

Tracy Daub
6/7/20--University Presbyterian Church
Psalm 8

HIGHS AND LOWS

It is fair to say that the writer of Psalm 8 has a very high opinion of humanity. The writer is speaking to God and asks a rhetorical question: "what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor." A little lower than God! Crowned with glory and honor! This language clearly reflects a very high opinion of humanity.

But the writer's high opinion of humanity does not arise from a sense of arrogance or vanity. Rather the writer's high opinion of humanity is rooted actually in great humility. The psalmist is looking up at the vastness of the night sky and has a feeling that many of us may have had ourselves when looking up at the constellations or maybe when gazing upon the immensity of the ocean, or when standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon. The writer is powerfully aware of how small and insignificant humanity is when compared to the enormity and complexity of creation. And it is a humbling experience. The psalmist marvels: "When I look at your heavens, the works of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them?" The writer is humbled that God even pays attention to us little people.

In light of how small we are in the vast scheme of things, the psalmist is awed by the way God has bestowed unique gifts upon humanity that no other creature enjoys. The writer marvels at the special capacities that mark humankind, capacities that are only a little shy of the capacities of God. We can see such capacities for ourselves. As God creates, so does humankind. We create all kinds of things: beautiful music and poems and literature. We create

families and communities of faith. We have learned how to build buildings and bridges and organize cities. We can contemplate our own existence, and study the cosmos, and examine the intricacies of a single cell, and cure diseases, and send people up into space and bring them back again. As the psalmist notes, we have dominion over the creatures of the earth--dominion which does not mean *domination* but rather the capacity to care for the creatures of the earth.

Humankind has powers and capabilities that are unique on this planet--capabilities that make us just "a little lower than God." Psalm 8 is a psalm praising God and marveling at God's high opinion of humanity which would lead God to gift us with such marvelous capacities.

This high opinion of humanity stands in stark contrast to the low images of humanity we so often see reflected on the evening news. Every day on the news and in our papers and in our personal lives we are surrounded by example after example of the brokenness of humankind toward one another and toward the creation. And this has been especially visible in the events of this past week. The looting and destruction of property we have witnessed taking place in America's cities are certainly wrong and harmful. However, these actions have become a distraction to what *really* needs our attention: the bigger and more profound issue of racism in our nation. The people marching in America's streets in peaceful protests are upset because something very upsetting has taken place. The murder of George Floyd is part of a long history of violence against African Americans in this nation--unjust violence against African Americans at the hands of the police, and unjust violence at the hands of private citizens, and unjust systems of discrimination and neglect that have become entrenched in social and governmental policies and practices.

And fueling all this violence and discrimination is the racism that still abides within the human heart. Speaking as a white person, most of us white people do not want to think of

ourselves as "racist." But racist thoughts and racial bias have so thoroughly surrounded us in our society, have been such a significant element of our social structures, that we cannot help but have absorbed this into our hearts and minds unconsciously. But it is time for us white people to take what is unconscious and make it conscious. It is time to examine how racism plays an unconscious role in our minds and hearts, and how racism continues to play a destructive role in our society. White people of good intentions and white churches as well, have too long remained silent, refusing to see how we are culpable in unjust systems, not wanting to acknowledge our own racism, and not voicing outrage in the face of injustice. But racism is a deep wound upon all of us. Instead of living out the high calling God created humankind to realize, racism has and always will bring humanity low.

Remember what the writer of Psalm 8 said to God about humankind: "Yet you have made them a little lower than God." It expresses a high view of who and what humanity can be.

We are a little lower than God when we are outraged by injustice--because that is a unique capacity we have among all creatures.

And we are a little lower than God when our hearts break in sorrow over death and grievous wrongdoing.

And we are a little lower than God when we are moved to act, to speak out, to stand with others.

And we are a little lower than God when we listen to the voices of others and hear their stories of suffering, and try to change ourselves and our thinking.

And we are a little lower than God when we strive to transform our communities to become just places for all people.

And we are a little lower than God when we welcome the stranger and are filled with compassion and act with kindness.

No other creature on earth has these capacities. But we do.

When public health conditions permit us to resume our usual ministries, I hope you will join the various activities of our congregation's Racial Justice Task Group as we strive to forge relationships across racial barriers and educate ourselves about our own unacknowledged racism. In the meantime, we can still listen and learn from other voices who can broaden our understanding of the issue of race in America. I have here a stack of books written by both black and white authors. I will make this list of books available as an attachment in the congregational email. This list is by no means comprehensive or exhaustive of the worthwhile material that is out there. But I offer these titles as a place to start listening and learning about ourselves and our nation.

The writer of Psalm 8 says something rather strange at the beginning of this psalm. The writer says to God, "out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger." Now this is a somewhat odd and confusing sentence. Let's see if we can understand it. A bulwark was a kind of defensive barrier used to keep back the enemy. What this writer seems to be saying is that somehow, God uses the voices of babies to form a defensive barrier against the forces of darkness. In other words, the contributions of even the weakest, smallest, least powerful among us have important consequences in combating darkness and in promoting good. Out of the mouths of babes God will form a defensive barrier. The defense against darkness and evil that God chooses is not found in the voice of the strongman who talks of domination. And the defense against darkness and evil that God chooses is not found in the voice of those threatening military might and the use of awesome weapons. And the defense against darkness and evil that God chooses is not found in

the voices of those who call people losers and low lifes and tries to divide people. Rather the defense against darkness and evil that God chooses is in found in the voice of babes, in you and me in all our ordinariness--babes who wear God's crown of glory and honor.