

“Acts of God”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, May 26, 2013

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Holy Scriptures: Psalm 8

Divine Majesty and Human Dignity

To the leader: according to The Gittith.

A Psalm of David.

1 O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory above the heavens. **2** Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.

3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; **4** what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

5 Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. **6** You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, **7** all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, **8** the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

9 O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Acts of God.

If you were to make a short list of composers
who captured the heart and soul of America,
Irving Berlin would make the list.

Berlin wrote nearly 1,000 songs.

In addition to composing such familiar favorites
as “God Bless America” and “Easter Parade,”

Irving Berlin wrote the all-time best-selling musical score:

“I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas.”

A Russian Jewish immigrant, he lived to the age of 101.

Until he passed away, he never stopped making music.

Even when Irving Berlin was at an advanced age he said, *“For me the question is,
‘Are you going to be a crabby old man or are you going to write another song?’”*

In an interview with the *San Diego Union*,

Irving Berlin was asked, *“Is there any question you have never been asked
that you would like someone to ask you?”*

Irving Berlin replied, *“Well, yes, there is one.*

*‘What do you think of the many songs you’ve written that did not become
hits?’*

My reply would be that I still think they are wonderful.”

They are wonderful -- full of wonder.

God, too, has an unshakable delight in what – and whom – God has made.

God made each man, woman and child wonderful.

Whether or not they are a “hit” in the eyes of others,

The nature and nurture of God is to always love and treasure
the wonderfulness of God’s creativity.

Acts of God.

Actus Dei – Latin for literally a “driving” or the “moving forward of God.”

This is the legal term used by attorneys and insurance companies

to describe an event or phenomena beyond human control,
a natural phenomenon or catastrophe such as an earthquake,
a hurricane, a volcanic eruption, a tornado,
something natural for which there is no legal redress.

For example, a State Farm insurance claim report stated that

after the flood one Noah Smith was dismayed to discover
his house was not insured against acts of God.

The Holy Bible presents the creation of the universe as an Act of God.

Creation is presented in story form

not as a natural catastrophe, but rather *as a natural blessing*.

The poetic language of Genesis imagines God gazing in wonder

at what has been created
and what is still forming, still birthing, still growing, still evolving.

God looks upon creation and calls it good.

Good.

Pure.

For those who have studied Latin you will recall the term, *actus purus*,

meaning “pure act,” which refers to any act of God -- *Actus Purus Dei*

They are all wonderful.

What God has made, let no one put down.

What God has joined together, let no one put asunder.

Acts of God.

Everything begins with God, and what God creates is good.

The Holy Scriptures open with a magnificent hymn of creation.

The entire story of creation unfolds from a towering clause,

“In the beginning...”

“In the beginning” comes from a single word

in both Hebrew (beresit) and Greek (Genesis),

which in turn becomes the title of the first book in the Hebrew Bible.

“Beresit and Genesis mean not the beginning of something

but simply The Beginning.

Everything begins with God.” Claus Westerman

God is one who acts.

Reality exists only because God acts.

God does not act alone;

God invites and involves and integrates that which is created

to be a part of creation.

Then 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.”

So God created humankind in God’s image;

male and female God created them.

Genesis does more than relate the fact that God creates.

Genesis begins the story of what manner of Creator our God is,

and to what purpose.

For example, God declares the goodness of creation,

that creation is well-ordered, beautiful,

pleasing to God’s eye, and able to function as intended.

The Good News, my friends, is that God’s creative power does not leave us passive.

God creates in such a way that all of God’s creatures are engaged,

empowered, commissioned to act, to think, to dream, to be.

Acts of God.

Everything begins with God;

what God creates is good;

and we are left in awe.

A few minutes ago we read Psalm 8 responsively,

speaking and listening to a hymn of awe.

William Shakespeare, desiring to admire God’s creative power,

quotes Psalm 8 in *Hamlet* -- “*What a piece of work is man.*”

Shakespeare grasped that Psalm 8 is an ode

to the creative power and blessings of our Creator:

O Lord, our Sovereign,

how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory above the heavens.

