

Crowned With Grandeur
A Sermon by Rev. Laura Mariko Cheifetz
for More Light Sunday
June 7, 2020
Psalm 8

LORD, our Lord, how majestic
is your name throughout the earth!
You made your glory higher than heaven!

When everything is going to hell in a handbasket, sometimes the last shred of hope, of faith, is this reminder. If nothing else, God's name is majestic. If we were to pull our bleary eyes up and out of the awfulness of now, it would be to acknowledge just this.

God is the only subject in this psalm. The name of God is not actually "God." "God" is standing in for the name. In the Jewish tradition, the name is so sacred, it is never said out loud. Without those diacritic marks in the ancient texts, we do not know how to pronounce the tetragrammaton. Instead, "lord" or "the name" is used. We with our buddy Christs mistake intimacy with God for a God we can understand. God knows each hair on our head, but God also separated the heavens from the earth. It is in this vein that we understand the only actor in this drama is God. God is too holy to name, but yet:

³ When I look up at your skies,
at what your fingers made—
the moon and the stars
that you set firmly in place—
⁴ what are human beings
that you think about them;
what are human beings
that you pay attention to them?

What wondrous love is this?

Seriously. We are not that great. Total depravity and the admonitions of the prophets aside, look at us. We are a mess. And yet, God is mindful of little ol' us. Not just God's chosen people, either, not just Israel. The words for "human beings" and "mortals" is flesh, members of the human race.

In fact, the psalmist sings,

⁵ You've made them only slightly less than divine,
crowning them with glory and grandeur.

Glory and grandeur are terms typically reserved for monarchs. By the time of this writing, kingship was no longer in practice. Here, it is all humanity in the place of kings.

This would be great if we treated all humanity like humans.

Historically, considering humanity like kings hasn't gone well, which might say something about kings, or about humans. Humans, particularly white European humans, have taken this to mean they were the closest to God, and as a result, simplistically speaking, they get to do whatever they want to everyone else. Equating non-white people as animalistic and primitive, and considering creation to be property to produce wealth instead of a beloved family member, or even as vital parts of an ecosystem, hasn't gone well for us. After all, now we see people as means to an end, whose bodies provide the fodder for a growing S&P and how we measure our GDP. This country rolls right over the bodies of the lesser-than in the pursuit of property.

How easy is it in the majority-white North American church to proclaim:

LORD, our Lord, how majestic
is your name throughout the earth!

And then continue on our merry way, as our siblings are trampled under the greater good of a "healthy" economy.

We are separated by... a lot. By a pandemic. By virtual gatherings. By social divisions that have become real. By wealth gaps, educational access chasms, unequal opportunities, discrimination in the workplace, over-policing, under-resourcing, misusing the powers of social workers and DCFS, food insecurity, restrictions on who can adopt or who can access health benefits, the criminalization of poverty, the criminalization of migration, what qualifies as essential healthcare when it comes to reproductive health and gender identity, gaps in legal accountability for non-indigenous people in and around reservations, by whose

death matters more than their life in the national consciousness, by whose gender expression is more acceptable than others, by whose relationship is normative enough to fit into our church communities, whose family structures are recognizable and respectable, whose body fits our preconceived notions of what a body should look like or act like. We are separated from our siblings in other countries, who we do not trust to govern themselves, so we have invaded them, destabilized their societies, displaced their elected leaders, trained their most brutal dictators, sent our teenage mission teams to build houses they are perfectly qualified to build themselves, exported our deadly homophobia to become policy in their countries. We LGBTQIA folx are separated from one another, by those benefiting from conformity to heteropatriarchal norms where equal property rights and benefits are sufficient, making the racism and poverty and transphobic violence experienced by our siblings the causes our community tackles after the wealthiest and most powerful get our marriage rights.

We are not doing great at embodying the psalmist's song that each person is crowned with glory and grandeur.

The psalmist isn't solely focused on humanity.

⁶ You've let them rule over your handiwork,
 putting everything under their feet—
⁷ all sheep and all cattle,
 the wild animals too,
⁸ the birds in the sky,
 the fish of the ocean,
 everything that travels the pathways of the sea.

The structure of the psalm, with the proclamation of God's majesty bookending it, includes humans, and in the center holds the handiwork of God. Ruling over God's handiwork has been a problem for humans, too. Those of us who are not indigenous disregard what we learned in Genesis 1, that God's desire for creation is to be fruitful and multiply, which requires a healthy environment. All life is meant to flourish, and it is our role to make that possible.

The way this country treats animals and the earth is not exactly that. Because right now we who live in broken relationships with creation have throughout history disrupted our indigenous siblings' connection with the land. We have decided to emphasize how we can monetize it most efficiently, instead of figuring out how we can live within its rhythms. We live out of sync, just so I can have blueberries in my smoothies in November, or get to the beach in February, or so privatized energy companies can drag their feet on building up sustainable energy infrastructure so their shareholders can get their dividends this quarter. We put the vulnerable, often immigrant and refugee, sometimes undocumented, underpaid, and under-protected, often not unionized, workers in meat processing plants at increased risk of contracting COVID-19 so we can have our pork chops and steak, and so the owners of farms and ranches don't have to gas their livestock before they get too big to process and sell for the mass market.

But the structure of the psalm indicates that we are to care for the farm animals, the wild animals, even the creatures of the sea, the same way that God cares for human beings. This is connected, isn't it?

