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10/4/2015, Pentecost 19B, Lectionary 27
Genesis 2:18-24, Psalm 8, Mark 10:2-16

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We have before today us quite a challenging set of Bible readings. It feels like God's Providence that he has set these readings before us at this time in the life of our congregation. Alas, these readings have the potential to trouble everyone in sight. We sure seem to read of a male/female structure to human community in our First Lesson, Genesis 2. In our Gospel Lesson from Mark 10, Jesus affirms that male/female structure in his discussion of marriage and divorce, frowning upon divorce in the process. And our Psalm is liable to offend the environmentalists, who are right in lamenting our human capacity for destroying whole worlds and sub worlds on our planet, and might do so in outer space too if we get half a chance. For a preacher who joins the congregation in hoping for some peace and quiet these days, these are difficult texts. But all the preacher can do is the same thing preachers have always tried to do: Trust that the thoughts and ways of God are higher than our thoughts and ways (Isaiah 55:9), but are good nonetheless and worthy of being preached as honestly as lies within the gifts of the preacher.

I have decided to approach today's Bible lessons by way of our Psalm – that beautiful Psalm 8. It is a Psalm that delights in God's creation as a whole and in the place of humanity within that creation. There is a passage in an old commentary on Psalm 8 that has really caught my fancy. I think it is because of a vacation our family took to Joshua Tree National Park in the southern California desert. The Psalm talks about the starry heavens – places where we might imagine our God is no longer involved:

⁴... I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars you have set in their courses...
(Psalm 8:4, LBW)

The commentary passage I like rejoices in the idea that none of this is by accident – that there is not one God-forsaken stretch of land on our earth or in the whole universe. Even where people have never stepped foot, still God is the Creator and Upholder of all that is. The passage goes this way:

God worketh ever and everywhere. There is no *place* where God is not. The miracles of his power await us on all sides. Traverse the silent valleys where the rocks enclose you on either side, rising like the battlements of heaven till you can see but a strip of the blue sky far overhead; you may be the only traveler who has passed through that glen; the bird may

start up affrighted, and the moss may tremble beneath the first tread of human foot; but God is there in a thousand wonders, upholding yon rocky barriers, filling the flowercups with their perfume, and refreshing the lonely pines with the breath of his mouth.¹

In the vastness of the California desert, it is easy to imagine yourself stumbling upon some narrow canyon that even the old outlaws had not found. And then it is awesome to know that even in that lonesome stretch of stones, and in the starry sky above with its multitudes of worlds, there is God at work, holding everything together in his loving way.

The Psalm then speaks with wonder about the place of humanity in this vast creation. The Psalmist does not leave our race out. He includes us among the many grand things that belong to the Lord. The stars belong to the Lord, yes. The heavens are the work of his fingers. The moon and the stars have been set in their courses by God. But we too are made by God. Our course too is tenderly regarded by the Lord. It fills the Psalmist with amazement to ponder this. Humanity is not overlooked and lost amidst the wonders of God's creation. And there is not a soul on this earth that is here by accident – by the cold randomness of an indifferent universe. There has never been such an accidental human being. Never will be! Each of you is here by the deliberate decision of God that he wants you here. He would not have the world be without you. You are a jewel in God's creation, "but little lower than the angels... adorned with glory and honor":

⁶You have made him but little lower than the angels;
you adorn him with glory and honor;

So, in the great doctrine of Creation, you and I are included. The Lord made the stars, yes, but also he made you and me too.

MALE AND FEMALE

Now let's move on to the peculiar way in which he made us: According to our First Lesson, he made us male and female. Let's explore that idea a bit.

Genesis 2 says that the LORD judged that we human beings are built for company. We are sociable beings:

¹⁸Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."

So the Lord created the animals and brought them to the man.

¹ Charles H. Spurgeon, Psalm 8, in his *The Treasury of David*.

Now, there is no doubt that animals are helpers to humanity. This was even more evident in earlier societies. The ox pulls the plough. The family would have starved over the winter if that ox had not pulled that plough. The cowboy has his horse. You can't round up the herd without your horse. The sheep provides us with wool, the bees with honey and the pollination of flowers, dogs and cats help us with their company.

Adam had all these animals, and I bet they helped him along. And yet they were not the kind of helper that the Lord had in mind. The animals are great, bless them, but there was some emptiness in the man that the animals did not fill.

The text specifies that it was the woman who completed the man. It is not just that the Lord gave the man another human being so that he would not be lonely. Rather the Lord gave the man a woman.

This accords with that marvelous saying the chapter before, in Genesis 1. It is a fascinating verse because it slips so easily between singular and plural:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27, RSV)

It is as if the word "man" does not acquire its precise meaning until it is spelled out in terms of male and female. A multitude of men does not make "man." Nor does a multitude of women make "woman." The text suggests that men and women should remember each other and be glad for each other.

