

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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October 4, 2015  
Psalm 8  
Mark 10:13-16

THE VULNERABLE

It was a cloudy night. Last Sunday evening, our family kept going outside to look up in hopes of seeing the moon. A total eclipse was expected, but with a significant cloud cover, we would only get a glimpse of the moon whenever there was a break in the clouds. Every five or ten minutes, light would start streaming through the clouds, showing us that a break was coming toward us and then we would get a brief glimpse. The moon looked large because it was at its closest distance from the earth for the year. The next peek we got, we could see how the shadow of the earth was progressing across the surface of the moon. Would the clouds open up to allow us to see the full eclipse? They did, this time for several minutes. The shadow of the Earth covered the full face of the moon and there was a red glow as sunlight shining through Earth's dusty atmosphere was bent toward the red part of the light spectrum and cast onto the moon's surface.<sup>1</sup> Thanks to National Geographic for helping me understand all of that. It was awesome and wonderful. The first and last line of our psalm for today came to mind: "O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens."

Now imagine what such an experience would have been like for the person who wrote what is now called the eighth psalm. Someone who lived before there were electric lights would have nice dark evenings to gaze up at the sky and wouldn't have to contend with the smog that can challenge our view. That person would not have known the mechanics and distances involved with such an event, and would not have known ahead of time that an eclipse was coming. Some ancient cultures found such out-of-the-ordinary events frightening, taking them perhaps as a sign of something dreadful that the gods were about to do. But the psalmist, even without understanding that the Earth was a sphere or how it was that the various lights in the sky were shining, was able to perceive the wonder of what was referred to as the heavens above. There was confidence that the same God who had created the Earth had also created the sun, moon, and stars, and that filled the psalmist with awe and wonder. Perhaps, God was even bigger than those heavenly bodies God made.

There is even more reason for you and me to be filled with awe and wonder about the creation of which we are a part. For over the last few decades, we have grown in our scientific understanding as we have been told that the universe is so much more vast than we had known before. Astronomers tell us that there are at least 100 billion galaxies and perhaps about 70 billion trillion stars in the universe that came into being 13.8 billion years ago with the big bang.<sup>2</sup> They believe the universe has such a huge diameter, that even if you were flying at the speed of light, to go from one end to the other would take 93 billion years.<sup>3</sup> You better have a fast rocket and a generous vacation policy if you book such a trip.

What we as humans perceive through the Hubble telescope and radio telescopes and computer models is even more marvelous and awesome than what our ancient forebears could see. Cosmic background radiation and dark energy and supernovas and quasars and black holes all belong to the wondrous universe of which we are a part. None of this proves that there is a God behind all of this, but if gravity had been stronger or weaker by just the smallest fraction right after the big bang, then life-sustaining stars like the sun could not exist, making life impossible. Or if the initial explosion of the big bang had differed in strength by an even smaller fraction, the universe would have either collapsed or expanded too rapidly for stars to form. In either case, life would be impossible. Left purely to chance, it is extremely unlikely that all of this could have formed on its own. We have even more reason than did the psalmist for us to live in awe and wonder that we exist at all.

We are even more miniscule in comparison to everything else. The size of our universe boggles the mind. Yet, as small as we are, the psalmist asserts, following the very first chapter of Genesis, that God took enough interest in humanity to not only give us life on this planet, but to give us a job of taking care of other life on this planet. Unfortunately, humanity to a great extent has looked up and only has seen clouds instead of the glory of the heavens. The clouds of anxiety and selfishness have covered up the sense of awe and wonder that we would naturally have, that would help us recognize that caring for creation is a significant part of our purpose as humanity. We have wanted to be lords over all we have seen. We have wanted to be sovereign, instead of acknowledging the One who created all of this as our Sovereign Lord. The prescribed dominion has become domination. Human rule has led to broad ruin. The clouds that cover the glory and wonder of God's creation have grown thicker.

However, there is a way forward. If we begin to recognize life that is most vulnerable and the extent to which human activities are threatening that life, we can move back toward the delicate balance of creation. Perhaps the growing perception of our own vulnerability will fuel positive steps.

In his ministry, Jesus had reached out to all kinds of people whose situation made them quite vulnerable. He went to and touched and healed those who were sick and understood to be contagious, who had been pushed to the margins. He ministered to those who were shunned because they were considered to be impure for a variety of reasons. He preached in the synagogues, but he knew that those who had been marginalized or vulnerable-ized because of their poverty or ethnicity or gender or health status, needed someone to go out to them. He broke the cloud cover, if you will, and helped them to begin to understand themselves as among those who are God's beloved. From our gospel reading today, that group included children.

The youngest at that time were very much more vulnerable to fatal childhood illnesses than is true today. They were often seen as a burden, another mouth to feed until they were big and strong enough to be productive in the fields or in working with livestock. They were excluded in many venues and their needs were frequently ignored. The disciples, with clouded intentions, thought it was their job to keep the vulnerable away from Jesus. His time was precious. But Jesus was indignant at such a thought. This is one of the times he is described as getting angry. He wanted to bless the children, so he took them up in his arms and held them with loving care. He then told his followers to look carefully, to see through all the figurative clouds in order to see the kind of majestic reign that God has. It is not one that dresses up in fancy robes and a big crown or requires a throne high and lifted up. It has the glories of all of creation as a throne room, so the kingdom of God, or as I like to refer to it, the reign of God, shows itself as one that relishes the most vulnerable. There is indeed much that can cloud our thoughts and vision of what is important and what is not, of what our purpose might be, and who is the be-all and end-all. But when we look to reach out with care to the most vulnerable within this created order, we not only open ourselves to the realm of Godly compassion, we move beyond the clouds to see and more fully enter the true glory and majesty of the reign of God.

<sup>1</sup> <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/09/150924-super-total-lunar-eclipse-moon-sky-watching-viewing/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.skyandtelescope.com/astronomy-resources/how-many-stars-are-there/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.quora.com/How-can-it-be-understood-that-the-universe-is-93-billion-light-years-across-and-yet-only-13-8-billion-years-old-1>