

Sermon – “Babes and Infants”  
Sunday, June 16, 2019  
Scripture Readings: Psalm 8:1-9, John 16:12-15  
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Our first reading is an ancient Psalm of wonderment at God’s majesty and care for us. Listen to these words of scripture from Psalm 8, 1 through 9.

*<sup>1</sup>O LORD, our Sovereign,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!  
You have set your glory above the heavens.*

*<sup>2</sup>Out of the mouths of babes and infants  
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,  
to silence the enemy and the avenger.*

*<sup>3</sup>When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established;*

*<sup>4</sup>what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?*

*<sup>5</sup>Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.*

*<sup>6</sup>You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;  
you have put all things under their feet, <sup>7</sup>all sheep and oxen,  
and also the beasts of the field, <sup>8</sup>the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,  
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.*

*<sup>9</sup>O LORD, our Sovereign,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

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Our Gospel reading comes from the very long discourse delivered by Jesus at the last supper as recorded by John. In this moment, even as a cautionary tone appears in his words, he assures the disciples that God is with them in Father, Son, and Spirit. Hear God’s word for you in John chapter 16, verses 12-15.

*<sup>12</sup> "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. <sup>13</sup> When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. <sup>14</sup> He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. <sup>15</sup> All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.*

It is a strange thing that we should be entrusted with the world.

Human beings are fantastic creatures, full of beauty and spirit, creativity and imagination. And yet we are also tiny things, with so little comprehension compared to the size of the universe in which we live as to effectively be infants, flailing about. The grand march forward of human science through the centuries is inspiring and fascinating...and yet when we remember what percentage of creation we have ever even seen, or what percentage of all of time our observations of the world have covered, we are forced to recall that all of human knowledge is but a tiny dot.

And knowledge is not even the real goal; it is only a tool employed by wisdom, which is still higher from our reach, and quickly forgotten.

We know this about ourselves. Much of the strategy and design of our nation's particular form of government is there with the purpose of preventing too much power from accumulating in the hands of any one person or small number of people.

Erecting roadblocks to the exercise of power could, in the abstract, seem like a strange goal. After all, power is merely the ability to get things done. Why do we intentionally make authority inefficient and slow by frustrating its ability to get things done?

Because we know that a human being has only a trifling wisdom, quickly discarded when temptations arise, and to consolidate more power than wisdom in a single set of hands is to invite calamity. And so we counterbalance power with power, one authority with another, and all the authorities with the voice of the people.

And yet even then, have we not made a mess of things? Democracy may be a step forward in fighting against rule that derives *purely* out of the self-interest of a few, but is the vector sum of all our wisdoms actually much closer to full and true wisdom than that of any one individual? It is not always clear that it is.

There is enough food to feed everyone, and yet some people get none. Booms and busts and environmental disasters show us that humanity as a flock thinks in the moment, according to the fashion of the day, and rarely with strategy or long-term vision for the future.

So it is a strange thing that we should be entrusted with this world. Indeed, if *you* had a world that you had carefully and lovingly crafted, beautiful and grand, full of life, would *you* entrust it to this crazy little mob of creatures who know so little what they are doing or why, who blow in the wind this way and that, who have brains capable of designing 50-megaton nuclear weapons while lacking the sense to avoid ever building a 50-megaton nuclear weapon? Would you even entrust such creatures to themselves?

And so we who worship God are left wondering still today what the Psalmist so famously wondered in ancient times:

[W]hat 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. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 8:4-6 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

This God has done even knowing how little we can see. In fact, some things are hidden from us on purpose, at least until an appropriate time, because of how little strength we also have: “I still have many things to say to you,” said Jesus in our second reading, “but you cannot bear them now.”<sup>2</sup> God knows perfectly well we are children.

Speaking of which, we often talk about all being God’s children, but do you ever wonder just how fully the “children” label holds true? I sometimes suspect it is a good deal more than we are aware.

We’ve had a week of children here at the church for Vacation Bible School. I enjoyed the fact that when I played the daily opening and closing videos, when it got to the scene where a giant spaceship suddenly emerged onto the screen, every time without fail I heard a couple of kids from the 4- and 5-year-old table exclaim, “Wow!” And another moment, when someone picked up the robot puppet that was talking to the kids all week and carried it for a moment out from behind the puppet stage, I heard a 6-year-old girl spot it and declare with authority, “I *knew* it was just a puppet.”

