

“Under our feet?”

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Psalm 8

Trinity Sunday

Today is Trinity Sunday, and the Psalm we heard, Psalm 8, is one of the readings for today. It seems like an odd choice, since it doesn't mention Jesus or the Holy Spirit. But it points to another trinity that all of us belong to. The late Pope Francis said that all humans beings belong to the trinity of humanity, God and nature. And, because we don't think about that trinity very clearly, the Earth is suffering, and so are we. Today's Psalm is much more about that trinity, and so it merits exploring deeply.

Psalm 8 is attributed to King David, who, as a shepherd boy, would have spent a lot of time under the night sky. Back then there was no light pollution, and not much pollution at all. The night sky would have been much clearer than it is now.

Milky Way

As a boy, David would have seen the glorious splendour of the milky way spread out above him as he tended his sheep. No wonder he speaks of it in wonder, as the work of God's fingers, which have created the moon and the stars.

Faced by this glowing splendour, in the psalm David is astounded that God pays so much attention to us mere human beings. We are like specks of dust in God's great creation. Yet, David says, we have been given great power, being little less than angels in the universe. And then David says those words that have become highly controversial in our times:

You have given (humans) dominion over the work of your hands;

You have put all things under their feet. (Psalm 8:6)

Then David lists much of the natural world: wild and domesticated animals, fish of the sea, birds of the air. It sounds like everything has been given to us to rule, since they are under our feet. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures we hear that God considers the Earth God's footstool (

Isaiah 66:1), so it is clear that to be under foot is an expression of royal hierarchy. God is the king of the universe, and this psalm says that humans are the kings of Earth's species.

Yet, we do not live in an age of powerful kings, so it is easy for us to forget what kingly rule was really like. We assume that kings are inherently cruel, exploiting their subjects for taxes and wealth. That is certainly the impression we get from television shows like Game of Thrones, where being a king or queen is a cutthroat business, and where subjects are just expendable pawns in the game of power and wealth.

But is that what God has in mind for when we deal with nature? In the Bible, there are many kinds of kings, good ones and bad ones. The Egyptian Pharaoh who oppressed the Israelites stands out as a particularly evil king. He had no reservations about exploiting the Hebrew slaves to the point of exhaustion and death (Exodus 1). But the Bible also features benevolent kings who seek to rule in a way that emulates the just ways of God. These kings know that God expects earthly kings to be fair to their subjects. They are to insure there is enough to eat by storing food in the good years in anticipation of years of famine (Joseph's Pharaoh).

They are to practice justice, serving like the Supreme Court of their kingdom. We see this in the famous story of King Solomon.

Solomon

One day, two women were presented to him, both of whom claimed to be the mother of a newborn (1 Kings 3:16–28) . This is a case the lower courts could not solve, so it is brought before the king. This was common practice back then.

Kings were expected to be fair and just to their subjects. Solomon famously threatened to chop the child in half, leading the real mother to cry out to protect the baby. Kings were expected to be wise and just, particularly the ones who claimed to follow God, the ultimate just judge.

So, when human beings are told to act like kings towards the natural world, we are not being given a license to cruelly exploit nature. That may seem to contradict what is said in today's psalm. But let's take a second look. When nature is placed beneath our feet, it is described with these words:

you put everything under their feet:

all flocks and herds,

and the animals of the wild,

the birds in the sky,

and the fish in the sea,

all that swim the paths of the seas.

This was written at least 2500 years ago. They didn't have planes, or our great fishing trawlers which scoop up everything on the sea floor in their nets. These words were addressed to a desert people who did very little sailing. What does it mean to put the birds of the air under their control? What could human beings do about the great flocks of birds that soared high in the sky? And how could human beings reign over whales and octopi in the deepest depths of the ocean, or those creatures that swim the paths of the seas? The way it is described, most of these animals are beyond human reach, and yet they are under our feet.

So what kind of dominion does God have in mind for us? What kind of kingdom are we supposed to govern in the natural world?

