

## Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth

### Psalms 8

The Apostles' Creed

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If you saw the film "Schindler's List," you may recall that the commandant of the Nazi concentration camp was very tender toward his own wife and children, and very cruel toward the prisoners. In his home he believed in a loving, forgiving, and father-like God. In the camp his was an almighty God who blessed the Nazi cause and therefore permitted and even encouraged the persecution of Nazi enemies. It was as if he had two gods, one for the home and one for the camp. Closer to home I have known corporate executives who, on Sundays, sang hymns and fervently prayed and then, on Monday, ran roughshod over any who got in their way. It was as if they had two gods, one for their private and one for their public life.

Lest we also worship such a schizophrenic god, it is imperative that we keep the words "Father" and "Almighty" linked together when we say, "I believe in God the Father Almighty." What is at stake here is the manner in which God expresses almightiness. God is almighty, but God is not an autocratic dictator or an aloof bureaucrat. God expresses almightiness like a caring parent. Wise parents use their power, not to coerce but to free their children to become all they are meant to be. In fact, parental power recedes as children grow older. Parental power gives itself away so our children may take responsibility for their own lives, and then we become peers, we become partners, in the adventure of living.

And that is one of the major themes of the eighth Psalm. Speaking of human beings, the author says, "You have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet." Frankly I find this astonishing: no sooner does the Psalmist praise God as the maker of heaven and earth than the spotlight swings away from God to humankind. Verse one speaks of God's glory: "You have set your glory above the heavens." Verse five speaks of humanity's glory: "You have . . . crowned them with glory and honor. Verse 3 speaks of God's creative work: "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers." Verse 6 speaks of our creative work: "You have given them dominion over the works of your hands."

God willingly gives up power so we may take our place as God's partners in creation, junior partners, to be sure, but partners for all that. But can anyone deny that we humans, instead of acting as God's partners, have behaved as rivals, even as enemies of God? God, the maker of heaven and earth, has given us dominion over the works of God's hands, but we must confess with shame that we have misunderstood the terms of our commission. We thought dominion meant domination, so we are consuming the earth's resources as if it were an infinite smorgasbord of delights. But in the Bible, "dominion" means "to cultivate and care for," just as my grandfather cultivated and cared for his eighteen hundred acres of rich bottom land in Ventura County, California. He would let whole sections lie fallow for a year to give the soil a Sabbath rest. Or he would plant several hundred acres with a crop high in nitrogen, not to harvest but to plow under to replenish the soil. My grandfather did not make demands on the soil; he nurtured and cared for it, and he was amply rewarded year after year.

In giving us the keys to the world God never intended we should be sovereigns, bent on doing what we please, but stewards, ready to do what God pleases. Back in my college days I worked on an estate in Santa Barbara. The owner had two other estates, one in Pittsburgh and the other in Florida, so we rarely saw her. Her manager, Mr. Stewart, was on the grounds every day, and as far as we were concerned he was the boss. Yet he too was only an employee, and every now and then he would be asked to meet with the owner to give an account of his stewardship.

And how shall we prepare for our interview with the true owner of all things visible and invisible? I have four suggestions.

First, our stewardship of the earth demands that we give up our privatism. No longer can we shrug our

shoulders and say, "That's the government's problem," or "Let the Sierra Club deal with that." The late Dr. Edward Lindaman, president of Whitworth College, likened privatism to the person who says, "Your end of the boat is sinking." No, when the boat sinks, all hands go down with it, so we had better help each other bail and caulk the cracks.

Second, we must adopt an ethic of restraint. I will never forget the question on the gasoline ration sticker on the windshield of my father's Model A Ford during World War II: "Is this trip necessary?" That is just as critical a question for the twenty-first century: not what can we do, but what should we do. Is this trip really necessary?

Third, a truly Christian stewardship will stress quality of life over quantity of goods. And by quality I have in mind the gracious gifts of God, forgiveness, renewal, the call of the Spirit to be engaged in Christ's ministry in the world. We have a garage sale every time we move. Things I once thought I couldn't live without and for which I paid good money, now sit out in the driveway selling for a dollar or less. They are chipped and soiled, and I have no use for them any more. By contrast, I have yet to find a single gift in God's bounty that wears out, or becomes obsolete, or is a candidate for a garage sale.

Finally, our dominion over the world calls for compassion toward all who share our humanity. For it is not just Americans who have been made a little lower than God. In the midst of a war designed to shock and awe the enemy, we must somehow hold on to our compassion for all who suffer lest we forfeit our claim to be children of the God who has crowned all people with glory and honor. I don't pretend that's easy, I only contend that it's essential.

In the current film, "Gods and Generals," Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson walks through a house in which his wounded men are being cared for. He stops at each cot to offer encouragement, like a father to a son. When he walks outside he overhears a doctor questioning how the South should pursue the war against the North. The General turns on his heels and says, "Kill them! Kill every one of them!" I cannot attest to the historicity of that outburst, and I hope he didn't really say it. Stonewall Jackson was a devout Christian. Nevertheless those words illustrate a reaction to the enemy that we must guard against.

In a later scene, Rebel Irishmen, shielded by a stone wall, fire at the advancing Yankees, killing men by the scores. Suddenly they spot a Union guidon bearing the green flag of the Irish Brigade from New York City. They keep on shooting but now tears are streaming down their cheeks, for the men they are killing are no longer merely the enemy; they are their cousins and brothers.

Whatever you may believe about the current war in Iraq, no one, least of all the President of the United States or the commander of our forces in the field, or anyone in this sanctuary is saying, "Kill them! Kill every one of them." But have you shed any tears? Do you feel compassion for the wounded and dying on both sides of the stone wall that separates us? And, when the war is over, will you help rebuild the country and revive its people? Let me tell you how. On Palm Sunday, three weeks from today, you can make a generous contribution to the One Great Hour of Sharing offering. One Great Hour is our Presbyterian response to disaster wherever it happens. Your contribution will provide food, medicine, tents, tools, whatever is necessary to rehabilitate the people of Iraq. On Palm Sunday, let us show compassion toward all who, like us, were made a little lower than God.

There is an old quarry on Vancouver Island from which tons of limestone have been taken to make Portland cement. The owner's wife saw it one day and was so offended by it that she began a gardening experiment. From her own travels around the globe she brought back a skillful mixture of exotic plants, shrubs, and trees. Then, a little over sixty years ago she opened her garden to the public, and since then millions have relished her artistry. No doubt many of you have walked through Mrs. Robert Pim Buchart's gardens in Victoria, and you never imagined that it was once an ugly scar on the landscape.

My guess is that God looks on Buchart Gardens as a rainbow of promise for all the earth. Not all our problems can be so easily solved, but solved they can be if we are willing to give up our privatism, to exercise restraint toward God's property, to prefer quality over quantity, and to show compassion toward all who share our humanity.

Do we really believe in God the Father Almighty? Then we will behave for the benefit of God<sup>1</sup>'s children everywhere. Do we really believe in God, maker of heaven and earth? Then we will act as protectors and not predators of God<sup>1</sup>'s magnificent garden.