

## A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*Humble Dominion*

Psalm 8

October 6, 2024

*On DaySpring's 31<sup>st</sup> Covenant Day*

The 8<sup>th</sup> Psalm opens with a celebration of the majesty of God and heads toward a recognition of the surprising place of humans in creation. *O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name... and... you, God, have set everything under our feet and given us dominion over all your works.* Yet the connection between God's glory and our role isn't entirely seamless. The psalmist asks, "Who am I that I would even cross your mind?"

Not everyone today thinks of themselves with this kind of humility. Some people are like cats in relationship to their Creator, some are like dogs.

Dogs think to themselves, "This person feeds me, waters me, pets me. They must be God." Cats think, "This person feeds me, waters me, pets me. I must be God."

The psalmist, it seems to me, draws on both ends of the canine-feline spectrum. "Who am I that you would think of me?" and in the next breath, "You have set everything in creation under my feet." Maybe we're cats and dogs... The psalmist draws on both ends of this.

And in it poses the existential enduring question: Who is God, and who am I? These are the throughlines in all of scripture. Who is God and who am I: The enduring questions of existence. When humans think about themselves—which, for some of them, unique among the creatures as far as we know—is quite often—when they really think about themselves, they tend to either think they are pretty special or they think they are nothing at all. Philosophers and theologians, ecologists, and anthropologists hold these self-perceptions in some kind of tension—humans are both the crown of creation and a passing whisper on the wind of history.

But we have the breath of God's life within us. The first page of the Bible resembles a great hymn of thanksgiving to the source of creation. This, we see from the first word unfolds as a story of life. It resounds in refrains: *This is good*. The goodness, the beauty of everything that exists is continually reaffirmed. God calls into life, and everything enters existence. With a word, he separates light from darkness, day from night, alternates the seasons, opens a color palette with a wide variety of plants and animals. And into this lush, vibrant garden of creation, the human finally appears. And God speaks yet again. *This is very good*.

And a solitary voice cries out a doxology on behalf of all creatures: "O Lord, my sovereign, how majestic is your name *in all the earth*."

The beauty and mystery of creation generate in the human heart the first movement that stirs prayer. "When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have set in place, what are humans that you are mindful of them?" (Psalm 8: 4-5).

The person in prayer contemplates the mystery of existence around, sees the starry sky that towers above and wonders what the design of love must be behind such a wonderful work! Throughout the universe, the human being is the only creature aware of so much profusion of beauty. A small being who is born, dies, here today and gone tomorrow, is the only one aware of this beauty. We are aware of this beauty! And, in this boundless vastness, who are we?

Who am I, just one human, in God's creation? With the world all around and underfoot, the skies overhead, the moon and stars and beyond, the majesty of God on display: who are we then? Wondering at this wonder, the Psalmist might be a young parent holding a newborn baby, looking into her eyes and seeing total vulnerability and total magnificence. You, child, are precious, you are glorious, you are frail, you are powerful, you are nothing, you are everything. How can life be both so fragile and so powerful, so delicate and so remarkable?

Prayer is a humility born of life's vulnerability and dignity that comes into the eyes of a parent holding a baby, an adult child burying a parent, every gardener nurturing seedlings to life.

Who am I? It's a question born of existential humility and one with a particularly sharp edge in this era in which we live. Who are we? Human greatness is infinitesimal when compared to the size of the universe. Our greatest achievements seem very little; our most egregious sins seem as if they would be inconsequential. But humans are not nothing. We are made as little less than a god; we are crowned with honor and glory (8:6). We are given dominion over the work of God's hands.

By nature, we are almost nothing. Today we are, and tomorrow we are not, but by vocation, by our calling, we are the children of the great King! And we, too, wear crowns on our heads. The crown we wear is our place among all the creatures. The dominion we have is our impact on creation. That's what dominion is: you have dominion when your actions affect others who have little say in how your actions affect them. In this regard, humans absolutely have rule and dominion—it may not be absolute dominion—that's God's—but we have power. And we are using it every day in small ways and in huge ways.

And, let us confess together, not always for good. This is a mirror we need to look closely into. Who are we in God's creation? The most powerful creaturely force the world has ever known.

