

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

On the Playfulness of Monsters

Sunday, June 9, 2019

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Psalms 104:24–35

How we live life depends on how we see life and on *what* we see when we look out at the world.

There's a story about Sherlock Holmes going on a camping trip with his sidekick Dr. Watson. As they lay down for the night, Holmes looked at Watson and said, "Watson, look up into the sky and tell me what you see."

Watson said, "I see millions and millions of stars."

Holmes replied, "And what does that tell you, Watson?"

So, Watson thought about it and said, "Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Theologically, it tells me that God is great, and we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, it tells me that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does this tell you?"

Sherlock Holmes answered immediately, "It tells me that someone has stolen our tent."

So, what do we see? Do we look out on the world and see beauty and joy? Do we see grace and life? Do we see unmet potential, opportunity, and utility? Do we see pain and heartache, despair and helplessness? Do we see threat and danger, indiscriminate cruelty and loss? Certainly it will largely depend upon where we look, but if the experience of Pentecost is any indication it will also depend upon *how* we look.

Our gaze and God's gaze

There is a way of looking in which I am not particularly skilled. It's a way that combines imagination with industry. Inventors have this skill. Real estate developers have this skill. They are those who are able to see an opportunity, turn it into a reality, and capitalize on it. I am constantly in awe of people who can do that, and (if I'm being honest) a little jealous.

There are others who see the hiddenness within things not as something on which to capitalize, but rather as something that needs... glorification. There's an apocryphal story about the great artist Michelangelo dragging a giant boulder down the street in his town when a neighbor calls out to him, "Michelangelo, why are you struggling with that old rock?"

Michelangelo called back, "Because there's an angel in here who is struggling to break free."

Artists are good at this kind of seeing. They can see the peculiar uniqueness in something that makes it beautiful. They can capture and express on paper, in stone, or in other media the *je ne sais quoi* of a thing that makes it glorious in itself, but our culture (and maybe human nature in general) accustoms us to seeing in the former sense. And, maybe that's one of the reasons we have a hard time understanding God.

I cannot even begin to count all sermons I have heard about how God needs us, needs our gifts, needs our talents, needs our time. And, don't be mistaken, God does need us. How many stories are there in the Bible about God calling persons to a particular service and looking upon people and circumstances as instrumental for his purposes. Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Isaiah, John the Baptist, Paul, even Jesus—these are employed for God in a particular purpose. God needs them, calls them, and sends them.

And, we modern-day saints are the inheritors of this purposeful work. There are the unmistakable, climactic moments in the Bible of God missioning the church, calling us to purpose and work. We even speak of Pentecost, the sending of God's Spirit, as a commissioning in which God empowers us with the tools we need to do God's great work. It is God empowering us with himself!

All of this is true. God does have a mission, he has a purpose, and he sees his church—he sees us—as instruments for the fulfillment of this purpose, but that's not the only way God looks. In fact, it's not even the

first way that God looks. I think God *primarily* looks as an artist looks. If you want proof of that, just look at the story of creation. After God fashions all the universe, the Genesis poet says, God sees it as “very good” (Gen 1:31). Then, he spends the first full day of creation’s completion—the Sabbath day—not laboring to tweak and improve and tend and use creation, but rather just enjoying it! And, that enjoyment isn’t limited to that first Sabbath day. It’s something God does every day!

If you’d like to take out your Bibles and turn in the Psalms to the psalm from which we read a moment ago, Psalm 104. This is a psalm of thanksgiving and praise in which the psalmist is looking out on the world and giving thanks to God for what he sees and appreciates. However, the language communicates an understanding that *God* is also seeing and appreciating this stuff, too.

Here you have this beautiful image of a God who enjoys what he has created. Verse after verse speaks of all these things that God has made: clouds and winds and mountains and streams; birds and lions and goats and rock badgers. It’s a panoply of things that, just because they *are*, are wonderful! In a few places there are expressions of gratitude for things that are very useful to creatures. Verse 10: “You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animal.” Verse 14: “You cause grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use.” Verse 16: “The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly; in them the birds build their nests.” But, by and large, all of these creatures are just beautiful examples of a God who rejoices in his works because they *are*.

My favorite verses, though, are verses 25 and 26. “Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great.” The psalmist then zeroes in on two very different creatures in the sea. “There go the ships,” he says, “*and* Leviathan that you formed *to sport in it*.” Another way to translate this: “Leviathan, with which you fashioned to play.”

