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The National Presbyterian Church

## Standing Tall When You're Thinking Small

Psalm 8; Psalm 73

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Lord, as we preach the Psalms let us hear you singing.

As we read your words let us hear you speaking.

As we reflect on each page let us see your image.

As we seek to practice your precepts let our hearts be filled with joy. Amen

(Gregory of Nazianzus, 4<sup>th</sup> century AD)

Over the summer months we're going to be looking together at various topics that come from one of the books in the Bible, the Biblical book from which we have just read Psalm 8.

If you don't know where the book of Psalms is in the Bible it's one of the easiest to find. You can find Genesis at the Beginning and Revelation at the end and right in the middle you open to the middle you'll probably end up in the book of Psalms.

The easiest way to describe the book of Psalms is as a collection of poems and prayers and hymns. Some of them go back as far as a thousand years before the birth of Christ to King David, Israel's greatest king. Others were written perhaps over a 500-year span after that. Some of them by temple musicians, or the equivalent of the "Director of Music of the Jerusalem Temple," would have written those in the spirit of King David. You see some of those names in the headings, such as Asaph (50, 73-83) or the "sons of Korah" (44-49, etc.). Asaph would have been a leader of the temple musicians in ancient days.

So the Psalms span an extended period of time, but all of them take their inspiration from David whose poetry and whose faith in God was renowned in the ancient world – a faith that did not always believe in God easily: the faith expressed in the Psalms is one in which the psalmists experienced not only times of hope and joy, but many days of doubt and bitterness, and anger that sometimes led to a rage against God for all the injustices and unexplained pain in the world.

In our summer series we'll be looking at different themes which come then from the book of Psalms and we're going to begin with Psalm 8, a psalm which speaks about who we are as human beings, about our value as human beings, about our estimation of ourselves or to use a phrase that we hear frequently these days about our self-esteem in the sight of God.

Clearly what we think about ourselves and how we value ourselves matters. How we think affects the way we live our lives, whether we want to bury our lives in the ground and disappear into a hole because we think too little of ourselves; or whether we vaunt ourselves, at times becoming obnoxiously arrogant or self-righteous because we think too much about ourselves. **Thinking Too Much of Our Selves**. And this latter direction, pride, is of course a danger especially if we have been successful or even moderately successful in life.

- As soon as we come to realize that we know more answers to more questions than other people do, there is a tendency to lift ourselves up a notch or two higher
- As soon as we come to realize that we have more power to get things done than other people have, we tend to wield it as if we owned it.

And we forget.

- We forget that just as other people blow it, we can blow it just as easily as they do!
- We forget that for all that we know there is far more that we do not know, and for all our power there is far more power in this world that we do not have and that we do not and will never wield.

I remember an occasion back in a Christian group at university when a minister spoke about this, probably because he realized that we thought that we had it all together theologically – we knew everything there was to know at age 21 or 22 years old! We knew it all! And what he said to us was this, he said: "I'm sure your ignorance is colossal." Well we were convinced that our knowledge was colossal! But here was this counterpoint to that. It didn't crush our souls (we were too cocky for that) but it did make us think, and, clearly it made its mark since I remember it to this very day 40 years later: "I'm sure your ignorance is colossal." That puts things in perspective doesn't it?

And sometimes the Psalms do this too. The Psalmists in different Psalms (for example, Psalm 73) from time to time really lay into people who think they've got life all together and tread callously over others.

Sometimes the Psalmist is very jealous of these people for whom everything seems to be going their way, even though they ignore God's law and God's people. But as the Psalmists reflect prayerfully on these situations, he reaches the repeated conclusion that for all these distinctions and inequities on Earth, that death is the great leveler that

in the end brings us all down to size. So there's no room for arrogance. No matter how much control we have on earth, we all lose control in the end to a higher power!