Out of the mouths of babes and infants

you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,

to silence the enemy and the avenger.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,

the moon and the stars that you have established;

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.

Acts of God

God's creativity described in Genesis inspires our own creative genius.

Sister Helen Prejean,

the Christian nun whose experiences with death-row inmates

led to her writing a book

which was made into a movie, *Dead Man Walking*,

talked recently about creativity.

Sister Helen Prejean said:

"In creating, we imitate God...

To be a creator is part of what it means to be a human being.

I met a guy on death row in Arizona who had nothing...

So he would unravel his socks and out of the threads

weave little necklaces with crosses.

The first time I visited another death-row inmate,

*he gave me a picture frame he had made out of gum wrapper foils.
These men were locked in a small cell 23 out of 24 hours a day;
they had absolutely nothing,
and still they were reaching out to create something of beauty and worth.”*

Acts of God

Reach out to create something of beauty and worth.

Reach deep within to contemplate that mysteries still exist, and always will.

Creation and awe reside side by side.

Not every question will be answered;

sometimes we do not know the reasons or answers, and that is okay.

We follow a long line of faithful souls

who accepted God's hand in the mysteries of creation

that were as obscure to them as they are to us today.

We stand on the shoulders of people who rejoiced that God created and creates,

and let it be at that,

happy to be filled with wonder and awe,

satisfied that we do not need to know everything there is to
know.

My college motto is *Non Satis Scire*, which means To Know Is Not Enough.

Knowledge and information are terrific,

yet are empty, clanging gongs without a sense of awe or meaning or love.

From the storytellers who first wove Genesis

to the Psalmists who celebrated the human body and God's marvelous acts,

from singer-songwriters who call us to a higher plane

to everyone here this morning who lets our imaginations
out

to play and dance on the wings of the morning,
ponder the created world and its mysteries.

Psalmists and priests and poets set down great hymns of praise.

They praise God because they see behind creation

the mind and purpose of a Supreme Power,

one whom they have already come to know in their own experience,

and whose guiding hand they have seen in the movements of history.

(William Neil, adapted)

As you know and appreciate, the Biblical stories of creation are poems.

Poems are not to be read as eyewitness accounts nor mistaken for scientific timetables.

Many people in our time insist

that these lovely Holy Scriptures be read as journalism,

as reportage on the dawn of time and space.

Creationism is thus alive and well,

as many school teachers and school boards will attest.

As Disciples of Jesus Christ we are equally inspired and interested in both

the Rock of Ages and the ages of rocks.

The power of God to create is not lessened by the science of evolution;

consider that the science of evolution is truly a spiritual testament

of the ongoing nature and nurture of God.

A God who can start life and sustain life for over the course of billions of years

is a mighty God indeed,

one who is worthy to be praised, one who is worthy of our awe.

We can appreciate that Charles Darwin

first went to seminary where he studied theology

before plunging head first into the science of evolution.
I saw a bumper sticker yesterday on the bumper of a family mini-van
that showed an image of a slick sedan, and read, "I Will Evolve".
Are you like me, wondering if Charles Darwin, a Christian and a scientist,
drafted his own bumper sticker or car ornament
if it wouldn't include both a shark and a fish,
happily swimming side by side.
(Like in *Finding Nemo* -- "Fish are friends, not
food.")

Acts of God

Everything begins with God;
what God creates is good;
and we are alive on a living, breathing planet spinning in the sky.

We witness every day the power of the continuing creative power of God in nature,
as Teutonic plates shift under the Indian Ocean
resulting in an earthquake that starts a tsunami,
and its ripples cover thousands of miles.
In December 2010, 250,000 innocent people were killed
and many more were impacted by the ongoing reverberations.
Hurricanes and tornados have claimed countless innocent lives,
and we grieve with the shattered families and devastated communities,
and we do our part to help rebuild and move forward as one people.
We mourn the loss of life,
the grief experienced,
and the pain caused.
We also acknowledge that God

– who sees that you are wonderful and wonderfully made --
did not purposefully cause the tsunami nor the tornado;
the God of love and grace is not cruel.