In the mirror of creation's life today, we see how we humans have used and misused our position among the creatures. Christ's way of rulership blesses others. Our rulership has cursed others in more and more ways. The effects of human dominion are being felt on every place on the planet. From the lowest trench under the sea, where the first unmanned submarine exploration traveled all the way down there, flipped on its lights, and the first thing it saw was a candy wrapper... to the highest mountain peak, Everest, which is strewn with trash and bodies like so many forlorn places on the earth... From the highest point to the lowest point, from the soil which we are hammering with pesticides and fertilizers to

the warming skies which are churning with industrial emissions--more than it can absorb, to forests bulldozed in the Amazon, to gulf waters warming to supercharge hurricanes, to a plastic island in the Pacific twice the size of Texas... The consequence of human dominion is evident all around. It's not so good.

It turns out we're not so good at being a little less than heavenly beings. We're so bad at it that our era is dubbed the *Anthropocene*—the human era because human activity is the dominant force on all planetary life—ALL planetary life. Rather than bearing witness to the majesty of God in all the earth, we fling our selfish power in every place on earth. We are kings and queens. And something is rotten in our kingdom.

The Bible calls this idolatry—when anything is swapped where God only belongs-- and idolatry is pretty much the worst. We've set ourselves up as idols and then served ourselves by sacrificing the firstborn of the next generations. *O Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth*, we sing, but we live as if it's our name that is to be most majestic in all the earth. *O Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth*, we hope our children and children's children will still be able to sing.

The problem is obviously bigger than can be solved with backyard gardens and composting kitchen scraps. The changes needed are industrial, technological, cultural, political, international, and spiritual. Yes, spiritual. That's actually good news. Because it means that our hearts and souls are caught up in this healing, too. Our whole selves in and for a world which is wholly God's. It means that kitchen scraps and little gardens mean something. In a world where Jesus receives a child and says you must receive the kingdom of God like a child, nothing is too small, nothing is too insignificant to matter to God's redemptive purposes in all the world.

It's exactly in the people and places deemed insignificant—the overlooked, the quotidian, the ordinary-- that we find personal connection to delight and connection to all that is wrong. Wendell Berry wrote, "Once our personal connection to what is wrong becomes clear, then we have to choose: we can go on as before, recognizing our dishonesty and living with it the best we can, or we can begin the effort to change the way we think and live."

Changing the way we think and live---the first steps there are steps we know how to take. We break the bread and share it with one another. And we share our lives with one another and beyond, outside the walls. We serve the Lord of the incarnation in our songs and with our hearts and with our hands. And we live with hope for all the world in whatever dark storms are ahead; we remember everything is spiritual. We are not alone. The Lord is majestic, and his whole world set under our feet means that it's right there. God's world set under our feet means that it's just right there—right there, waiting for us to straighten these clumsy crowns on our heads and get to being who we were made to be and can still be.

To exercise dominion is to take responsibility for our role in the lives of all that is and will be. We may wish to give this crown back and retreat into our solitary lives and personal

pursuits. We don't have to worry about the other, the outsider, the immigrant, the child, the widow, the orphan, the poor, the person knocking on our door, the ground beneath our feet that's crying out for our participation in our redemptive lives. We may wish to retreat back into our solitary pursuits, but this is not possible. Who are we that God should be mindful of us? We're the ones to spark the revolution, to ignite the revival, the spiritual revival of the glory of God in all the earth, the goodness of God in the land of the living, the love of God in Jesus Christ for all people and all critters and all places. As Wendell Berry also said, "There are no unsacred places, only sacred places and desecrated places." Let the revival break out.

Now, it's time for a sacred revolution. The time has come. It's time to topple our own pretense to lordship, to restore our unshod feet to holy ground, return our hands to service, our hearts to compassion, our minds to creativity, our prayers to humility, our voices to give courage and conviction to those who have power to make changes big and small.

We don't deserve this crown. We didn't ask for this crown, but we certainly don't deserve it. But God chose us like a child pulled into the arms of Jesus before a watching world. By grace, we still pray, chose us for such a time as this. Our eyes turn to one who is the Son of God and Son of man. He was equal with God but emptied himself to become human, born in the likeness of men. He lowered himself to self-sacrifice to death, even death on a cross. This is what Christ's version of lordship looks like. It's not the pretense of those who would crown themselves king of kings. It's the one who set aside his crown of glory and took on a crown of thorns. Which means that for us, it's not ruling over, it's laying down our lives for the good of others, including those yet to come. It means that we are to live in the world in such a way so that, we pray, our children and children's children can, like their greatest great-grandparents, take all the beautiful world into their eyes and join the hymn that goes on and on and on---O Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.

Amen.