

Genesis 1:1 – 2: 4a
Psalm 8
Matthew 28: 16-20

Human Dignity
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I have just spent some time in the Eastern Sierra Mountains in California. Specifically, I was on the Mount Whitney Main Trail on Tuesday, trying to summit the 14,500 foot peak. And we made it to the top! There is nothing that makes you feel quite as small as a big mountain, and nothing that makes you feel quite as “elevated” as standing at the top. Breathless, elated, and at the same time, knowing that you are a little speck on the landscape. Maybe some of you have had this feeling while sailing out on the ocean, or flying high in the atmosphere.

There is a feeling of this paradox in the words of Psalm 8 that we heard earlier. Gazing upward at the beautiful night sky, the Psalmist asks God, “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” We are tiny, fragile specks compared to the moon and the mountains, and yet we are crowned with honor and glory, we have a special place in the hierarchy of living things. This is wonderful, and this is daunting. What are human beings? We are the creatures who ask such questions, who ponder over ourselves, who wonder about meanings. As far as we know, no other being on earth shares in these concerns.

The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (who wrote the well-known serenity prayer) also wrote, “Man has always been his own most vexing problem.” This, of course, written before we worried whether woman might be her own most vexing problem.

We are vexed, from time to time. What are human beings? Who are we? Questions of identity lead to questions of purpose. Each of you will ask and answer these conundrums with your own actions and your own professions and avocations. Our Scriptures give us some sense of our shared human purpose.

The Book of Genesis is full of stories that help us to puzzle this out. It is not a history exactly, and certainly not a science book, but a meandering series of word pictures. We start with 2 creation stories: today we read the first one, which scholars actually believe was composed later than the second one. It is a hymn to the God who ordered the universe as a place of blessing. In contrast to many of the creation myths of the surrounding empires, which were violent and bloody, these Hebrews depicted a divine Spirit hovering and infusing everything around them. And God does not just create: God actively responds to and enjoys this world. Over and over again we hear of goodness: “God saw that the light was good” - “God saw that Land and seas were good” - “God saw that vegetation was good” - “God saw that the Sun, moon, and stars were good” - “God saw that living creatures and birds were good” - “God saw that livestock and wild animals were good” – and finally, after creating humankind in the divine image, and blessing humanity, God saw that everything was *very* good. The worth and the dignity of those first humans is clear – they are the icing on the cake, the cherry on the sundae, the pinnacle of creation.

Stuck in to this stately epic about the orderliness and goodness of the world are God's instructions to the first humans – so we listen attentively here for a clue to the vexing problem of being human. And we hear: “Be fruitful and multiply, till the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over all animal life.” The second creation story tells of Adam and Eve and the apple, but I think that seeds of sin and conflict were actually planted in these instructions. As with any instructions, it is so easy to go to extremes, and to take them out of context.

So what are human beings? Are we baby machines – is multiplication of the species our most important function? The mandate to be fruitful may have looked one way thousands of years ago, when having **enough** children in the tribe was not a given, when disease and danger whittled away at the population. In our time, in our place, we can rejoice over the birth of a child, not as a necessity, but as a gift and a sacred trust.

Are we dominators of nature? Psalm 8 says that God has put all things under our feet – every animal on the planet is ours to use and to subdue. The freedom to manipulate nature may have looked one way thousands of years ago on a subsistence farm in ancient Israel. Tilling the hard stony ground, subduing it, making it yield enough to keep a family from starvation: this was a matter of survival. No one could have envisioned the kind of dominion we would learn over the centuries, so that in our time we take our control for granted. Endless fields of wheat, as far as the eye can see, giving us – Wonder Bread. Chicken nuggets from massive chicken factory farms. We subdue, we multiply. We exercise dominion over the flora and fauna of the world not because we are created in God's image, but just because we can. In our place, in our time, we would do well to remember that nature is not an object, but a gift and a sacred trust.

Mark Twain said: "The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why." Twain is known for his rather glib pronouncements, but he is naming a truth here. I would just amend it to say that those important days are happening all the time, and need to happen all the time. We are being re-born when we find new life and new orientations in the transitions of life. And we find out why we were born over and over again as well – each time we find a connection, a relationship, a purpose that resonates with our deepest hungers. All of this reveals both human dignity and human vulnerability.

In our time, as we grow in power over nature and over our neighbors, our weakness is revealed. Misuse of dominion and authority mars the goodness of God's creation and leads to conflict with the humanity loved by Jesus. Misunderstanding God's generosity in power-sharing makes us selfish. But we can re-learn the goodness and responsibility given to us. Maybe each of us needs those moments of wonder on mountain tops to get a perspective on our true size and dignity. The Psalmist sings: “you have crowned mortals with glory and honor.” We have the status of kings and queens. God sings at creation, “This earth is yours to care for.” We have the status of humble workers on the land. Jesus calls, “Go and make disciples.” We have the status of teachers. Our glory is also our responsibility: our responsibility to use all kinds of power in loving and creative ways.

There are many ways to understand that first chapter of Genesis, which has less to do with events of the past than understanding the present. Here is Rabbi Gellman's retelling of that chapter (from his book Does God Have a Bog Toe?):

Before there was anything, there was God, a few angels, and a huge swirling glob of rocks and water with no place to go. The angels asked God, "Why don't you clean up this mess?" So God collected rocks from the huge swirling glob and put them together in clumps and said, "Some of these clumps of rocks will be planets, and some will be stars, and some of these rocks will be . . . just rocks."

Then God collected water from the huge swirling glob and put it together in pools of water and said, "Some of these pools of water will be oceans, and some will become clouds, and some of the water will be..just water."

Then the angels said, "Well, God, it's neater now, but is it finished?" And God answered: "NOPE!" On some of the rocks God placed growing things, and creeping things, and things that only God knows what they are, and when God had done all this, the angels asked God, "Is the world finished now?" And God answered: "NOPE!"

God made a man and a woman from some of the water and dust and said to them, "I am tired now. Please finish up the world for me — really it's almost done." But the man and woman said, "We can't finish the world alone! You have the plans, and we are too little."

"You are big enough," God answered them. "But I agree to this. If you keep trying to finish the world, I will be your partner."

The man and the woman asked, "What's a partner?" and God answered, "A partner is someone you work with on a big thing that neither of you can do alone. If you have a partner, it means that you can never give up, because your partner is depending on you. On the days you think I am not doing enough and on the days I think you are not doing enough, even on those days we are still partners and we must not stop trying to finish the world. That 's the deal." And they all agreed to that deal.

Then the angels asked God, "Is the world finished yet?" and God answered, "I don't know. Go ask my partners."

Thank God for this gift – this partnership in dignity. Amen.