And Jesus picks up on this doesn't he? He picks up in this same theme when he speaks about money and success. In Luke 12:13-21 he speaks about a person who has a stash of money (nothing wrong with that). But the man just stashes it away, builds more and more barns for everything that he has (more and more investment houses)! He stores it all away. And then, God speaks to him (and it's very interesting what Jesus says in the name of God), and says, "You fool!" As if to say, *you're not wise at all, and you're not ultimately successful! Indeed, you're a fool because you don't realize that this day your life is required of you. What good will it all do then if you haven't been a faithful steward of what God has entrusted to you in your life.*

So the Psalmist, and Jesus follows in this pattern, at times brings people down from this pinnacle on which we or others place us when we forget our mortality and our weakness. So sometimes our problem when it comes to our sense of self-value, of self-esteem is a problem of arrogance.

**Thinking Too Little of Ourselves.** But my guess is that for far more of us these days our problem is not so much that (-- that we lift ourselves up so high --) but that when it comes to matters of self-esteem, most of us actually put ourselves down too low! We think too little of ourselves.

Indeed I think it's fair to say (and many psychologists I think would agree) that sometimes when we meet people who are arrogant or pushy or seem to think a great deal of themselves the fact of the matter is they do that as a front because they are afraid that deep down their lives are actually empty, that there's nothing there. Their lives are hollow. And so they bolster themselves up with this way of thinking about themselves, which they vaunt and push on other people.

Sometimes the truth is we think not too much of ourselves but too little. Norman Vincent Peale the late pastor of Marble Collegiate Church said that when he was a child he constantly thought too little of himself. He was always dealing with his own sense of inferiority and insecurity. And he wrote these words about himself:

*"Perhaps the most difficult problem I ever faced, as a youth was my inferiority complex. I was shy and filled with self-doubt. In fact I lived like a scared rabbit. I constantly told myself that I had no brains, no ability, that I didn't amount to anything and never would. Then I became aware that people were agreeing with me. For others unconsciously take you at your own self-appraisal."*

And sometimes that self-appraisal is absolutely devastating. It comes out of left field but it finds a home within our heads and we're stuck with it or so we seem

to be. Sometimes we have no clue where it comes from. Perhaps it comes from a word that was spoken at some time long ago in our life that we cannot forget, from somebody who at that time was significant to us in some way or another. Someone spoke a word and we've never been able to forget it, and it drags us down.

Psychiatrist Smiley Nlanton once told this story of a man by the name of Gillespie. I don't know whether that's his real name or not but the story is true, who had a crippling sense of inferiority and came to Dr. Blanton for help. Blanton probed deeply and began to explore this man's past, and discovered that when he was 14 years of age he had a math teacher who mocked him incessantly. Whenever Gillespie was facing a problem the teacher would say well come on, come up to the board and show us the solution to this problem. And the teacher would know that Gillespie couldn't do it, and that there would come this moment of awkwardness when he would give up. And the teacher would point to him and tell him in front of the whole class that his head was empty. There was nothing in his brain. If he were to be turned upside down and shaken around nothing would fall out of his head!

And what Doctor Blanton discovered was that those words affected everything that Gillespie did from that time on. They were like poison in his soul and affected his whole view of himself and the way he lived his life.

Sometimes there is a lingering and destructive word in our minds, and if we were to examine our lives we might find a voice from the past speaking that word to us and we need to wake up and realize that we've been imprisoned by those words for many years.

Or it may not be a word that holds us back but an action – something that we did that we regret; a failure within our life, a weakness within our life and we haven't been able to let go of that either.

