

## **“Glorious Nobodies”**

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*O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. <sup>2</sup> Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger. <sup>3</sup> When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; <sup>4</sup> what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?*

*<sup>5</sup> Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. <sup>6</sup> You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, <sup>7</sup> all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, <sup>8</sup> the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.*

*<sup>9</sup> O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! (Psalm 8)*

Many of us here can recite the closing scene of Casablanca by memory, at least the most iconic lines. Standing on the tarmac beside the plane that will carry the resistance leader Victor Laszlo to safety, Rick speaks to Ilsa, the woman he loves. Though it breaks his heart to say goodbye, he knows that she needs to join her husband on the plane so their important work can continue. In the end, Rick chooses the needs of the many over the desires of the few. “Ilsa, I’m no good at being noble,” he says, “but it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world. Someday you’ll understand that.”

It's one of the most memorable scenes in movie history. It's also pretty solid theology. Some of the loftiest poetry in the Bible concedes that human problems, even human lives, don't amount to a hill of beans in the vast scheme of the universe. Psalm 8 is part of that legacy. Speaking to the God of heaven and earth, the psalmist admits “*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, mortals that you care for them?*”

This ancient observation, made from the ground looking up at the heavens, is the exact one made by humans thousands of years as they looked from the heavens down at the Earth. Jim Lovell, from the capsule of Apollo 8, was deeply moved by the sight of our tiny green and blue planet from space. “*In an instant,*” he said, you get a sense of “*how insignificant we are, how fragile we are...*”<sup>1</sup> From the ancient psalmist to the modern astronaut, we find it a mystery that God pays us any mind at all.

It is true, even eight billion of us still represent only a miniscule corner of the universe. But that's not the only reason we might seem like a small hill of beans; it's also that we are not very good beans. In fact, we are rotten, stinking, beans. If that sounds harsh, just consider what some of the great Christian thinkers throughout history have said. Take the Apostle Paul, who said “*I do not understand what I do. For [the good] I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... [this is] sin living in me. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I*

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.nbcnews.com/id/18202449/ns/technology\\_and\\_science-space/t/mankinds-rarest-view-earth-afar/#.WTaycfnyvX4](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/18202449/ns/technology_and_science-space/t/mankinds-rarest-view-earth-afar/#.WTaycfnyvX4)



*cannot carry it out... I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.... What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”<sup>2</sup>*

In the Scots Confession, John Knox proclaimed, and we still profess, that through sin “the image of God [has become] utterly defaced in man, and he and his children became by nature hostile to God, slaves to Satan, and servants to sin.”<sup>3</sup>

John Calvin, in his study of this very psalm, simply referred to human beings as nothing more than “poor worms of the earth.”<sup>4</sup> The point is impossible to miss. You and I are part of a tiny hill of rotten beans. In the eyes of heaven, we really should not amount to much.

That could have been the end of the psalm. But as it turns out, that was only background context for what the psalmist really wanted to say. In the end, Psalm 8 is not about self-consciousness about our insignificance, nor is it about the shame of our sinfulness. Instead, the psalm is a profound profession of awe and wonder about something that is also true: namely, that despite our many, many flaws, God chooses not only to love us, but to glorify us. We are given glory that is neither earned or deserved, but still offered in grace, in hope, and in faith. “I cannot believe you even know that we are here,” the psalmist says, “and yet you have lifted us up like angels... you have elevated us to a divine-adjacent status... you have crowned us with glory and honor... and put us in charge of your creation, the works of your hands.” The psalmist is in awe of this honor, this faith that is in no way deserved, this blessing that is so generous they hardly comprehend it.

I once heard the late, great preacher Tony Campolo tell a story about a father who lived in a small Midwestern town. The man had a daughter who couldn’t have been more than four or five. Her name was Janice. Early one morning, when it was still dark, a huge thunderstorm came over the house – the kind where the flashes of lightning are almost immediately followed by massive thunder claps that seem to be right on top of you. The booms were rattling the walls. When one strike hit so close that his hair stood on end, he figured he better go check on Janice. She had to be scared, he thought. He got quickly out of bed and ran upstairs to his little girl’s room. When he opened the door, he expected to see her cowering under her sheets. But she wasn’t. She was standing on the windowsill, pressing as much of her body as she could up to the glass. Rain was pounding the panes and huge flashes of light were popping everywhere.

“Janice,” he cried, “*what are you doing?!*”

“Hold on, dad,” she said, “*I think God is trying to take my picture!*”

That image of a tiny child -- one of the littlest beans in the cosmic hill, being convinced that the God of heaven and earth not only knew her, but was looking out for her, loving her, and lifting her up – captures the true spirit of Psalm 8.

This morning, as we ordain a new class of officers to new positions and install the people we have elected to be our spiritual leaders for this moment in our congregation’s history, it is the perfect time for all of us – not just the officer candidates, but all of us -- to think deeply about these two truths that are held in tension within every human soul: that in the grand scope of the cosmos, we don’t amount to a hill of beans... but in the eyes of a loving God, we are glorious. The life of a disciple of Christ requires us to hold fast to two things: (1) **humility** about our flaws and our brokenness; and (2) **acceptance** of the fact

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 7:15-25.

<sup>3</sup> Scots Confession, 3.03.

<sup>4</sup> <https://ccl.org/ccl/calvin/calcom08/calcom08.xiv.iii.html>

that God calls us to be so much more. We may never know the reasons why, but God has chosen to honor us, exalt us, and give us profound responsibility over God's creation. We are called to protect the world we have been given... to defend the powerless and protect the weak... to be ambassadors for peace... to speak the truth and live the truth... to seek righteousness and justice... and to let our own lives be reflections of the very nature of God.

It is a high calling for sure, but that is how God sees us. So the least we can do is to try and see that potential in ourselves... and do our best to show the world what a bunch of glorious nobodies can do. ***Amen.***