

**Songs of the Heart:
WHAT A WORLD!**

Psalm 8

Creation calls us to respond to God.

A sermon preached by
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What is the most beautiful thing you have experienced this week? Maybe it was something you heard—a beautiful piece of music or the sound of a loved one’s voice. Maybe it was something in nature—a sunrise or sunset, a grand vista, or the small wonder of an animal or a plant. Maybe beauty was in the sense of smell or taste—the scent of a rose or a wonderful meal.

Maybe the most beautiful thing in your week was something active—an accomplishment at work, a relationship healed, a love shared. There are many ways to experience beauty. The world is full of beauty if we think about it.

What I want to suggest to you today was articulated by Bishop N. T. Wright, who said, “Our ordinary experiences of beauty are given to us to provide a clue, a starting-point, a signpost, from which we move on to recognize, to glimpse, to be overwhelmed by, to adore, and so to worship, not just the majesty, but the beauty of God himself.”¹ In other words, our experiences in the world draw us to God. Creation calls us to respond to God. That’s the focus of our sermon today.

Creation calls us to a sense of **AWE** at God’s world. We have a world of majestic mountains, blue skies, green grass, a world of vast oceans and delicate butterflies. We live in a universe that is unfathomable in its diversity and infinity.

Have you been following the news lately about the eruption of the Mount Kilauea volcano in Hawaii? The biggest eruption in 30 years has destroyed 75 homes and caused the evacuation of some 2500 residents. Massive lava fountains are reaching heights of 250 feet, feeding rivers of lava that stretch to the sea. Where the lava hits the ocean the chemicals instantly make tiny strands of glass that float through the air and create breathing difficulties. It’s dangerous and scary and even tragic for those who are in the way of the volcano. But it’s also an awesome display of the power of nature.

Philip Yancey gave a description that puts us in our place with respect to nature. If the Milky Way galaxy were the size of the entire continent of North America, our solar system would fit in a coffee cup. In 1977,

two Voyager spacecraft left earth headed for the outer limits of the solar system. Travelling 100,000 miles an hour, it took them 35 years to get there. This coffee-cup solar system fits with several hundred billion other stars and systems in this galaxy, one of about 100 billion galaxies floating in space. Scientists estimate that a light-speed message sent to the edge of the universe would take 15 billion years to arrive.² There's no instant messaging in space.

Can you even imagine the size and scope of creation? But in addition to just being awesome and colossal, we also affirm that creation is good. The world is the creation of a good God; it's God's gift to us, given in love. Not all religions affirm this; some see the world and nature as demonic in character. But the Bible is very clear about the goodness of creation: "*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth... and it was very good.*"³ The Psalmist affirms God's hand in creation: "*O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens, ...the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established.*"⁴

Creation calls us to respond to God with a sense of awe.

Creation also calls us to respond to God with sense of **HOPE**. This is our Father's world. We can rest assured in that. God made it. God loves it. God sent his Son to save it. God is still in charge. We don't have to worry; we can dwell secure in God's creation. We know that one day God will redeem all of creation and establish God's Kingdom forever. God has a plan, and that plan will be fulfilled.

Paul talks about that plan in the 8th chapter of Romans: "*I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.*"⁵

This is our hope. As chaotic as life sometimes is, we are part of a grand movement of history toward an ultimate destination: the consummation of creation in the Kingdom of God. Do not lose hope; it will come!

Colonel Charles Duke was a member of the Apollo 16 crew and drove the lunar buggy on the moon. He described his feelings as he emerged from the landing module and took his first tentative steps on the lunar surface: “I looked up at the earth and stood silent for a moment, drinking in the wonder and being conscious of a flood of new feelings as I looked up from afar at our world.” Then, for some inexplicable reason, Col. Duke put his hand up and realized that the palm of his hand completely covered his view of the earth. He stood there for several moments, spellbound, allowing the power of that experience to work its way into his mind and heart. For the first time, Charles Duke realized the unity, the wholeness, and the uniqueness of the world. It’s not that big, when you look at it from that far away. The problems, the divisions, and the conflicts are not that big, either. Earth is not so big that we cannot all live in community. It should be possible for all God’s children to live together in harmony, reaching out and touching one another and communicating with one another. That is our hope.