Someone who thinks it's okay to blow off the tops of mountains and leave pools of coal ash and let uranium leach into a water supply or that the local river is the perfect place for the industrial waste from a big box store isn't so far from people who think extrajudicial killings of black men can be explained away. "If only he had stayed calm, put his hands up." Because whatever someone did before this moment, and how someone reacts to a gun pointed at them or a man charging at them and yelling is somehow responsible for their own death. Because the river was there, after all.

If we cared for God's handiwork as if it were God's creation (because how proud are we when we roast our coffee beans for the first time, strip and refinish our first piece of furniture, assemble the new bookshelf, create that new curriculum, quick pickle our onions, raise a human being?), we would find it unacceptable to privatize the profits and socialize the costs of propping up this unequal society. We let our entire world be exploited, forests razed, oceans warm and drive the creatures traveling the pathways of the sea to cooler waters, so we can live a more

convenient life, with more stuff, because we are told the stuff defines us, and a few can become richer.

As human beings reflect the character of God, crowned with glory and honor, just as God the Sovereign is crowned, it stands to reason that, “When we do not love, we destroy God’s image within us. When we hate, use violence, kill, disregard, and discard, we are destroying God’s image.” (FOW reference – Constance M. Koch)

And if we are to God as the planet’s creatures are to us, we are to be mindful of them. When we mistreat them, we are destroying God’s image, are we not?

That we are created not for the accumulation of power or stuff, but for growing to understand the world, embracing of beauty and praise, the gift of caring for others. We reflect God in how we care for God’s earth. And do we actually believe this? Do we really believe humans are “crowned with glory and honor”?

LGBTQIA siblings: For all the sparkle of Pride, it is both a joyful protest to how we have been persecuted, silenced, shamed, and made illegal throughout history, and a painful reminder that we have to have this space because too many of us still live, work, and worship in spaces where we are made to feel deviant. Why else would we wear glitter and lamé, with our loud music, demanding to be noticed? Why else do we make our joy so in-your-face?

It is because we who are marginalized, by race, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, disability, age, citizenship status, know the truth. We who are considered deviations of the perfect human reflect the glory of God. We are that grandeur just as Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, and Ahmaud Arbery were. So were Tony McDade, Nina Pop, Monika Diamond, and Iyanna Dior, black trans folk who were murdered in the past couple of months. So were Layla Peláez and Serena Angelique Velázquez, and Alexa Negrón Luciano, Puerto Rican trans folk murdered in the past couple of months.

God provides for all of us, especially those of us suffering under the weight of unequal social structures. God desires our good, and enables us to seek it. We reflect God’s image in the proper governance of our fellow creatures. And instead,

and I speak especially to white people, men, cis folk, upper and upper middle income folk, straight folk, American citizens, those who settle for the structural status quo, and those who engage in direct violence, spit in the face of God.

This is why this psalm is so powerful. Even those of us who experience the worst of humanity can proclaim this truth:

LORD, our Lord, how majestic
is your name throughout the earth!

We in the U.S. don't treat ourselves, let alone others, as though we were barely lower than the divine. We are not so skilled at reflecting we are just lower than God who is love. We as a people have structured our society to reflect that we hoard our love, handing it out to those we consider deserving of it, instead of giving it freely. We in the U.S. have set up our culture to destroy the image of God within others and all the earth.

It is bad enough our government spend so much on drones and bombs. It is that we as a society punish communities who dare to exist. And even though LGBTQIA people have been on the receiving end of that, we LGBTQIA folk are, or many of us are, also responsible for it. How many of us have enjoyed Pride until we see two white men walking down the street in fake geisha get-up, white face and bastardized kimono, as though our cultures are their plaything, and it's okay because they're gay?

What would it be like for us, all of us, to live the psalm?

Believing all humanity is crowned with glory means how we LGBTQIA folk see ourselves at Pride, gloriously queer, colorful, joyful, endowed with human dignity and beauty, all kinds of bodies and families present, defying gravity with the glittering heights of what it means to be fully ourselves.

LORD, our Lord, how majestic
is your name throughout the earth!

Believing all humanity is crowned with glory means how we see everyone else. Even straight people.

Believing all humanity is crowned with glory means we would not accept

- missing and murdered indigenous women,
- black men and boys gunned down for being in a car accident/working/caregiving/shopping/playing music.
- Tearing families apart, forcing people seeking asylum, many of them children, many of them single parents, many of them gay, to live in dangerous and unsanitary conditions on the other side of the border

We would not accept:

- the awful fact of 1/3 of all trans people living in poverty
- or that trans people, any trans people, particularly black and Latinx trans folx, are murdered because they dared to be who they were created to be.

We would not allow law enforcement, in our name,

- to brutalize glorious and honorable bodies.
- We would not police our own boundaries as LGBTQIA people.
- We would seek to understand the terms and sexual identities the young'uns tell us about.
- We wouldn't weave biphobia and transphobia into our own casual interactions.
- We wouldn't be so misogynist, racist, and patriarchal.
- We could manage to have an entire parade with no racist representations.
- We would understand that beauty standards are meant to expand, stretch, be redefined, so this gorgeous queerness of who we are is seen for what it is: embodying holiness.

Bring on assless chaps, flamboyant queens, shaved-head butches, professional lesbians who give generously to the community. Bring on those shy baby gays, that introverted book-loving poetry-spouting gay, the radical black and brown revolutionary aunties. Bring on the drag fashion shows, drag bingo, protest organizers, mamas, and sweet dads.

Siblings, we are crowned in glory and grandeur. Let us go out and act like it. May it be so.