

Anchored in the Storm

Message #4 – “Imago Dei: Providing Identity”
Psalm 8; Genesis 1:26-28; Colossians 3:9-10
St. Paul’s United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown
January 24, 2021

Pastor John Marcott

Psalm 8

- ¹ *Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory in the heavens.*
- ² *Through the praise of children and infants
you have established a stronghold against your enemies,
to silence the foe and the avenger.*
- ³ *When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,*
- ⁴ *what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?*
- ⁵ *You have made them a little lower than God
and crowned them with glory and honor.*
- ⁶ *You made them rulers over the works of your hands;
you put everything under their feet:*
- ⁷ *all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild,*
- ⁸ *the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea,
all that swim the paths of the seas.*
- ⁹ *Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! (Psalm 8:1-9)*

INSIGNIFICANCE

Wow. Did you ever realize that the feeling of insignificance was not simply a *modern* phenomenon? You would think that with all the advances in science and with the advent of space travel, that only modern people could *truly* appreciate our *smallness* in comparison to the *enormity* of the universe! However, this poem found among the ancient songs of Israel expresses the same, very ‘modern’ sentiment. Maybe the wisdom of Israel isn’t so far off either, when it said, ‘*There’s nothing new under the sun*’ (**Ecclesiastes 1:9**)?

Have you ever felt ‘lost in the Cosmos’? For the last three decades the Hubble Space Telescope has been sending infrared images of faint galaxies perhaps 12 billion light years away (that’s 12 billion times 6 trillion miles)! Even within our galaxy there are systems containing stars with a combined luminosity *five million times brighter than our sun!* You heard me: **FIVE MILLION TIMES BRIGHTER THAN OUR SUN!** Okay, has your mind exploded yet?

But, let’s come down to earth a bit, a little closer to home and talk about our own experience. As you’ve stared out at a beautiful sunset or looked up at the stars on a clear autumn evening (just as the Hebrew poet did), have you ever wondered? -

- ³ *When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,*
- ⁴ *what is mankind that you are mindful of them,*

human beings that you care for them? (Psalm 8:3-4)

The sheer vastness of the night sky – does it compound your sense of apparent insignificance? Does it make you feel negligibly small? Maybe the stars and moon do speak to you about the glory, grandeur and greatness of God...but, what does it say about men and women? What does it say about *you* and *me*?

IDENTITY

As we ask those questions, do you notice that there is a slight misstep in the logic behind that question about humankind? Probably not. That's because it's a mistake we **all** make..and we make it **all** the time. Let me explain the misstep clearly: the question attempts to establish human beings' identity and significance by their surroundings. The surrounding world is great and wondrous....and quite frankly, we're not....so, why do we matter? Here is the mistake spelled out:

We can't derive our sense of IDENTITY from our surroundings.

What do I mean by saying we all make the same mistake? Let me show what I mean by way of a challenge I faced many years ago. And, let me ask you, 'How would you handle this?'

I was still single when I was asked to preach on the benefits of Singleness in 1 Corinthians 7. Okay, I honestly don't remember much feedback on the sermon itself; but after the sermon I received a barrage of blind date proposals. The first was the most intriguing: I was told "I have a friend, she heard your sermon and she'd like to meet you, but not in person, she'd like to strike up a friendship through writing or emailing." Okay, I wondered, how would I go about presenting myself without my good-looks, or my endearing humility, my irresistible charm, or my quick-wit? [*by the way, yes, that was intended as a joke; but I have to admit that I'm a little hurt by how hard you're laughing!*]

How would I convey who I was? Given a situation like that - What would *you* include in your first letter?

- Would you start off with **what you do**? Whether a student, an accountant, a pastor or retired? Now, that's natural and understandable; but what we DO is not the same as our identity.
- Would you include **a short history of your life**? Would you tell of your family? Well, we are in many ways the product of our upbringing and formative experiences, but again, that doesn't equal personal identity.
- Would you tell of **your personal struggles in life**? If you have a past....I think all of us would agree, some of the most influential experiences in life are the hard ones, but we are not identical or to be identified by our struggles. We are not our past; and we are not defined by our struggles or failures.
- Would you tell of **your pet-peeves**? This is almost the opposite of the first answer – defining ourselves by what we do; here we talk about what we don't do. "I don't smoke, or drink or.....a whole list of things that you're against is how some-people identify themselves. Many Christians too often define themselves by what they're against, but, just as what we do does not define who we are neither does what we don't do define us.

- Would you tell of **significant relationships and friends?** For many of us it is relationships that we cherish the most. However, our identities are not bound up with the approval and/or disapproval of friends.