Finally, creation calls us to respond to God with **REPONSIBILITY**. God gave us this world, but there are strings attached. God appointed us to take responsibility for his world, to have dominion over it, to be caretakers of it, to be good stewards of creation. In the process of creation, God said, “*Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.*’ ...and God said to them, ‘*Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over ... every living thing that moves upon the earth.*’”⁶

Our Psalm today reflects the same understanding: *“You have made [human beings] 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.”*⁷ We have a responsibility for creation.

I remember a story about a man who went to visit an old and wise rabbi. The old scholar sat in a room full of books, but with very little furniture. There was only a bench and one simple chair. The visitor asked, “Rabbi, where is your furniture?”

The rabbi replied, “Where is yours?”

The man said, “Mine? I’m not sure what you mean. I am only a visitor here.”

“So am I,” said the rabbi. “So am I.”

We are only visitors here on God’s little planet. We are stewards of God’s creation, caretakers entrusted with the property of our Master. God has entrusted this world to us, and we respond to God by taking responsibility for the care of the planet. We have dominion, and we are to use what God has given us, but we are to use it wisely and carefully.

Today we are confronted with a number of issues of environmental stewardship. We are filling the earth with our disposable culture. The landfills are full, and the oceans are being used as dumping sites. Acid rain from the pollution in the air has stripped forests bare in many parts of the world. The ozone layer that protects life from the harmful rays of the sun is deteriorating. Our global climate is changing more rapidly than scientists first thought. You know all this.

The good news is, all over the world, awareness is rising, and people and governments are taking action. Our own government has backtracked lately on some of its commitments to environmental stewardship. But the international community is still on board. Surveys show the majority of people are aware and doing something to help protect the environment, if only to take the recyclables to the curb every week.⁸

People of faith and communities of faith can lead the charge to save the planet. Of all people, those who believe in this Bible ought to model good stewardship of creation. I served a church one time that had a “Green Team” that produced resources to help us be better stewards at church and at home. They considered it part of their response to God. I wouldn’t mind if somebody or some group would take that on here.

Psalm 8 reminds us of our identity before God: “*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.*”⁹ It’s not that we are little more than animals. That may be the scientific view, but the spiritual view is that we are a little lower than the angels, a little less than God. The Psalms are poetry, and this Psalm reminds us who we are and whose we are. That’s what poetry does.

In the film *Dead Poet’s Society*, Robin Williams plays a teacher of poetry who calls his students to learn the true nature of their humanity. The teacher, John Keating, introduces his students to classic poets, teaching them to look at life from new vantage points instead of simply relying on knowledge that has been passed down to them.

One day Mr. Keating invites his students to tear out the introductory chapter of their textbooks, which instructs students how to methodically analyze poetry as though reading poetry were a science. Keating wants his students to feel the poetry, not analyze it like a chemistry experiment. Crouching in the middle of his students, he tells them to huddle up. Like a coach at halftime, he addresses his students: “We don’t read and write poetry because it’s cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. The human race is filled with passion. Medicine, law, business, engineering—these are all noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love—these are what we stay alive for.”

Mr. Keating then quotes from a poem by Walt Whitman: “Oh me, oh, life, of the questions of these recurring. Of the endless trains of the

faithless. Of cities filled with the foolish. What good amid these oh me, oh life?"

The students wait with rapt attention as Keating continues, "Answer: That you are here. That life exists. That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse. And you may contribute a verse."

Then he looks around at his students and asks, "And what will your verse be?"¹⁰

Christian, what will your verse be? What contribution will you make to this grand scheme of creation? You who are made little lower than the angels, you who bear the image of your heavenly Father, what will your verse be? Look around you at the wonder and beauty of creation. It calls you to respond to God in awe, in hope, and with responsibility. How will you respond? What will your verse be?

As we come to the table and partake of the elements of creation this morning, let our song of praise be, "*O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*"¹¹

¹N. T. Wright, *For All God's Worth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 1.

²Philip Yancey, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 20.

³Genesis 1:1, 31.

⁴Psalms 8:1, 3.

⁵Romans 8:18-21.

⁶Genesis 1:26-28.

⁷Psalms 8:5-6.

⁸ABC News/Planet Green/Stanford University poll (July 23-28, 2008).

⁹Psalms 8:4-5.

¹⁰*Dead Poets Society* (Touchstone, 1989), written by Tom Schulman, directed by Peter Weir.

¹¹Psalms 8:1.