Leviathan was this mythical sea monster that sailors reported seeing leaping from the oceans alongside their ships. Who knows what the sailors actually saw, maybe a whale or orca or something of that sort. Whatever it is, though, the psalmist is clear that it is there not for utility or human need. It is there not even to satisfy some link in the food chain, but there simply for the heck of cavorting on the waves right alongside the ships of man. God made it to play with.

I get this image of God rolling with laughter, his own heart leaping for joy simply for the sheer fun of having such a weird and wonderful creature to leap over the waves. I think this is how God looks.

Pentecost as an invitation to look anew

One theologian said there are two ways of looking at the world: inventory-taking or praise. We know how to take inventory. Even those of us who are not particularly good at entrepreneurial-looking, where we see the world before us as a means of advancement, we know how to take stock of what we have. We count and name and categorize and classify, and mostly in reference to our own needs and wants. If you’ve ever cursed a mosquito that bites you on a warm summer’s night and then asked that rhetorical question, “God, why did you make mosquitoes?” then you know what I mean. You’ve taken inventory of the world and decided what’s useful and not—to you.

Even our God talk and religious life can too quickly become utilitarian. We go to the Scriptures looking for spiritual gems to help us in a problem or struggle. We go to worship hoping to “get something out of it,” to be “filled up” for the coming week. We put our children in Sunday school so that they’ll get a moral education. In our adult Sunday schools, we talk more about what God does for us and how God treats us than we do who God is in himself! And, against all logic, there are even preachers who have twisted stewardship and giving into an act of selfish ambition. This thing that is supposed to be a pure act of praise, worship, and thanksgiving *to God*, we have contorted into something for us. They call it the “prosperity gospel”—the more you give the more you get. Give to God, serve God, do things for God so that *you* can be blessed. (Let me be clear that this is not the gospel that we preach here!)

In our prayers, too. Our very talk to God becomes a kind of inventory-taking. God, help us do this; God, give me this; God, do this thing for me. We make prayer lists and catalogue our prayer concerns, and I know some people who keep prayer journals. They delight in going back from time to time to see where God has answered their prayers. I do respect people who have a rich prayer life and are *that* disciplined (I am not), and I’m not saying that asking for things or keeping prayer lists is unbiblical or wrong, but if that’s *all* prayer is then it truly is just inventory-taking. How often do any of us simply sit before God? Enjoy God? Reflect on God’s

blessings for their inherent beauty and not for their usefulness to us?

The story of Pentecost guards against a vision of life with God that is too utilitarian, that seeks too much our own self interests. As the story goes, the apostles, 50 days after the resurrection, were gathered in Jerusalem. Ten days earlier the Lord Jesus had ascended into heaven, but instead of letting the apostles begin their mission, living out their calling, doing all the important work that needed to be done to spread the gospel to all nations, Jesus told them to go back to Jerusalem and just wait.

So they did. They went back to Jerusalem, did a little housekeeping, maybe prayed and rested. But, then on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit of God descended upon them. Luke describes it as a mighty, rushing wind. Those present witnessed the Spirit descend upon each of the disciples gathered there, like a tongue of fire resting upon each of them. It was a miraculous, overwhelming moment, a moment of unprecedented filling up and blessing, to be sure. But, anyone who reads the book of Acts will discover that this moment converts the self-interested disciples into Spirit-filled vessels of God, taking them into circumstances that are beyond their reckoning, that are too wild and wonderful and (frankly) weird to inventory.

You can read through Acts and you see mission, of course. But, you also see that when the winds of the Spirit begin to blow, they shape and reshape human communities, they inspire encounters as joyful and miraculous and wonderful to God as ships and sea monsters plowing through the same waters. Rich and poor break bread at the same table, old and young begin to dream dreams together, the outcasts and the in-crowd praise God in the same tongue. Pentecost was nothing less than God turning us, like Leviathan, into his playmates.

Or, what is the sending of the Spirit if it is not the creation of a people—of a church—who will share in God’s joy-filled engagement with the world, a people whose very existence will serve to invite all persons high and low, rich and poor, old and young, black and white, gay and straight, believer and nonbeliever to know God’s great joy in having created them, called them, and redeemed them. What is the Holy Spirit if he is not a means of God’s intimate revelry in the very fabric of this wonderful world, a means of God’s cavorting with his creatures, not just for a mission, but for the sake of just

being intimate, for the sake of cavorting, for the sake of godly play.