Okay, these are all perfectly good examples of trying to explain who we are by our surroundings – what is outside us. Let me try to make this clear: This is not just an issue for teenagers who are trying to ‘find themselves’ nor even just college-age newbies to the workforce trying to find their place or pursue their dreams, or make their mark. It’s true for all of us. Let me illustrate by an experience I had in seminary.....

As I walked into class one afternoon, Dr. Roy Bell, Professor of Pastoral theology at Carey Hall in Vancouver, was writing on the chalkboard. He had numbered 24 different items. He explained that each word represented a major motivation, which when he read the item off the board, he wanted us to raise our hands if we identified it as a significant motive in our actions.

So, he started by reading aloud, “#1. Achievement-oriented,” and then turned, counted the 25 raised hands and logged the total 25 next to #1. He preceded to follow this process for each number, reading out the motivation, counting the upraised hands and then cataloging the total next to the number. The only departure from this routine was when he arrived on #15, which was ‘people-pleaser’. After scanning the room, taking note of the 3 of us who had raised our hands and writing 3 after #15, he turned to the class and said, “If you were all honest, you would have all raised your hands. Studies show that for 99% of all people, ‘people-pleasing’ is a major motivation. I thought to myself, “Oh, I hope he saw I that I was honest and raised my hand!” (proving to me by my very inner thoughts what a people-pleaser I was!). If we’re honest with ourselves we’ll take note of our motives and see how we tend to find our identity in things external to us. And, this is crucial for all of us because

All of us will be ruled by where we derive our identity from.

See, here’s the resultant problem:

Surroundings can change:

- If you derive your identity from what you do: Many of us derive our self-worth from a job well done, achievements, success. However, we can feel lost when laid-off, or transferred, or retired.....

Surroundings can change:

- If you derive your identity from secure, affirming, loving relationships....this is not a bad thing, but relationships can morph, or end, through relocation, maturity, drift, age, death...when they do are you left without a clear identity?

Surroundings can change:

- If we rely on positive emotional feedback, reacting to affirmation, criticism; then you’ll know the highs and lows and we know they can vary moment to moment....and identity and value will ride the waves!

You see all surroundings will eventually collapse because they are unreliable foundations upon which to rest our identities....

But our psalm itself gives us a clue as to where our identity is to be found – and it is not found in anything that surrounds us on the horizontal plane. Rather, our identities are given to us by God, who defines us vertically. And this is an unshakable basis for a secure identity.

**Surroundings change.
What God says is more stable and more glorious
than what we can derive from any surroundings.**

Here's how the question is answered -

INFRASTRUCTURE

*⁵You have made them a little lower than God
and crowned them with glory and honor.*

⁶You made them rulers over the works of your hands...(Psalm 8:5-6a)

In answer to 'God, why do you care about puny humans?' the poet supplies God's own answer: "*⁵You have made them a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor*" (**Psalm 8:5**). This echoes what God said in the original creation story: "*Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness...*" (**Genesis 1:26**). We are not defined by anything surrounding us, we're defined by our Creator. By our creation and by our composition: namely, made **by** God; made **LIKE** God. He didn't choose to make a colossal statue of Himself to display His immensity; No, He chose to make us and He deemed "little us" more LIKE Him than anything else he made.

***Whenever we forget God's high estimation of us,
we look for significance in all the wrong places
to find some form of identity replacement.***

Most often we seek the estimation and approval of others...forgetting the clear statement of God.

So, when we look at Creation we see God's glory – his love for colors, variety, grandeur, noticing awesome gestures and subtle shades.... Looking out and about creation is like walking through an art museum and gasping at the wonders and beauty of the artwork. But, right before you exit, the tour guide takes you aside and explains – the Artist whose work you've been admiring - that's your Father, and you're just like him!

Ultimately, who I am is not about me; nor is my identity found in my surroundings. The key to my identity is found in God. **Not within, not around but from above.**

Not within - my identity is not simply self-discovery.

Not around – I don't draw my significance from what surrounds me.

From above – God defines my identity.

Our Creator made you and me, as the psalmist puts it, "*a little lower than God.*" Okay, that sounds like a little negative way to put it - but listen to what it says: ***we're almost God! We're as god-like as they come!*** Can you think of a higher compliment? Well...actually....YES!

IT ONLY GETS BETTER!

Both Pastor David and Pastor Matt drove home the point that we've messed up the image of God built into us – not so badly that it is erased, but as Pastor David put it, it is 'graffitied'. Pastor Matt emphasized forcefully that the damage done by Adam and by sin is devastating; but, as devastating as its impact is, it can't come close to compare to the restoration that is available through Jesus Christ – who is the True Image and restores that Image of God in us.