Sometimes when seeing little moments of clear little-person thinking, whether wide-eyed awe at something an adult might not take notice of, or a logical baby step proudly made, I wonder if that is anything like God’s experience of adults. We can see that a 5-year-old has significantly advanced reasoning skills and world awareness from that of a 3-year-old, a 10-year-old still more, and yet we pretend that from age 18, or 21, or somewhere in that vicinity, human beings have attained a full maturity of understanding level. I have a sneaking suspicion that this is completely false, and our eternal, resurrected selves will see our adult selves much as our adult selves see our early childhood selves.

The temper tantrums we throw! And over the simplest of things! The inability to communicate our needs. The degree to which we remain unaware of what is going on inside ourselves and others. The inclination to grab what we want, and sometimes the inclination to hit people (literally or otherwise) if they prevent us from having it, and the disinclination toward delaying gratification. The degree to which acting with basic human kindness toward others sometimes just requires a nap. Maybe growing up is something we are just getting started on, really.

It is really something, that we’ve been invited into the creative process of seeing to the shaping of the world. As I mentioned already, we do not very often do the greatest job. And God giving us a part in this is probably not altogether dissimilar to the experience of agreeing to let your young child help with a household project. You have agreed in that moment to accept the project taking twice as long, and there will be paint in some places there should not be, or dropped and lost screws missing from where they should be, but somehow you have done something more important than finishing the task efficiently or perfectly.

Now the world as run by adults truly has more significant consequence to it than the outcome of a parent-child bookshelf assembly task, so God’s allowance of human will and authority over our own situation has much more sobering import to it. We do a lot worse than just dripping some paint on the floor. There is a whole branch of theological examination

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<sup>2</sup> John 16:12 (NRSV).

addressing the perplexing and surprising question of theodicy, which is what we have labeled the attempt to reconcile the idea of a good and powerful God with the fact that evil is allowed to be done by us and others and be experienced by everyone as a consequence.

It might be hard, in fact, to believe God is on our side at all in allowing us to be at the wheel of our own lives and world. That is something of a mystery to be sure. We trust not because we truly understand this, but because we know of God having taken human form in Jesus Christ, lived within the mess, and borne human suffering and death in the work of ultimately rescuing us from what we must endure here on earth; restoring our losses, resurrecting and remaking each of us and the world in which we live.

But as for now, we walk onward in this life, making our childish mistakes and stumbling into moments of childlike wonder at creation, living out our youthful arrogance and showing our young, creative imaginations. It is never certain how we should go.

But wisdom is not altogether absent. Proverbs 7 and 8 speak of wisdom personified, as something that comes from God and counters the temptations of other directions which beckon to us. Hear how the scriptures speak of wisdom as something before us, beyond us, belonging to God, and yet caring for us:

Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?  
On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside  
the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out:  
“To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live...”

The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts  
of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the  
earth...

When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle  
on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above, when he  
established the fountains of the deep, when he assigned to the sea its limit,  
so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out  
the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker;  
and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his  
inhabited world and delighting in the human race.<sup>3</sup>

This is an ancient wisdom, close to God, coming from God, and which we only know in glimpses. But it does not remain altogether foreign. We are assured of some help. Even as we are told we cannot bear hearing all things now, the “Spirit of truth” is promised, as we heard in John today, to guide us “into all the truth.” It seems that in the pursuit of wisdom we do not find it quickly, nor all at once. We clearly will not attain glory and goodness by our own muddled efforts. It may be that what is most important in our search for wisdom is setting down our stubborn belief that we have it already, and, with the trust of a child, showing a faithful readiness to hear wisdom declared to us. As long as we will not let our human wisdom be overturned, it will entangle and drown us.

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<sup>3</sup> Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-23, 27-31 (NRSV).

So let us open our hearts to hear a thing we do not know, even when we think we do know it perfectly well. Let us watch for it, listen for it in prayer, in scripture, in life. Let us not think of ourselves too highly, but remember ourselves to be “babes and infants,” and let God work through us. May God help us to be so humble, and may the Lord grant us the goodness and understanding to match the task before us, living as stewards of the world and ourselves. Amen.