I don’t know about you, but I never liked being in a relationship with someone when I was just the means to some end. We call that being used. Well, the Spirit ensures that our relationship with God never has to boil down to that. He is our communion with God himself, and his presence in our lives through Pentecost restores *to us* the capacity to do what God has always wanted us to do: to revel in his presence and within his creation. Moreover, his presence preserves and deepens *for God* the capacity to do what he has yearned to do since the dawn of creation: to romp and play with his creatures simply because he loves them.

God’s play

That’s what God sees when he sees his creatures. Sure, he sees creatures with purpose and use, but before that—more than that—he sees creatures who are inherently beautiful, who bring him joy simply for the fact that they are. Mountain goats and sea monsters, lions and humans. Even the sun and the moon are delights to God simply because they are. By his Holy Spirit, God is entering through us, in us, and with us into the world that is such a delight, and he’s doing so because he’s ready to play. And, that’s the image of God we encounter in the psalm.

But, then there’s a strange intrusion into the end of this Psalm. “Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more” (v. 35). It seems like such an odd statement when you consider that the psalmist has just led us in praise of sea monsters and rock badgers and lions and grass. Why call out the sinners and the wicked? So distasteful is this verse to some that they just skip right over it. In fact, the lectionary reading assigned for today omits the beginning of verse 35.

If we’re going to understand this, we need to remember what it is to play. Do you remember as a kid going to the playground? You walk up and everything is just amazing. Yes, it’s just monkey bars, a swing set, a slide, a sandpit, and one of those ride-on, spring-mounted horses, but to a kid that’s a world of endless fun, endless, that is, until the mean kid shows up and pushes you off the slide. (That’s the only time I ever broke my arm, by the way; I was in the second grade and Beth Boos pushed me off the slide... not that I still hold a grudge.)

That ruins it all, though: the mean kids who want to control the play, who want to hog the equipment, who keep spoiling your imagination; the selfish kids who don't realize that it's there for everyone. It's hard to be excited about kids who are mean and manipulative and bossy. It's hard to find joy when your playmate throws a temper tantrum because they don't get their way. It's hard to have fun when there are people on the playground who are insensitive to others' feelings or flippant toward other's needs.

And how often does God find that in us? How often does he come to play and fail to experience it as a joy? When he steps into his playground, how often does he experience destruction and evil rather than peace and righteousness? As God, in his Spirit, engages his world and finds bitterness, ecological ruin, callous disregard for life, selfishness, greed, violence, and enmity; when he looks and sees that we're the ones still holding the severed head of his Barbie dolls or we're the ones with our feet in his sandcastle, what makes us think God will continue to want to play with us?

Woe be unto us if God finds in us not joyful playmates, but the playground bully. Woe be unto us when God encounters in us the kind of sin and wickedness that the psalmist says must be wiped from the face of the earth! Woe be unto us if God should pack up the divine toys and goes home.

Conclusion

The good news is that, with Pentecost, God is inviting us into a renewed relationship with him and with the world, to put away all our old ways of being on the playground. In sending his Spirit, God has announced he's ready to play, and he has invited us, the church, to be part of the fun. Maybe most miraculously, he is gifting us with the capacity to see this world through his own eyes because he himself is within us.

With his eyes, we can see that "there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; ... everything has become new!" (2 Cor 5:17). With his eyes, we can see the wonder of what *is* by God's grace, and what is *becoming* by God's grace.

These will be my last words to you as your pastor. With them, I'm not asking you to get busy doing some mission or give more money or serve more faithfully. I'm sure there will be ample opportunity for those messages from whomever may stand in this pulpit in years to come. I'm asking you to look again. Look at this world that God has made. Look at the birds and the grass and the clouds and goats and mountains and see in them the beauty God sees. Look at the Leviathan and hear God's laughter. Look at yourself and sense God's joy in having such a remarkable creature as you to be his playmate.

Don't neglect to be the kind of playmate God desires.

But, I offer this Psalm to you because this isn't about me; it's only about any of us to the extent that God loves us and cherishes our being. So, I hope that for all of your usefulness and purpose and mission to make disciples of Christ for the transformation of the world, for all of your industry and innovation in bringing that transformation, that you will remember first that God has called you son and daughter, God has called you beloved, God has called you beautiful in yourself.

We, the church, get to be a part of the fun.

If we have heard this promise—if we have received this promise—if we have been gifted to live in the power of God's joyful play, then our lives are to revel with sea monsters and mountain goats in the mystery of the created order, then let us enter into a new relationship with the world, one that sees as God sees, plays as God plays, and loves as God loves.