So I figure that even the celibate, holy, hermit dwelling alone in his mountain cave dare not forget about women. He should remember his mother. He should remember Mary the mother of our Lord. He should remember his sisters and young women he knew back when he was a young man. For if he forgets them, he thereby diminishes his own humanity.

And the same goes for the celibate, holy, hermit dwelling alone in her mountain cave. Let her not forget men. Let her not give up on men as if the universe had no men or would be better off if it did. Men are nothing special, I know that very well, and yet I do not think we are entirely worthless. The Bible suggests that we are awfully alone in this world if we fail to remember and give thanks for the other sex.

MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, CHILDREN

So, I have touched on our Psalm and our First Lesson, which is from Genesis 2. Now I want to carry on by taking a look at our Gospel Lesson, with its talk of marriage, divorce, and the children. Let's begin with these words of Jesus from this morning's Gospel Lesson:

⁴They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to put her away." ⁵But Jesus said to them, "For

your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment.
(Mark 10:4-5, RSV)

You can almost hear a sigh in the voice of Jesus in this passage. Jesus knows what he is talking about in this matter of marriage and divorce, for he was with the Father and the Holy Spirit in the beginning, when they instituted holy marriage. But things have not worked out as our Triune God had hoped. Instead of husbands and wives loving and cherishing each other as long as their hearts were beating, there is much sadness, conflict, disappointment, and divorce in marriages across our land. The statistics are not good. Divorce is sometimes necessary. Even Jesus seems to acknowledge that in our passage. But things simply have not worked out as Jesus had hoped. Too much “hardness of heart” in our world.

I bet Jesus often looks at our poor human race and sighs. He loves us, gave his life on Calvary for us, and yet I fear that we often disappoint him. The frank words of St. Paul ring true in our lives:

... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23, RSV)

Sometimes I think the trick to the Christian life is simply that we should wake up in the morning with the intention that today we are going to try to make Jesus proud of us, with less need to sigh over us.

In our Gospel Lesson, Jesus affirms the male/female structure of human community and he speaks up for the life-long nature of marriage. Notice that marriage between a man and a woman is not an institution that came into existence during the course of the human story. Marriage is in Genesis. It is not *part* of the human story, but the *beginning* of the human story, to get it started as the Lord wants it to be. So marriage is old — older than the Church, older than Israel. Indeed, the Church believes that God gives his blessing to all marriages, long before Abraham, Moses, or the apostles came along. And the Church would urge all husbands and wives, whether or not they are Jews or Christians, to be true to one another. Jesus knew that there is divorce in our world, and he acknowledges that Moses allowed for divorce, but it is not what he wants for us. He wishes that there was no need for divorce.

So do many of us. We wish there was no need for divorce in this world. Even better, we wish there were no hardness of heart that drives people to divorce. We wish that people would simply and honestly do what they pledged to do: to love and cherish each other until they are separated by death. And if people do suffer divorce, let them whisper a prayer for each other from time to time, even as they grow old.

In this section of our Gospel Lesson, Jesus is trying to protect the vulnerable ones in our world. He does not want husbands to cast off their wives for light reasons, nor wives to divorce their husbands for light reasons. This focus on the vulnerable ones becomes most focused in our Lord’s talk about the children. He

does not want the children to be pushed away, to the outside of our thoughts and plans:

Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. (Mark 10:14, RSV)

And this talk of marriage and children brings me back to Psalm 8 and the glorious things it says of humanity:

⁵what is man that you should be mindful of him,
the son of man that you should seek him out?

⁶You have made him but little lower than the angels;
you adorn him with glory and honor; (Psalm 8, LBW)

Perhaps we human beings are never more majestic, never more human, and never more angelic than when we are simply trying to fulfill the vows we took in life -- in Baptism or Ordination to Holy Ministry or the solemn vows of marriage -- loving our wives and husbands and the children of this world. We look at old folks as they look at each other. We see in their eyes their longstanding love for one another. We know that their beloved is beautiful in their eyes, though onlookers see only grey hair and wrinkles. We notice poor parents in a tough economy, working their hands to the bone, doing without for themselves, trying with all their might to maintain a good home for their children. We human beings are probably never more majestic than when we are trying to take care of the little ones among us -- whether or not we are married, whether or not they are our children or simply the weak ones of this world. We admire people for pouring out their lives and strength for the little ones of this world -- both their frail elderly spouse and this world's little children with life ahead of them -- and we should think that our God admires them too.

JESUS

I conclude by noting that the extravagant language of Psalm 8 is perfectly true in one case. Many of us fall short of the praise the Psalm gives for man, but there is one Man for whom these things are all true:

⁷you give him mastery over the works of your hands;
you put all things under his feet:

This one Man, to whom all dominion has been given, is our Lord Jesus Christ. This is really good news for us. And to him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.