Dale Galloway is a retired pastor from Portland Oregon and he speaks about the impact of hearing the news of his wife's request for a divorce and how painful it was. He says

*"it all happened exactly as my wife had told me that it would. According to her preplanned time schedule a total stranger handed me those dreadful divorce papers on that fateful Friday a few days before Christmas. [Now let me say he doesn't blame his wife for everything that happened here. He very much speaks about his own responsibility and accountability as well. But nevertheless he says] According to her preplanned time schedule a total stranger handed me those dreadful divorce papers on that fateful Friday a few days before Christmas. Within 24 hours I stood at the Portland International Airport and through misty eyes watched helplessly as the woman I'd loved since I was 18 years old led my two children onto an airplane and departed never to return. Many times as a minister I've heard people talk like they thought there were some things worse than death. At that moment and in the following days for me life was worse than death. ("12 Ways to Develop a Positive Attitude", introduction).*

There are of course many reasons for feeling this way, for feeling small, for feeling insignificant, for feeling worthless, or that life is simply not worth living. And some of those reasons are very complex indeed. Indeed, I challenge some of you to think about going to get professional help – the kind of help that I cannot give you, the kind of help that Smiley Blanton or somebody with his credentials could give to you; some of you may know you need to do this, and have been putting it off.

But having said that what I also know is this: that sometimes it only takes a small adjustment to change our lives dramatically for evil or for good! Just as a small word spoken by somebody significant can push us down, making us feel very small, so a small word spoken by somebody significant can also lift us up and challenge us successfully to see our lives and the value God assigns to each of us, and be transformed by that knowledge.

There's a great story about Bart Starr the quarterback for the Green Bay Packers in the 1960s in their glory days, who had a little incentive game going with his son Bart Junior. Bart Junior was a lucky boy! If he got a perfect paper at school when he arrived home he would get ten cents for that perfect paper. Now this apparently in those days was quite an incentive and he was drawn by this: one dime for a perfect paper. Well, apparently one weekend Bart Senior was playing football in Saint Louis and it was not a good game. I don't know what the score was but Bart Starr did not play well, and he felt bad about himself: he felt battered and bruised by the game and battered and bruised mentally and the trip home was a long trip. And when he arrived home he was feeling blue, down on himself until he got into his bedroom and looked at his pillow. And there on his pillow was a note. And on that note there was some writing, it was from his son. It said, "Dear dad, I thought you played a great game. Love Bart. And then right beside the note, taped to it, were two dimes.

Now that story is important to me I've told it many times in different churches. Important to me especially because after I told it the first time, sometime later I wasn't feeling too good about myself and I walked into my study in the church (I was in San Antonio at the time) and there on my desk was a note from one of the Elders, a person I treasured. It was a kind note and taped to the note were a couple of dozen dimes.

What a difference a few dimes can make! A couple of dozen or just two. A little love from someone who is important to us. It could be a child, it could be a parent, it could be a friend, it could be a spouse. Who knows who it is? Two dimes and a little love from someone who is important to us can change things. The world begins to change. Our view of ourselves begins to change.

And this really is the message of Psalm 8. In a nutshell the message is that God, the most significant 'significant other' of all actually has an opinion about us. Indeed God cannot get us out of God's mind and out of God's heart. Though we are mortal, though we are flesh, though we will wither away and die, God says that to us through Psalm 8 that we matter, infinitely. You and I matter. Even though we are not God. And this is really important to say. Even though we are not God and never will be God, we matter to God.

Indeed this is where the Christian view of self-esteem of our value really begins. As Rick Warren says in the opening line of his book "The Purpose Driven Life," in a line that has become famous: "It's not about us." If you want to know your value the place where you begin actually is by saying negatively it is not about us. It's not about me or you and it doesn't have to be about me or you! The universe is not about us. It's not about human life. It is not about the Earth. It is not about the solar system. ***It is*** about God. It is all about God. And if we are to value ourselves we must start there, which is where the Psalmist starts.

*Oh Lord our Lord how majestic in all the earth is ***thy name***.*

*Oh Lord our Lord, how majestic in all the Earth is ***thy name***.* It is 'thy name' that matters. The name of God. It is the majesty of God that matters. It's the honor and the glory of God that matters. An honor and a glory and majesty that can be seen, says the Psalmist, ***in the heavens***.