The tsunami was set in motion by a living planet
that breathes and moves, grows and changes every single day.

The tornado was caused
by the delicate balance and interactions of heat and wind, cloud and earth.

In times of trouble and tsunamis and tornados
we experience the creative presence of God
in the grace and mercy extended to nations in need,
and in the opening of heavens gates to the innocents,
to the whole people of God.

If God's grace is true, then everyone will be saved.

Acts of God.

Everything begins with God;
what God creates is good;
and we are connected, bonded by the Holy Spirit.

When she turned 21, Tammy Harris from Roanoke, Virginia,
began searching for her biological mother.

After a year, she had not succeeded in finding her.

What Tammy Harris did not know was that her biological mother, Joyce Schultz,
had been trying to find her for 20 years.

One other thing Tammy did not know:

the person she was searching for was her coworker
in the same convenience store where she worked!

One day Joyce heard Tammy telling a customer about her search.

Soon they were comparing birth certificates.

When Tammy realized that the woman she knew and worked alongside
was in fact her own birth mother, she fell into her arms.

Tammy said to a friend later, "*We held on for the longest time.*

It was the best day in my life."

Each year, each month, each week, each day
we rub shoulders and share lives and experiences
with people we think we barely know.

Yet if they share a new birth in Jesus Christ,
they are our dearest relatives.

And if they share a part of the new creation,
we are bonded by the Holy Spirit.

And if they are *actus purus*, Acts of God,
a good, pure, wonderful act of God's love in creation,
then we are family.

We are the whole people of God. Thanks be to God!

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

Extra Material

A modern Christian who speaks and writes
with the heart of a pastor and the vision of a prophet is Max Lucado.
You may be familiar with the name of Max Lucado;
go to any bookstore or bookstore web site
and you will find in the religious section Lucado's Christian books and
meditations.

He was not always at home as a Christian;
he was not always aware that we live in the grip of the grace of God.

One summer while Max Lucado was in high school
he worked laying pipe in a West Texas oil field.
At lunch time the workers in the oil field would tell jokes and play cards.
Max Lucado looks back and recalls:

For thirty minutes in the heat of the day, the oil patch became Las Vegas
--

replete with foul language, dirty stories, blackjack,
and bar stools that doubled as lunch pails.

One day during lunch a supervisor walked toward the workers.

Did he have a job for them that could not wait?

They wondered what he would say.

Uh, fellows, he said.

The workers turned and looked up at him.

I, uh, I just wanted, uh, to invite...

Max and the workers could tell that their supervisor was uncomfortable
with whatever he was trying to tell them.

I want to tell you that our church is having a service tonight and, uh..

Max thought to himself in disbelief, What? He's talking church? Out
here? With us?

I want to invite any of you to come along, the supervisor said.

There was silence among the workers.

Several started at the dirt.

Others just looked at each other. No one said anything.

Well, that's it, he said. *If any of you want to go...let me know.*

After saying that he left. Max and the other workers began to laugh.

Five years later Max Lucado was a college sophomore struggling with a
decision.

Max admits that he drifted from faith. He wanted to know Jesus again.

But the price was too high. His friends might laugh.

That is when he thought of the supervisor in the West Texas oil field.

The supervisor's love for God had been greater than his personal concern for his reputation.

So I came home, Max says.

Throughout the pages of the Bible,

throughout the liturgy of worship,

throughout the daily experiences of our lives,

we discover a God who loves us and wants the very best for us.

Sometimes God speaks to us directly,

like when we commune with God through prayer.

Sometimes God speaks to us through the words of another,

like though the shy invitation from Max Lucado's supervisor.

Sometimes God speaks to us generally,

as God did when Isaiah first heard the call to serve.

But the power of God's love is always available.