

Tree Huggers
A Dialogue Sermon
Matt & Rachel Matthews
Psalm 8

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
September 5th, 2021

(A sermon with two speakers and accompanying slides.)

Matt: A few weeks ago, Rachel and I got back from a trip out west to see the giant coastal redwood and sequoia trees.

Rachel: I wanted to see these magnificent trees before any more of them were lost in forest fires. Seeing them was on my bucket list.

M: We used San Francisco as our base. Our eldest son Joseph met us there. On our first Saturday, we hike through the Muir Woods. On Monday, we spent the day outside of Three Rivers, California, hiking the Congress Trail at the Sequoia National Forest.

R: We call this sermon “Tree Huggers.”

M: These trees are amazing. Their bark is thick and textured. The trees are giant. You just want to hug them, but, of course, one can’t begin to get one’s arms around them.

R: The soaring trees give flight to one’s imagination. And praise rolls off of your tongue.

M/R: *Oh Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

R: *You have set your glory above the heavens.
These trees make you look up and up.*

M: The coastal redwoods—*Sequoia sempervirens*—are the tallest trees on earth. The tallest tree is 380.1-feet and it’s called “Hyperion.” Its location in the Redwood National Forest is kept secret so it won’t be damaged. Coastal redwoods line the coast in a thin band from Oregon to Northern California. They get 50-percent of their water from fog.

R: These beauties are tall and elegant and soaringly, amazingly tall—taller than the Statue of Liberty. Taller than Big Ben.

M: We spent a lot of time looking up.

R: *Oh Lord, our Lord,*

M/R: *how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

R: *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 are human beings
that you pay attention to them?*

M/R: *Oh Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

M: I like hiking, but Rachel and our son love hiking. On Saturday we hiked and hiked.
Up and down,
around and around,
looking up and up at the trees,
sometimes looking down.

R: There's a part of Muir Woods called "Cathedral Grove," but the whole forest is a cathedral. If a church building hints of God's power and God's grace, these cathedrals of high trees shout it.

M: But the silence, the hush, of the forest is holy and hallowed and restorative.

R: And these massive trees put you in your place. The Psalmist says that we, humans, are just below the angels. But these trees remind us that we are, still, a small part of creation. And it's awe-inspiring to be reminded that we are called to "have dominion" over all the earth, that we are called to be stewards and care for the environment. The human family and the family of trees and all creeping, flying, hopping, and growing things is part of the same amazing family, the same ecosystem. We are all rooted together in this amazing web of life. God's handiwork is amazing.

M/R: *Oh Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

M: John Muir (not our very own John Muirhead, but the naturalist John Muir) once wrote: "Keep close to Nature's heart... and break clear away, once in awhile, and climb a mountain or spend a week in the woods. Wash your spirit clean."

M: I didn't feel clean from this long hike. I was sweaty and tired. But I felt cleansed, and restored, and awed, and thankful. My sore feet reminded me of those giant tree trunks that have held those trees aloft since the Middle Ages and before. I had trouble expressing how awed I was by God's creation.

R: *Finding the right words...* I felt that, too. It's difficult to find the right words, to sum into words the awe you feel about and the gratitude you feel for the marvel of God's creation. I think the Psalmist is reaching for words. And these words of Psalm 8 became my abiding prayer on these winding, forest trails:

*Oh God: 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 us,
mortals that you care for us?
Yet you have made us a little lower than you, Oh God,
and you crowned us with glory and honor.
You have given us dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under our feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

M/R (sung): *God of the sparrow*

*God of the whale
God of the swirling stars
How does the creature say awe?
How does the creature say praise?¹¹*

* * *

M: The San Francisco skyline was filled with tall, magnificent buildings. On some days they pierced the fog and you couldn't see the tops of them. When we were in the city, we ate good food, enjoyed views of the ocean and bay, and we did a lot of looking up.

R: But these tall building didn't compare in the same way to those tall, tall, lovely, living, breathing trees.

M: The Giant Sequoias four hours away in the Sierra Nevada mountains were amazing. These trees are not as tall as many of the coastal redwoods, but they are larger by volume.

R: The General Sherman tree is the largest tree by volume on the face of the earth.

M: This tree is tall, giant, massive and huggable, but they don't let people get close enough to hug the tree, so people have to settle for less and hug each other, instead.

R: The idea that God has given us dominion over the created order is mind-boggling when you stand in these forests of tall trees. The English word "dominion" has to do with "sovereignty." But the Psalmist makes clear that we aren't sovereign, only God is. So, created in God's image, we are called to care for creation in God's way. That means we are called to be stewards of creation, care-takers of it. God takes care of us—feeds us, delights us, restores us—through creation. So, as creation cares for us, we are called to take care of creation. This ideal is at the core of our faith.

M: A word related to "dominion" is "jurisdiction." If we have jurisdiction over creation, that means we have power exercised only within prescribed limits. And those limits have to do with caring for the earth they way God cares—creatively, redemptively, sustainably.

R: God cares for and has provided for creation in marvelous, interwoven-interweaving ways. The valleys around Sequoia National Park were filled with the smoke of the Walkers Fire some 15-miles south of the General Serman Tree.

M: Fire is a natural part of forests and an essential part of their health. Every fire, though, invites us to think about our role in nature, the ways we manage and mismanage natural resources. I don't pretend to know the ins and outs of this.

R: It's complicated.

M: But we do need to take care.

R: We need to take good care. Because creation has been entrusted by God to our care. We are "responsible;" that's the word Eugene Peterson uses in his translation of the creation story.

M: God spoke:

R: "Let us make human beings in our image, make them
reflecting our nature
So they can be responsible for the fish in the sea,
the birds in the air, the cattle,

And, yes, Earth itself,
and every animal that moves on the face of Earth.”

M: God created human beings;
God created them godlike,
Reflecting God’s nature.
God created them male and female.
God blessed them:

M/R: “Prosper!
Reproduce!

R: Fill Earth!

M: Take charge!

R: Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air,
for every living thing that moves on the face of Earth.”

M: This is an awesome responsibility. It is a holy, holy gift.

R: I left these cathedral forests feeling speechless. Our human dignity is tied to God’s majesty. I was left with all sorts of feelings that I’ll be thinking about for the rest of my life. But whatever else I felt, I felt gratitude, and awe, and praise.

MorR: God of the ages
God near at hand
God of the loving heart
How do your children say joy?
How do your children say home?

M: *Oh Lord,*

R: *Oh Lord, our sovereign Lord,*

M/R: *How majestic is your name in all the earth!*

M: Amen.

R: And amen.

[1] *God of the Sparrow*. Text: Jaroslav J. Vajda, 1983; music: Carl F. Schalk, 1983.