalm to lead in worship. But it's different than when I was 15. Michael W. Smith has come out with his song based on this Psalm, number 112 in our new Mennonite hymnal and we sing it at the top of our lungs in worship. Surely this is what it means to praise you God. O Lord, our Lord is wrapped up in the communal life of living in a small town in Kansas predominately filled with Mennonites. A little narrow and ingrown at times, but life is good.

More time passes, years. A lot of years of living. A lot of years at pastoring. But none of it prepared me for.....



Cancer and chemo. A lot of chemo. I had walked through the valley of cancer with many people. I'd buried many because of cancer. But now it was me, my family. Only one of several disorienting seasons in my life. Who am I now? A husband? A father? A pastor? A cancer survivor? All of those feel really inadequate. Maybe the simple way to answer that is to quote a phrase from Brueggemann of where the Psalms lead us, which I'm guessing that Arnold and Ron will give voice too as well.

I am, we are, “surprised by a new gift from God, a new coherence made present to us just when we thought all was lost.” (p. 11)

Maybe a way to speak of orientation is to mention a few things that I learned, like:

- I was touched by a broken world
- There was nothing I could do, I needed something from outside myself.
- Only by standing on the shoulders of Christ and others could I survive...grace.

- The real answer to “Who am I”? whether you are talking about identity or feeling worthy I am.... made alive. Whether in life or death, God has prepared good works as a way of life for me in this world and the next. I am an “official in the administrative arrangement of the kingdom of God.” And so are you.
- For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God created beforehand to be our way of life. Eph. 2:10

Flow of Psalm 8 / Toward Orientation

- ▶ “Adonai” / “My Lord“
- ▶ The Sovereign One.... who is mindful of us in our lowly estate.
- ▶ The Sovereign One.... who stands at the gates of life and death so we don't have to go through them alone.
- ▶ The Sovereign One....who exists in the cosmos ordering and reordering so that chaos doesn't prevail.
- ▶ “Our Lord” means that I am a part of a larger whole / people having faith and hope when I couldn't.

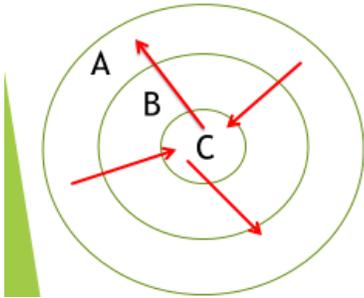


I find that what I learned is what gets at the core of the meaning of a Psalm of Orientation. “O Lord, our Lord” now is closer to the Hebrew A-do-nai, or my Lord...the Sovereign One who has been mindful of me in my lowly estate.

- The One who stands at the gates of life and death so we don't have to go through them alone.
- The One who exists in the cosmos, ordering and reordering so that chaos does not prevail.
- “Our Lord” now means more than family or cultural milieu that I might live in, whether good or bad.
- It now means tangible people who had hope and faith on my behalf when I wasn't able too.
- It now means tangible people who cared when I found it impossible.
- O Lord, our Lord. It means that am part of a larger whole. A part of the cosmos that God has put into place. It is so much more than anything I might own, so much more than any role I might have, no matter how good or noble it might be.

Flow of Psalm 8 / Reveals the Structure of the Cosmos and how they Reverberate

- ▶ A - Doxology / expression of praise to God (anchor)
 - ▶ B - God's work
 - ▶ C - Who I am! (anchor)
 - ▶ B - God's work
 - ▶ A - Doxology / expression of praise to God (anchor)
- Mutual Regard



In many ways, the structure of Psalm 8 mirrors the structure of the cosmos and the structure of our lives, lives that have the possibility of experiencing orientation. God and humanity anchor it and like a tuning fork, animate the structure of the psalm. The praise of God frames and encompasses the world from beginning to end; and, at the structural center, humanity. And as I mentioned earlier, this is not static; far from it. The mutual regard, and this is really important, the mutual regard between God and humanity that you see in this psalm connects and animates these two points of the psalm: God, from the outside, looks

inward toward humanity with care and concern. Amen to that. And humanity, from the middle, looks outward toward God in praise. The entire psalm reverberates, like an echo chamber or a tuning fork of divine love and human adoration, back and forth, back and forth throughout time whether you are 15 or 35 or 55 or 85.

Orientation is found in rhythmic response between God and you and I.

O Lord Our Lord, how majestic is your name. Indeed. May you know and experience God's orientation, no matter whatever age you may be right now. Amen.