

Daily Gifts
Psalms 8 & 104
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I want to tell you a story about one of the churches I preached in as a teenager, I first have to tell you something about northeastern Oklahoma—it is not flat.

One of the annoying things about growing up in Oklahoma is that when you meet people from other places they assume that you come from a place where the land is flat. As Nebraskans you understand that. I must confess that when Michael and I landed at Eppley Airfield in March 2010 on our first visit to Omaha in order to interview for this job, we were pleasantly surprised to look out the terminal window and see wooded hills rising up before us. Michael said, “Is this Nebraska?” “I guess so,” I answered. Later we would learn that it was in fact Iowa we were looking at. Nonetheless, there are wooded hills on the Nebraska side of the river.

As an Oklahoman I learned to explain to people that though we had portions of the state that were flat, they were mistaken to assume that we looked like Kansas. Oklahoma in fact has 13 ecological zones, more than any other state, from mesas in the northwest where antelope roam to cypress swamps in the southeast where you can find alligators. Oklahoma even has a few ancient mountain ranges, now long worn down by erosion. And northeastern Oklahoma lies at the foothills of the Ozarks, so there are heavily wooded valleys and remote regions in the hills away from towns and highways. And it is this which is important to my story.

One day when I was in high school the Director of Missions of the Grand Lake Baptist Association called me, as he did on occasion, to ask if I would preach for a pastor who was away. He said, “Scott, can you preach this weekend at Poynor Baptist Church?”

“Where’s that?” I asked, surprised to hear the name of a church that I’d never heard of before. Having grown up in that Association I thought I knew all the churches.

“It’s past Whitewater Baptist Church.”

“Really, there’s something past Whitewater? That’s about as backwoods as it gets,” I thought. He gave me directions, and on the appointed Sunday, Mom and I left home to drive to this mysterious, backwoods church.

If you head south on Highway 10 out of the lake town of Grove, Oklahoma, you are in a rural area of small farms nestled in the hills and along the creeks. In order to make the turn to Whitewater Baptist Church, you have to look for the granite monument to General Stand Watie, the Cherokee leader who was also the last surrendering Confederate General. The granite monument marks his burial spot. We turned east at the monument and soon the county road entered the dark woods that run along Whitewater Creek. Eventually we passed the tiny Whitewater Baptist Church and continued farther east into even deeper woods, not far from the border with Arkansas.

Soon, there was a break in the trees to our left, and there was a tiny stone church. There were no houses or buildings anywhere around. Mom and I parked and entered and were greeted warmly by the few folks there setting up. Eventually, there would be eight people in attendance that day. We would learn that only one of them lived nearby. The others all drove in from other places, because this was the church where they'd grown up. There was one young child. I was surprised to learn that the nursery was the open spot at the back of the sanctuary and that one of the adults would sit back there and watch the toddler while he played during the service.

When worship began the song leader stood at the pulpit and encouraged everyone, but I noticed, oddly, that he turned with his right side toward the congregation, rested his elbow on the top of the pulpit, and stuck his finger in his ear. Then everyone began to sing. And suddenly two truths were revealed. The first was that this small congregation of eight people loved to sing. They all sang out loudly and strongly and with much joy. The second truth was that not a one of them could carry a tune. Which explained why the song leader stuck his finger in his ear.

In the twenty-seven years that I've been preaching (yes, it is surprisingly that long) I've often heard far more harmonious singing, but I must confess that I have never witnessed such exuberant praise as I did that day in the tiny, out-of-tune congregation of that backwoods church.

Song inspires us, connecting us to spiritual realm. In her book *The Great Awakening* Karen Armstrong writes about the very first Indo-Europeans living on the steppes of what is now southern Russia. As far back as 6,000 years ago these people developed religious practices that included sacrifice, a shared meal, and song. She describes the scene,

Sacrifice was offered in the open air on a small, level piece of land, marked off from the rest of the settlement by a furrow. The seven original creations were all symbolically represented in this arena. . . . The priest, expert in the liturgical chant, would sing a hymn to summon *devas* to the feast. . . . Since the sound of these inspired syllables was itself a god, as the song filled the air and entered their consciousness, the congregation felt surrounded by and infused with divinity.

