

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Our Fundamental Orientation”
1st in the series *The Spirituality of the Psalms*
inspired by Brueggemann
Psalm 8

It was well into the month of July. We had been traveling every couple of days, visiting one family member here, another there.

We'd been to Grandpa's farm and Aunt Lou's pool,
Grandma Patty's house and Grandma Evelyn's house.
We had picnics with Jessi's cousins and watched fireworks with the kids' cousins.
And now... we were spending a few days in Yosemite National Park.

We were down in the valley. If you've ever been there then you know that the valley is surrounded by sheer granite mountain cliffs on both sides.

And they are just beautiful. The sides of the cliffs have these dark arches that look almost painted on by the hand of God.

But down in the valley between them is flat land with a river flowing through it. The river is fed by these magnificent water falls. Yosemite Falls on one side. Vernal Falls in the back... and lots of other falls hidden here and there on the sides of these granite walls.

That particular day we had hiked up what's called the Misty Trail, next to Vernal Falls. After a mile and a half up the falls, the trail turns into these massive rock stairs, carved into the side of the cliff next to the falls. It's called the Misty Trail because the mist from this massive waterfall is soaking you as you walk up the slippery rock stones.

The trail is a bit un-nerving. In fact, Jessi and I had to carry Brandt and Theo up to be safe. At times the trail narrows so there is barely enough room for someone to pass you going down.

You slowly go up in a single file line holding the side of the cliff. Step up, after step up, after step up... into the mist...

It was beautiful. I kept thinking that we were in some scene straight out of Tolkien's Middle Earth. It may be one of my most favorite hikes I've ever done... but 6.5 miles later, up and down a mountain with kids, and cousins, and grandparents... we were all pretty exhausted.

That night everyone went to sleep in our little tent cabins, but I was restless. So I grabbed my flashlight and snuck out of our tent to wander out into the darkness that had settled into the valley.

Eventually, I made my way through the trees and out into the meadow, on a wooden walkway that leads to the river.

I sat down,
turned off my flashlight,
and looked up.

It's hard to explain what I saw. A vastness. An unending-expansiveness.
The stars... were astonishing.

The constellations... beyond counting.
The Milky Way flowing like a river in the heavens.
Every now and then I could see a satellite slowly moving across the dome of the sky.
A shooting star here... and another... and another...

I sat there... staring up at all this...and out of some place deep in my being... ancient words began to bubble up in my soul... the ancient words from Psalm 8:

"What is man, that thou art mindful of him?"

I felt so small looking out into the universe.

Like we are all so small... our lives, the things we get so caught up in... the things that drive us crazy or make us anxious... or that we work so hard on...

It's... so small.

Even our global struggles. Our politics and fighting.

Wars and posturing and insecurities of one nation against another nation...

All of it... in that moment... seemed so small... so insignificant in light of the vastness of a universe that I was only getting a glimpse of... a universe that expands indefinitely beyond our comprehension... and a God who is in all of it... calling all of it into being.

A universe that is so much bigger than even our wars,
and so much bigger than our petty grievances against one another,
and so much bigger than the agendas we fixate on.

The words keep stirring in my soul... like a deep, longing question.

"What is man, that thou art mindful of him?"

Bruggeman describes Psalm 8 as a psalm of orientation. In fact, he suggests that the spirituality of the psalms can be understood in three basic postures, or basic phases. Maybe think about them as phases of the moon.

There are psalms of orientation, psalms of disorientation, and psalms of new orientation...

We're going to be exploring that pattern in the psalms for the rest of August... because the psalms are helping us to understand the phases in our own soul. They parallel our own experience... Orientation, Disorientation, and New Orientation.

And they also remind us of the kind of spirituality that we need to encourage, nurture, and cultivate as a church. Anytime we gather, some of us will come from a season or place of orientation – where life is good and makes sense,

some of us from a season of disorientation,

and some of us come from a place where we have moved into new ways of seeing our life and the world... of new orientation for us...

They are always present. And for us to care for one another well, for us to do church spirituality well, then we need to not only recognize that the person sitting across from you is somewhere in that spiritual movement... but you yourself are somewhere in that.

Or maybe you're moving between those places... just like the moon is always moving through its phases.

And so maybe you're moving from thinking you had your life pretty figured out... at least for this season, but something is pushing you into disorientation... where what you thought you had figured out doesn't work anymore... It doesn't make sense anymore.

Or maybe you came this morning and you've been disoriented for a long time... but you find yourself moving into a new way of seeing your life and this world... and not just seeing, but a new way of living this life of yours. You're moving into a new orientation.

Or maybe that new orientation has been around for a while now, and you've forgotten what the disorientation was like... and that new orientation is becoming your old orientation.

You see this isn't a linear process. There's no beginning and ending in this movement in our lives. There's no arrival with phases of the moon.

We'll talk about this more in a few weeks, but for now simply know that yesterday's new orientation... becomes tomorrow's old orientation... from which we will someday experience again... disorientation.

There is this movement.

In any healthy journey of faith... in a healthy spirituality... there is, over time, going to be movement. Which means, that as a church, we need to enable and encourage that movement if we want to enable and encourage a healthy spirituality.

This is part of what the psalms are teaching us.

It's what they help us to experience... and learn to see.

There is orientation. And there is disorientation. And there is new orientation in the psalms... and all of it is needed.

Which is partly why the psalms are needed in the life of faith. It's why they've been called the prayer book of the church.

