

May 22 2016

Scripture Lessons

Psalm 8

John 16:12-15

Sermon *God – Near and Far*

God is said to be both immanent and transcendent. On one hand, by immanent, theologians mean that God's presence is capable of being felt. That God can be experienced subjectively. You might imagine this attribute of God as God being your closest friend, your confidant, the one you can trust for everything. What this means is that you can feel God with you, that you can experience the presence of God in your everyday life. It implies that God is busy in this created world on a personal level with people. It means that you may have a personal relationship with God and that the proper response to God is love. You might call this immanent God—the "Holy Spirit."

We also say that God is transcendent. By transcendent, on the other hand, theologians mean that God may also be somewhat distant. We might imagine this attribute of God as being like a king. We might imagine that God is on God's distant throne-in charge of everything; all powerful, all wise; that God is somehow beyond the limits of human understanding and experience; that God is above and independent of the material universe. This view of God almost objectifies God into something unapproachable by mere humans. The greatness of God's own being is comprehensible. God created the universe and its laws; and is so powerful that God is to be feared more than loved. God is out there, not here with us.

We all know that God is both immanent and transcendent...but, it is transcendence that we experience in today's scripture reading; especially in verses 3 & 4,---see & read Psalm 8

When I was in the 4th & 5th grades it was my fancy to someday to be astronomer. I learned the order of the planets and anything else I could about space. When I was in high school I would walk out at night to a hill some distance from the farmstead and watch the summer sky. The sky had captivated my imagination for years. Viewing it's wonder left me in awe, but never more than when I was gazing upward on a cold winter night. There is a clarity to the winter sky unlike any other time of the year. It may be the cold sharp air, but each heavenly body is boldly displayed against the blackness of the sky with such definition that one cannot help but feel small and insignificant.

Two aspects of human existence are highlighted in this Psalm. There is, first the human sense of insignificance when confronted with the awesome reality of the created order. Whoever wrote verses 3 & 4 must have seen the heavens on some

clear, crystal, Palestinian night and, being overwhelmed by the vastness and beauty, wondered where humans fit into the scheme of things.

A second affirmation arising from this Psalm centers on humankind's high status in the created order—"a little less than God" with "dominion over" creation. Humans are thus the intermediates between the heavenly and the non-human world.

The first of these concepts has, if anything, become even more intense since the writing of the Psalmist. At that time the earth was believed flat, under a dome which carried the sun, moon and stars. Before Galileo the earth was the center of the universe, but his theories moved the scientific world from a geocentric model to a heliocentric model where the sun was believed to be the center of the universe. Scientists no longer believe this to be the case, because we now recognize that our solar system is but a small part of the universe. The progression of the center from earth, to sun, to ever greater distances from our own living space has made God feel to us even more transcendent than before. On the other hand, the experiences people have with God bolster a feeling of God's immanence.

One of the philosophical proofs of God's existence is the argument from design, what is called the teleological argument. In arguing that there is a design in creation, one implies that there is a designer. The proof of design was one of Thomas Aquinas's famous five ways of proving the existence of God. Aquinas believed that reflection on quite familiar features of the world affords ample evidence of God's existence.

William Paley argued that if you were crossing a field and found a stone one might think that it had been there forever, but if one found a watch one would assume it had been built by someone, a watchmaker. He wonders why people assume the watch could not have been there forever. It must be, he says, because one can take apart the watch and through examination see that it was built for a purpose. He says, that upon close examination one can say the same about the stone. There is a continuity of design that holds the stone together.....

Whenever I read this week's psalm, I regret my limited vision. I think the psalmist glimpsed the complexity and intricacy of creation, the wonder of space and time that cannot be expressed in words or pictures, but might be apparent to an Einstein or Stephen Hawking. When I was young I could not see 'the beauty' in the great expanses of wheat fields or the straight roads leading to the horizon. I yearned for mountains, rocks, rushing streams and winding roads. But even when I wished that I had been born in Colorado, or Wyoming, or Montana, I could always see God's handiwork in the sky. The psalmist, I think would appreciate in the broad sweep of the Kansas horizon, the sheer immensity of the sky. What when we lived in Montana called 'the Big Sky'.

In 1992, when I moved to the large urban expanse of the Dallas-Ft. Worth metropolis, I thought, "I'll never be able to just step outside and see the sky. The city

lights obscured the star”. With that thought there was an underlying thread which says, “I’ll be cut off from God.” Then when I could see those stars that managed to outshine the city lights, or when I saw the moon rise high and triumphant over the Metropolis, I knew that I was seeing the work of God’s fingers, even in the city.

Here in Newport, we are fortunate to be able to see the stars often.

The sight of the night sky makes mystics of all of us. Yahweh brought Abram outside and said, “Look toward the heaven and number the stars, if you are able to number.” Genesis 15:5 Of course, he could not, yet Abram received a promise. His grandson Jacob saw the heavens open, with angels ascending and descending. He, too, received a promise. The magi saw a star and followed it. And the shepherds were the first to hear the “Good News” when they saw the sky illumined over the hills near Bethlehem.

It is almost as if God is saying, ‘plant fields, build roads and houses cover the earth with your own little creations, pollute and deface if you must; but then look up and see the heavens, the works of my fingers, the moon and the stars which I have established. Look up, and pay attention.’”

.....You might see what Abram and Jacob saw, the cosmic intricacies that guided ancient mariners and land travelers on their journeys, or the source of the inspiration of young romantics....signs from the sky guided wise men from the east and overwhelmed those grubby and unlettered shepherds on the Judean hillside. Pay attention, and you might encounter God.....

We live in a place where the sky is not dimmed too much by the reflected lights. The night sky near Newport approaches the clarity, blackness, and brilliance suggested in the Psalm. I want to see the sky unmolested by humans so that I can revel in the miracles performed by God’s fingers in creation.

The psalmist said, “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?”

I know why I am in awe. It is because I have seen the work of God’s fingers. And for a little time I know who I am. I know my place.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, we are but a speck of your creation, yet we trust you for everything. We are at your mercy, but it has promised to us. We know that you are love and power. We do not understand your concern for us, but are grateful for it. Sometimes we feel the embrace of your immanent presence and at other times we are in awe of your transcendence and power over everything. We ask that you might let us know both intellectually and experientially. Be with us now, we ask. Amen.