We who live in the city don't see the heavens as most people have seen them throughout history because of all the lights around about us. But the night sky of the heavens declares the majesty of the living God.

And so too, says the Psalmist, does the miracle of life found in a little infant or a baby. The words we read a few moments ago in Psalm 8:2 are a little confusing. The passage speaks about a "bulwark" or a defense, as if the Psalmist was saying the best defense against God's enemies, such as an atheist, is not just the majesty of the stars in the sky (important as it is) but a little baby's cry. When you see that newborn baby it is hard, it is hard to deny that there is a maker and that we hold a miracle in our hands.

But that's where a correct understanding of our self esteem begins: not with us, but with God, with the spectacular, unfathomable majesty of God, with the declaration of verse 1: "*Oh Lord our Lord how majestic is thy name in all the Earth.*" And then comes the twist. This significant other, this infinitely significant other, turns around and says to you and me, "*By the way, I think you're significant too. In fact I cannot get you out of my mind. I hold you in my mind all the time. I made you. I created you. I care for you. Everything that you see around you that I made I have entrusted to you. I have called you to take care of it. I have given you life and I have given you purpose.*"

Hear the Psalm again.

*Oh Lord our Lord 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 (defense of stronghold ) because of (or 'to silence') your foes.*

That is, the best defense to silence the enemy and the avenger, are the enormous heavens and the tiniest of babies].

*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? (But you are. You are mindful of us).*

*What are mortals that you care for them but you do? (But you do! You do care for us).*

*You made us a little lower than God. (The book of Genesis would add that God made us in God's image)*

*and crowned us with glory and honor. (We are sons and daughters of the King of Kings.) You have given us dominion over the work of your hands.*

*You have put all things under our feet. All sheep and oxen and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air and the fish of the sea whatever passes along the paths of the sea.*

(You have given us purpose. We have been entrusted with the care of God's creation and God's people. And then the summary).

*Oh Lord our Lord (how amazing), how majestic in all the Earth is your name.*

Tired or weary? Feeling small and insignificant?

In bondage to feelings that belittle you, or words that somebody spoke that cripple you?

Or to failures or regrets that hold you down?

Well, here's a word to place into the very depth of your being from Psalm 8. A word that was written long ago, but just for us. A love letter from God, the infinite one, who says that he cannot get us out of his mind.

And, as if that were not enough, he follows up on the words of the Psalm a thousand years later by proving his love -- sending his son into this world and saying to us that despite everything we have done to get God out of our minds, God, literally cannot forget us!

Remember those words from Norman Vincent Peale that I mentioned a few moments ago about his struggle as a child? He goes on as he tells that story to tell about what happened with those feelings. He writes:

One summer Sunday afternoon when I was 12 my father said he wanted to call on a family living two miles out in the country and asked me to accompany him as he walked over there.

On the walk father asked me Norman, are you willing to let the great doctor Jesus Christ treat you? If you will let Jesus take charge of your mind -- indeed your whole life you can be free of this misery, which if it continues can destroy your effectiveness. I said I would put my life into the hands of this Jesus. My father committed me to Christ in a prayer. He then asked me to tell Jesus that I was giving myself into his hands quite deliberately and

letting go by an act of affirmation of all my inferiority feelings. As we walked home in the gathering twilight I felt a sense of peace and happiness as though I were really on top of this problem. Although I had another bout with inferiority during my college days the same remedy was applied again with the result that this self-defeating thought was healed through the power of Christ.

We don't have to be God. God is God. It is God's name that is majestic in and above all the Earth. God is the only truly significant one. But it is precisely this very being, who says to you and me "You are significant to me: I cannot get you out of my mind." And it is this recognition, that will never change in God's heart, that is sealed by the broken body and shed blood of Jesus Christ, the knowledge of this recognition that both humbles us – and lifts us up higher than we could ever dream.

May we know this good news and be at peace.

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