The forms may have developed over the millennia, the words and concepts altered, but the basic emotional connection has remained. Song connects us to the spirit. It helps to orient us and make sense of our world.

Thus the importance of the ancient Hebrew songbook, the Psalms, to the biblical tradition.

Part of the beauty of the Psalms is how they convey the wide range of human emotion. They contain exultant praise, passionate longing, painful lament, angry invective, profound doubt, stately anthems, and everything in between. Thus their continued appeal, thousands of years after composition. We continue to read and to sing them for devotional encouragement, the beauty of their words, the depth of their thinking. Walter Brueggemann wrote that "the Psalms permit the faithful to enter at whatever level they are able—in ways primitive or

sophisticated, limited or comprehensive, candid or guarded.” This book is available to everyone.

I’m going to preach a series on the Psalms, exploring a variety of different types of psalms and how they speak to our spirits today. Since I’m about to go on paternity leave, the bulk of this series won’t occur until late June and July.

Brueggemann has a very helpful book on the Psalms in which he has grouped them according to a three-part movement—psalms of orientation, psalms of disorientation, and psalms of new orientation. The two psalms we’ve looked at today are psalms of orientation. They are, in fact, more specifically psalms of creation.

Brueggemann writes that “the most foundational experience of orientation is the daily experience of life’s regularities.” These songs are the grateful expressions of a people who are happy and blessed.

These creation psalms, like psalms 8 and 104, describe a world that is orderly and reliable and made so by God; “all of that is daily gift,” Brueggemann wrote. These psalms, then, are expressions of a satisfied and grateful people, thankful to God for making a world that we can rely upon.

Psalms 8 and 104, in particular, convey the idea that we live in protected space, that Creation is governed by a kind, loving, and generous God. The Protestant Reformer John Calvin thought that this psalm conveyed the idea that creation is well-parented. Our divine parent’s care and concern help us to avoid chaos and uncertainty. Because we live in this cared for and protected order, we can feel confident, safe, and free.

Now, all of this may sound a little unrealistic, right? We often experience the world as chaotic, not orderly, dangerous, not safe. There will be psalms that express those disorienting emotions.

I must also include a word of caution. Songs celebrating a reliable, satisfied order can also be written by people who are well off. And it appears that these two particular hymns might come from the royal court. It is much easier for the rich and powerful to be happy with the existing order than it is for the poor and disenfranchised.

But with those caveats, there are also times in our lives when everything feels good and right with the world, at least our small portion of it. These psalms are for those sorts of moments. These are the songs we sing when we are happy, confident, and grateful.

Another feature of these psalms is that they remind us that creation is on-going. It is not simply the work of the dawn of time. The universe continues to expand and evolve. New worlds are born. Life develops. God is still active in creating. That evokes in us the emotions of wonder and praise.

But also expectation. Even when we acknowledge that everything right now is not as orderly and as safe as we hope it will be, we can still trust in the promise that everything will turn out well. Brueggemann writes, “There moves in these psalms a deep conviction that God’s purpose for the world is resilient. That purpose will not yield until creation is brought to fullness.”

And Psalm 8 makes it quite clear that we have a role to play in bringing those promises to fullness. Humanity is crowned with glory and honor and given dominion over the work of God’s hands. It is our role to be regents of God’s reign upon the earth. It is our mission to be stewards of the creation, contributing to its growth and development, its safety and reliability.

There is a powerful moral message in these songs—we are responsible to God and to the rest of creation for the way we live. This should compel us to be kind and loving to other people. It should inspire us to work for a world order that is safe and reliable and that benefits everyone. It should drive us to care for the environment, to make it a protected space that evokes our wonder and praise.

And all of that from a couple of ancient songs.

My thoughts return to that tiny congregation in the backwoods of Oklahoma. They gathered every week and sang with joy and gusto. Despite their lack of harmony, they expressed faith and hope that God was in control, that God's promises would come true, that they would be blessed.

The power of song is that it helps us to create the world of which we sing. So, let us join in thanks and praise.