The 4th Century theologian, **Athanasius** had a lovely illustration to help us appreciate Christ as the true image of God who restores the image of God in us. He said, "Adam was like a beautiful portrait painting. On him, the image of God was drawn." When he sinned however, that portrait was ruined. Still resembling God for sure, but now also very unlike God - he'd become vicious, selfish, unholy. And so, the image, the painting was ruined. So, how could this precious portrait be restored? **Well, the problem was, there was nobody who knew what the portrait had originally looked like. They couldn't restore it. To restore it, you had to know God. You had to know what He's like. Otherwise, you could never know what the image of God should look like.** There was only one hope. The original subject of the portrait had to come and have His likeness redrawn on the canvas of humanity. Only the One whose likeness was originally drawn on Adam could restore and renew it. **And so, the God Himself came.** He took on humanity to renew His image in it. He came and showed us the image of God in the flesh. In Christ alone could humanity be restored from this "dehumanized version." Only He, the image of God Himself, could rehumanize us. Only in Him could we, as Paul puts it in **Colossians 3:10**,

"put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator."

Our only hope of wholeness is in Christ, the image of God. Humanity can be restored nowhere else.

This issue of deriving our IDENTITY from what God says might seem like a very basic, 'we've heard it before', concept. However, these are truths that will revolutionize our lives **if** we remember them. If we actually make the effort to build our lives and identities on these truths. You see, God has so much more in store for you than you simply being nice to others, or making you feel good about yourself or being available to call for help when you hit a snag or crisis in life. God has such high aspirations for you – and we will delve into this next week when we finish up what is in this psalm. But to accomplish this you need to have this firm foundational truth at the center of your life.

This truth is foundational. Like buttoning up a shirt. When you start buttoning from the bottom, if you get the first button wrong, you might only realize the mistake when you get to the top bottom, but in fact, you'll never get it right if you get the first button wrong. Resting your identity on God's Word and not anything surrounding you is a FIRST BUTTON TRUTH. This comes first.

**Surroundings change.
What God says is more stable and more glorious
than what we can derive from any surroundings.**

We need to intentionally install God's definition of us as His image - created like God and recreated by Jesus – to secure our identity daily. DON'T FORGET WHAT GOD SAY ABOUT YOU -

YOU ARE LIKE GOD
YOU ARE LOVED
YOU ARE VALUABLE
YOU ARE FORGIVEN WITH A LOVE THAT IS SHOCKINGLY DEEP

Let me give you a challenge for this week. If you are able to take a walk outside at night, take with you a Bible and a light. If you have a cellphone with a Bible App on it, that's all you need. Otherwise, take your Bible and a flashlight. Find somewhere where you have an unobstructed view of the night sky, hopefully away from distractions and noise. Look up at the sky and take in as much as you can. Then read aloud Psalm 8. Join the psalmist in his praise. Let the words of the psalm wash over you...in the presence of the grandeur and glory of God's creation, feel your comparative smallness. But then let God's statement about how you are wash over you. Then, realize, "I'm not small or insignificant because God says otherwise." And the, picture in your mind's eye the cross. No more memorable portrait of the love of God and His valuing you has ever been painted. We are not only designated for royal responsibility by being created in the image of God; beyond a shadow of a doubt we are loved like the very children of a loving God who can't let go of us – to the point of dying to win us back. If you are unable to leave your house, find a quiet time of the day - free of noise or distraction – and read aloud Psalm 8, picture the sky or your favorite scene of nature and picture the cross. Remind yourself of what God says you are.

I want to close in prayer using a mash up of two songs I love. You may recognize them, or at least one of them....one is a traditional hymn, one is a contemporary Christian song, but they combine to convey what Psalm 8 says to us....

*I keep fighting voices in my mind that say I'm not enough
Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart...
Every single lie that tells me I will never measure up
Thou my best thought, by day or by night
waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.
Am I more than just the sum of every high and every low?
Remind me once again just who I am because I need to know:
Thou my great Father, and I Thy true child
Thou in me dwelling and I with Thee one
You say I am loved when I can't feel a thing;
Riches I heed not, nor vain, empty praise
Thou mine inheritance, now and always!
Thou and Thou only first in my heart -
High King of heaven, my treasure Thou art.
You say I am strong when I think I am weak;
High King of heaven, my victory won
May I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's Sun
And when I don't belong, You say I am Yours
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall
Still be my vision, O Ruler of all! Amen.*