

# Beautiful

Psalm 8

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My brother Barry was trying to get my attention. We were young, I might have been eight or nine. We were driving up to the mountains in California to the camp where we spent so much time. As a kid I was all boy, wanting to run, to play sports, to swim, to wrestle. Being in the car for a couple of hours did nothing but make me feel caged up and anxious. But Barry was older, more mature, more refined, with an appreciation of the finer things. Barry must have been eleven or twelve by then. Anyway he was looking out the window as we made our way up the mountains. With eyes wide open he saw the grasses and flowers of the foothills. He caught a view of a hawk soaring, he saw the pines and firs, the cliffs and valleys, the cool running streams, the clouds set so high against the blue backdrop of the sky, and he was filled with wonder and amazement. Meanwhile I was bored. After a while Barry sat back in his seat, gave a contented sigh, and said, "It is all just so beautiful."

I wonder where the psalmist was when he wrote our words for this morning. Was it a cold and crisp night when the sky was lit up with the moon and stars running their courses? Was it on the shores of the sea or by some clear flowing river? Was it gazing out on a sweeping view of the cattle on a thousand hills? The psalmist saw something. Then composing a simple set of stanzas he gave voice to a psalm of praise. I can imagine that one, so filled with wonder and awe, sitting back and giving a contented sigh, saying, "It is all just so beautiful."

I can also imagine so many in our world today having the attitude I did at eight or nine years old. Maybe not boredom, but certainly disinterest. There must be many who don't really get it. The stresses and strains of life don't allow them time to sit back and take in the majesty of God's creation. The struggle to survive, real threats like wars and

famine fill them with despair and hopelessness. For some they can't think beyond themselves, either thinking too much of themselves and having no room for God or thinking too little of themselves and finding it impossible to believe that God is mindful of them, much less as being one who is there to care for them. Some are bored and disinterested, finding more pleasure and pursuit of happiness in created things like electronic devices or bigger toys like boats and cars and even private jets. And there are some so filled with hate and a distorted view of life that they are literally blocked from seeing the beauty of creation, the beauty of the Creator, the beauty of life, and so they perpetrate crimes against humanity and persecute those they have deemed the enemy.

Psalm 8 has taken on a place of great significance for me. It seems of the utmost importance that we come to a point in our lives where we stand alongside the psalmist and share this wonderful reverence for life and this worshipful adoration for God our Creator, wrapping ourselves up front and back, beginning and end, with the joyous outburst of praise, "Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth." This psalm prepares us to live fully into a life of loving God and loving our neighbor. This psalm prepares us to resist the urge to see others as less than human. This psalm prepares us to see God as so much more than human, so beyond us, and yet so close to us.

I don't think it takes away from the inspiration of the psalmist to say the one writing this didn't connect all the dots on their own. Whether on a crisp cold night staring at the open sky or by the shores of the sea or the banks of a river or gazing on the cattle of a thousand hills, the psalmist was not working with a blank slate, an empty canvas. The psalmist knew a story. That story informed his outlook on life and his understanding of creation. What was the story he knew? "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...." The psalmist was an Israelite, with a heritage that stretched back to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and a belief that there was a God by whose hand all life had come into being. This God simply spoke and there was life. "And God said...." Those words declaring the power of God to speak and bring life are found in verse 3, and verse 6, and verse 9, and verse 11, and verse

14, and verse 20, and verse 24, and verse 26, and verse 29 of Genesis chapter 1, the chapter that begins the Bible with the words that say, “In the beginning.” And God said...and it was so. We are not alone in this world.

The story the psalmist knew was not only one that tells us God said, it also tells us God saw. As God said and things were created God saw what was created, and what God saw was good. Today in a world where the headlines in the paper and the lead story on the news and the trending topics and the posts are speaking of wars and violence and hatred and pain, we must remember that what God saw in creation was good. Today I am talking about what God saw as good and I am holding tightly to the word beautiful. In a few weeks we will read a bit further in the story God has given us and we will add to our vocabulary the word broken. Today I do not deny or ignore the word broken, but neither am I about to lose sight of the word that describes God’s creation, and that word is beautiful. What God made was good. How do we know? God saw it and God said it was good.

This is so important when we come to verse 26 in chapter one of Genesis. We have one of those phrases I just referred to, another one of those, “And God said....” In Genesis 1:26 the verse reads, “And God said, ‘Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness...’” So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” In the image of God we were created. I think it goes without saying that this refers to all humanity, to all human beings. We are all created in the image of God.

And then humans are given a very special responsibility, to be stewards of life, of all life. The Genesis story speaks of ruling over the fish in the seas and the birds in the sky and over the livestock and wild animals and over all the creatures that move on the ground. The command, the call we have been given is to be fruitful and multiply. Where human life is lived rightly things grow and blossom and bloom. Life is protected, life is preserved, life is guarded, life is special, life is sacred.