The clue appears in what seems like a throwaway line at the beginning of the psalm. The Psalm begins by praising God, and then it says:

Through the praise of children and infants

you have established a stronghold against your enemies,

to silence the foe and the avenger. (Psalm 8:2)

What an odd thing to say. How can the sounds that babies make silence the foe and the avenger? And who are these enemies anyway? Usually, the words foe and avenger mean people who are enemies of the nation of Israel, or an individual. They are the ones who don't care about anyone but themselves. They lack compassion, and they just want to harm others to benefit themselves. The Egyptians, the Babylonians, they are ruthless foes and avengers who will take anything, and give no concern for who they hurt. They fear no retribution from God, often not believing God will know or care about their evil deeds.

So, how can the babbling and crying of children have any effect on evil people? I suggest we take a moment to think about what happens when infants make sounds. They don't have many sounds at their disposal. They can cry of course, often very loudly. They can also gurgle and babble. When they cry or babble, what do the adults around them do? We usually come forward to see what's going on. If a child is crying, we try to calm her down - "shhh, shhh, what's the matter?" If a child is babbling, adults do something funny. We usually respond by talking to the child. "Who's the good baby, what you are you saying, who loves you?" And we'll often babble with them.

The point is, when babies verbalize, nearby adults become sympathetic. We care for the child, we try to help if she is crying, or we engage in a loving, playful dialogue if they are babbling. We lean in, we show care, we show sympathy. If we have any evil, uncaring impulses, they go away for the time being. Baby talk brings out our compassionate side.

The line about warding off evil with baby talk comes right at the top of a psalm that declares how human beings should relate to nature. We're supposed to care. To take care. To show compassion. The implication is clear: parents tend to babies whom we cannot understand in their babbling; God tends to us, in all our immaturity; and we are expected to tend to nature, in a caring, loving way, too. Not because nature is a baby, but because nature is hard to understand, like a baby, but deserves care and concern just the same.

This past Wednesday was the birthday of the American environmentalist, Rachel Carson. She was born in 1907. She was an American biologist at a time when it was rare for women to work in science. She wrote several popular books about her love of the sea's creatures.

Rachel Carson - Silent Spring

In 1962, she released her most famous book, *Silent Spring*.

The book's title referred to her fear that in the future, there would be no songbirds left in the spring. No chirping or dawn chorus when spring arrived.

In her book, she argues that the indiscriminate use of pesticides and herbicides was having a quiet but devastating effect on the ability of birds and insects to reproduce. Like a concerned parent, she had checked to see how nature was doing. Chemicals like DDT and others were causing harm to bird's eggs, undermining their ability to reproduce; they also sank into the soil, and then were absorbed by the entire food chain, poisoning entire ecosystems.

The chemical industry was outraged by Carson's denunciation of DDT, and they dismissed it, and attacked her personally. No woman scientist had any business meddling in affairs she didn't understand. Fortunately, other scientists confirmed her findings, and in the early 1970s, DDT was banned in the United States, and soon after, in Canada and other nations. Today, it is very little used in the world, mostly due to concerns about its ability to stay in the environment long after its last use.

Carson's concerns were well founded. Here in Ontario, some species of large birds like peregrine falcons, ospreys and bald eagles were almost wiped out. DDT caused deadly thinning in eggshells - preventing birds from even hatching. After DDT was banned, Ontario had to reintroduce the birds to their former home, a process that took many years to succeed.

Osprey nest

Today if you visit Napanee or Prince Edward County, artificial nesting platforms are home to birds that DDT once wiped out. Rachel Carson's concern for nature has helped bring back these species, so that they can cry out their praise to God again here.

We have changed the world since Psalm 8 was written. We have altered the climate, and polluted the oceans. Now, micro plastics can be found everywhere, even in our bodies. Like it or not, humans really do have the power of a king over the environment. Now more than ever, we need to come to grips with our part in the trinity of humans, nature and God. God has granted us astounding powers of reason to alter nature. The pressing question now is whether we can call on our hearts and our capacity for wonder to ward off the evils of greed and indifference towards the natural world. Psalm 8 starts out in wonder and praise. It is time we started from there, too, so we can play our part in this earthly trinity. Amen.