A few years ago I heard a Jewish Rabbi teaching on the psalms and she said that for most of the scriptures, we're on the outside looking in. We're hearing about someone else's story. What happened to them. What God said to them or about them.

But in the psalms, we're on the inside looking out. The psalms give us a glimpse of their inner world...

their deepest joys and longings...

their anger and fears...

their hope and despair.

All of it is there... And we get to enter that from the inside... and that's a great gift to us.

I mean, imagine for a moment some great spiritual leader, someone you have admired your whole life... someone whose presence has radiated God... one day... they're gone. And in their will they leave you... all their personal journals.

And maybe they leave them for you with a note:

"Be gracious to me when you read these... there are things in here that aren't pretty. But be gracious to me... because there are also things in you that aren't pretty. Be gracious to me... and if you will... you'll learn how to be gracious to yourself too. And maybe... you'll become more gracious to the world."

This is what we have in the psalms. We are given a glimpse into the soul... the inner life... of people like David and people like the exiles in Babylon.

The inner life of poets and priests... of peasants and soldiers... of everyday people like you and me.

The psalter is the prayer journal of God's beloved community. And it has been given to us. It's a gift to us... for our own prayer and spiritual wandering.

And in a very broad way, what we see there... are these phases of spirituality, phases of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation... all phases that are part of what is happening even in the movement and phases... within your own life.

So we're going to explore these phases in the coming weeks and we're starting with Psalm 8... because it's one of the many psalms of orientation. One of the many psalms that grounds us.

"Oh Lord our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth." It begins and ends that way. It names a fundamental orientation of the people. It names the realities that we can come back to, a reality that we can depend on.

In some deep and profound way, God has ordered all of creation.

In some deep and profound way... we trust that God is the artist, God is the power, God is the ultimate reality, God is the love that is the very foundation of our lives... that is the very foundation of our world.

"Oh Lord our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth." This is the reality that grounds us. That orients our whole lives.

And there are all kinds of psalms of orientation. Creation psalms, and wisdom psalms, and psalms about the Law of God... And all of them are laying an important foundation for us.

Because... and I hope you'll hear this... any healthy spirituality begins by trusting that there is order in the universe... that life fundamentally makes sense.

It's why children who grow up in a stable household with parents who are consistent... and in a church that nails down certain truths about God...

will almost always be more healthy spiritually speaking, than children who grow up in un-stable homes,
or unstable communities...

or in churches who are too distracted by their own questions to take the time to lay a foundation for their children.

Healthy spirituality begins... and will even come back to... the psalms of orientation... where certain things are nailed down. Things like:

There is a God at the center of the universe... And this God knows you and loves you. This God cares about the world... and is working to heal and restore this world.

We know this God in Jesus' life and ministry. There is good news. God is near. God is coming. And God is making all things new – this is what Jesus taught and did.

And this same God is inviting you to participate in that work.

(Jesus says, "Come and follow me...")

Your life has meaning because this same God has created you, and this God loves you, and called you.

Jesus is calling you... .. to know that you are the beloved of God... and to follow him in healing the world as he healed the world.

This is our orientation. We start here and we come back here.

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

It's the ancient version of, **"God has done great things for me!"** *orientation.*

It's **"In the Lord, I'll be ever thankful.... Look to God do not be afraid... Lift up your voices the Lord is near."**

This is part of our fundamental orientation as a community.

These are *our psalms* of orientation

and *they are so key.*

Brueggemann describes the church that will give this fundamental truth to its next generation as drawing a line in the sand against the forces of chaos and death.

We are confessing and remembering and trusting that there is goodness at the center of the universe... and ultimately as Julian of Norwich puts it, **"All shall be well. All shall be well. All manner of things shall be well."**

So we don't have to live in fear. We don't have to be anxious all the time. We can let go... and learn to trust.

That's what the psalms of orientation provide for us... and it's why we need to come back to them.

So on that day... when your first child is born... and you look down at her beautiful face... and something in you is filled with awe and wonder at the beauty of life and this miracle... that is somehow part of you...and you smile,
and it feels like nothing else in the world matters...

and you know that deeper truth of the Psalm 8:2, **"From the mouth of nursing babe, you have laid a foundation..."**

God is at work in the mysterious life of this child.

Or maybe you find yourself out in some beautiful place in creation... and you look around, and you experience the same orientation as the psalmist. You're caught up in the goodness and wonder of it all:

When I look up at your skies,
at what your fingers made—
the moon and the stars
that you set firmly in place—
what are human beings

that you think about them;
“What is man, that thou art mindful of him?”

Or maybe you’re cooking a delicious meal, and you’re thinking about the gift of your food,
and the ground where it comes from,
and the animal that gave its life for your meal...
and there is gratitude welling up in you,
gratitude for the cattle, and the birds, and the fish...
all that are part of God’s good creation.
...here for us to care for...
and for us to honor... and yes, even to delight in...as verses 6-8 remind us.

“Oh Lord our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.” ...in every part of it.

The psalms of orientation call us back to a fundamental trust in God’s goodness and order...
They remind us of the goodness that is already given to us in the midst of our life.

The goodness of our God, it is always near.
It is always coming.
There is beauty, and joy, and grace flowing to you...
So, yes... in the end... all shall be well.

Amen.

Reflection:

*O Lord, my heart is not lifted up,
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.
But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.^[a]
O Israel, hope in the Lord
from this time on and forevermore.
~ Psalm 131*

Sing “Be Still and Know”