The psalmist really gets it right. He lifts high the name of God, “Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.” Simply looking at the heavens the writer is able to see the great gulf between the almighty God and human beings. “When I consider your heavens, the works of your fingers, the moon and stars which you have set in place...what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them.” There is a chasm so great between God and humans, we must be insignificant and not even matter. In the scope of things we are so small. But the psalmist has heard God’s story of creation. The psalmist has been invited into a world where humans are created in the image of God. The psalmist has even read into Genesis chapter 2 where we are told God formed us from the dust of the earth and breathed into our nostrils the breath of life. The breath of God, the spirit of God is in us. It is not of our doing, but it certainly is God’s doing. Humans are stamped with the image of God. “You have made human beings a little lower than angels, you have crowned us with glory and honor.”

I share this psalm today in the hopes that one day every human being will come to the place where they know the majesty of the Creator and the sacredness of human life and where we all walk so closely with God that we share a common goal of preserving life and nurturing life and where our life together as God’s children is marked by loving God and loving our neighbor. I hope for that day when we all live into the fullness of the good life God has prepared for us. I long for that day when we all sit back and sigh with wonder and with awe and say, “It is all so beautiful.” I don’t know when we will get there. I don’t know how we will get there. But I firmly believe God’s plan and purpose is to get us there. And while we have this gift of life in our nostrils and the spirit of God in our hearts I believe each and every day we are to be like the psalmist, waving our hands and raising our voices and proclaiming how majestic is the name of the Lord in all the earth. And I do believe that sometimes someone will hear our songs of praise to the Creator God and they will get it.

I didn’t get it as a kid. My brother Barry sat back and said, “It is all so beautiful.” I, all of eight or nine years old, was bored. Well, in the summer of 2014 I got my brother Barry back. We were at Moss Landing, a spot on the California coast about halfway between Carmel

and Santa Cruz. We were having lunch, a feast of cioppino and halibut and artichokes and shrimp, but there was no way the food on the table could compare with what was happening out in the Pacific Ocean. The whales had come out to play, and it was awesome. Barry and I were glued to the fence looking out. We weren't alone. Close to a hundred people were on the shore and up on the patio of the restaurant, and when a whale would rise from the water you could hear a roar. Someone would point, someone would shout, and ooh and ahh would be heard up and down the coast.

The next part of this story is not my favorite, but it is part of the telling. Apparently when I get excited my voice rises. Some would say, "Rises more than usual," because some say my voice is always a little high. Now this has led to some embarrassing moments in my life, like the day the San Francisco 49ers came to play the Houston Oilers...yes, I said Oilers. It was the fall of 1995, the first year we lived in Houston. I bought tickets to a noon game, by a miracle of God the service ended early that day...and by 11:45 I was headed to the Astrodome to meet our son Jake and our friends. I knew the cost of food at sporting events, so I pulled into the drive thru at a McDonald's and ordered a Big Mac meal. It was a special day, so I even said I wanted it supersized. The woman on the speaker said, "Will there be anything else...ma'am." I guess I was so excited that day my voice was raised a bit, and she called me ma'am. I tried to lower my voice and respond, "Yes, that will be all." Didn't work. She said, "That will be \$3.50...ma'am."

So I have come to accept that when I get excited my voice rises. Well there I am next to my brother Barry about a year ago and the whales are just blowing us away with surges and splashes and flips and turns. Barry has this really nice little camera and he was taking pictures. I had a set of binoculars and I was the spotter. When I spotted activity I would get Barry's attention and he would capture it with a picture. We were a mess, me screaming in a high voice and pointing at the water and shouting for Barry to take a picture and then me anxiously asking, "Did you get it, did you get it." Later in the day, we were looking at the pictures and he got some spectacular ones. He said, "What a great day...but you were like a little girl with your screaming and shouting." I

just smiled and said, “It was all just so beautiful.” I should have winked at him. All these years later, and I got it. It is all just so beautiful.

A guy came to our church in Houston years ago and he didn’t get it. He knew about the wonders of creation, he appreciated the stars and galaxies, he was a man of science. He was a nice man, kind to others and respected. But the idea that there was a God who created all this, much less that this type of a God was intimately involved in human life, was just too much for him. He came to church because his wife believed, but he just smiled and nodded his head, not believing a word of it.

At the time we were offering the Alpha Course, and so his wife signed up for the Alpha Course. Alpha covers the basic things of the Christian faith, and it was a very helpful class. Susan, the wife, was loving Alpha and she went on the retreat toward the end of the Alpha Course. At the retreat some, some powerful things happened. People opened up about their lives, one woman prayed to give her life to Christ, there were some pretty amazing healings in relationships, and everyone felt the Spirit of God at work.

Saturday night of the retreat, in a time of prayer, Susan asked for prayers for her husband Trevor. She told how Trevor was not a believer, how his scientific mind played a role in keeping him from believing, and how she longed for him to know the love of Jesus Christ and to believe in God in a personal and intimate way. She said, “He told me he is going to church tomorrow while we are away on retreat. I pray God touches his heart.” The group gathered and prayed.

Trevor showed up for worship that Sunday while the group that was in Alpha was away on retreat. I was glad to see Trevor, but I knew he didn’t really get it, he didn’t believe. I greeted him as he came in and we then moved into the worship service. That particular Sunday I was preaching from Mark 8, and the passage included two stories. One was about Jesus feeding 4,000 people with just seven loaves and few small fish. This feeding happened after Jesus had fed 5,000 people in Mark chapter 6. After Jesus fed the 4,000, which was after Jesus fed the 5,000, the disciples get worried because they are in a boat with Jesus and they only have one loaf between the twelve of them. They are worried about

having enough bread when Jesus has just fed 5,000 and 4,000 with just a few loaves. Jesus throws up his hands and says, “Do you still not understand?”

Well that morning, as I preached through that particular passage, I kept using the phrase, “Do you get it?” Do we get it, that God loves us and God will provide for us and that to go even a bit further with the image Jesus is in the boat with us, Jesus, God’s Beloved Son is with us, with us, Immanuel, God is with us...do you get it, do we get it? When I consider the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars which you have set in place, what are we as human beings that you care for us? God’s ultimate answer is to send his Son to be with us, to bridge the chasm, to unite our hearts, to be the God who is with us, to live with us and for us, to die and to rise again so that we can have life now and life for eternity with God. I guess I got going a bit that morning, because this stuff really matters. And I guess I asked the question quite a few times that day, because that questions really matters. Do you get it?

After the service I had calmed down, hopefully my voice wasn’t quite as high as it gets when I’m excited, and Trevor comes walking out the door. I had forgotten about Trevor in my excitement, I had forgotten about the group on the Alpha Retreat, I had forgotten the prayers Susan and the group were praying for Trevor. Trevor comes out the door at the end of worship smiling and I shake his hand and start moving toward the next person. But Trevor holds on to my hand for an extra moment. He has a big smile on his face. He looks me in the eye and he says, “I get it.” It took me a second, actually it took me more than that. I didn’t get it at that point. He said, “You asked this morning if we get it, and I get it. I get it.” We live for moments like that. We stand with the psalmist week after week in church and we walk with the psalmist through neighborhoods and marketplaces and schools and offices and in our homes and we live the story and we tell the story and we proclaim, “Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.” And so often people aren’t ready, people don’t get it. And then sometimes, some times that are sacred and special and holy and precious, somebody gets it.

That was in the February of 2002. A few years ago I got an email from Susan, Trevor's wife. This is what it said:

*Hi, Wayne:*

*Trevor has terminal cancer. The doctors think he only has months to live. I am putting together a testimony of Trevor's walk with the Lord, and wondered whether you would have a copy of the sermon you gave at Pines on Sunday, 24 February 2002. It was titled "Don't You Get It Yet!"*

I found the sermon and sent it to her. She wrote back:

*Hi, Wayne:*

*Thank you so much for locating and sending the sermon. It brought back so many wonderful memories of that wonderful Alpha weekend. As a result of answered prayers that we prayed that weekend, Trevor has not been the same.... he was forever ruined for the ordinary.*

*Although Trevor's health is failing, his faith grows stronger day by day. I was reading your sermon again and reflecting on how God has provided during Trev's illness. Every time Trev had to visit the chemo ward for treatment we would pray that God would bring people to us that needed the love and encouragement of God in their life at that particular time. Every time God was faithful to provide. People still come and visit Trevor at our home, and it's such a joy to see people growing in their faith as they observe Trevor going through this illness and having no doubts or fears about his future.*

*We feel God's presence with us, and know we are not alone in this season.*

*Please pass on our love to our wonderful Pines family.*

Love and blessings,  
Susan and Trevor



We will leave this sanctuary and go into a world filled with brokenness. There are so many who do not get it. But we go out believing in the beauty of life, in the beauty of a God who not only created this world and stamped it with his approval, but also of the God who was not willing to lose this world, but has sent his Beloved Son to save this world. We have a story to tell and we tell it day after day and week after week. And every once in a while someone walks out our door, looks us in the eye, with a big smile on their face, and they say, “I get it.” And we say:

Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.