



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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The Holy Trinity

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“Great Expectations”

(Psalm 8:3-8)

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“When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas. O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Psalm 8:3-8).

COLLECT: Almighty and everlasting God, You have given us grace to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity by the confession of a true faith and to worship the Unity in the power of the Divine Majesty. Keep us steadfast in this faith and defend us from all adversities; for You, O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, live and reign, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

If you think back to all the teachers that you've ever had, I bet one who really stands out was the one who saw more potential in you than you saw in yourself. It was the one who expected more from you than you were producing. He or she surprised you with these great expectations, sometimes annoyed you, didn't seem fair, made you feel like they were picking on you . . . but always challenged you to do better. Maybe this wasn't your favorite teacher because he or she was so demanding, but it was the one who had the greatest impression on you. Perhaps you have a teacher like that right now. Perhaps it was 60 years ago. Either way, what a blessing to have a teacher who pushes you to be more than who you are.

One of the fundamental messages of Scripture is you have a God who is pushing you to be more than who you are, a God who has the highest expectations of you, and places on you greater responsibility than you are ready to carry.

It's there already in the very first chapter of the Bible. In five days God creates the heavens and the earth, the flora and fauna, the oceans teeming with fish. All is ready, so God proceeds with his crowning work. "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." And so God created us, the pinnacle of his creative work.

Then he gave us dominion over the earth, and that does not give us the permission to exploit it and exhaust it and destroy it. The dominion he gives us is the responsibility to care for it, to look after it, to help it flourish. In Genesis 1

when God tells man to subdue the earth, the Hebrew word for subdue is “kabash”. It’s a word we sometimes use when we say I’m going to put the kabash on that. There’s a sense of force and firmness in the word. I’m going to put the kabash on this fire so that it doesn’t destroy this forest. And when he says we are to rule over the earth, that comes from the Hebrew “radah” which means to rule. But in Scripture one who rules is not supposed to do that for his own benefit. A president governs, we hope, so that the country prospers.

There are two other verbs God gave us to do in the creation account. They are there in Genesis 2:15: “the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to 1) work it and 2) keep it.” The Hebrew word for work there is “avad” which means to cultivate or till, and to keep (“shamar”) means to protect and preserve. All these verbs he’s given us to do in Genesis: subdue, rule, cultivate and keep . . . all these verbs together mean “care for.” Care for the creation. You take care of the land because the land takes care of you.

God wants his creation to flourish, so he sends us to care for it. God wants your children to flourish, so he gives you the responsibility to help them flourish, to bloom and blossom. It’s your responsibility then to put the kabash on bad behavior. It’s your responsibility to “govern” or “rule” in their best interests and “cultivate, or till” their skills and “keep or preserve” them from harm and danger. What tremendous responsibility God gives us as parents! It’s unearned. Who can prove himself ready for it? And it’s the same responsibility he gave us when he entrusted his creation to us.

Isn’t that remarkable? From the very beginning, God puts limits on his own power and authority to make room for us, men and women, to work as his partners. God creates, and loves his creation, but then hands much of the responsibility over to us and steps back. Such great expectations he has for us. Or in the beautiful words of the psalm, “You made him a little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler

over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea...”

Such a contrast to how we think of ourselves. Such a contrast.

The Bible thinks of us as the pinnacle of God’s creative work. The Green movement sees us as a weed species on earth, the world’s worst pest, a cancer on the planet, the blight of the earth.

The Bible says we’re different from the rest of the animals. He made us in his image and gave us dominion over other creatures. He talks to us alone in the Bible, never to other creatures. But we’re being told man is just another species of animal with the good fortune of being at or near the top of the food chain.

God’s Word says he made us just a little lower than the angels. But evolution thinks of us as just a notch or two higher than a primate.

God gives us the freedom and dignity to make choices about how we’re going to interact with the world and with one another. But Freud and others think of us as slaves to primal instincts, drives and desires, or slaves to our genes, our DNA.

The Bible says we were created in the image of God. But racism pigeonholes us into characterizations.

The Bible says God has plans for all our days, not just some of them, but ageism says when you get old it’s best you disengage from the world and learn how to play cards instead. Shuffleboard geriatrics.

The Bible teaches God so loved every one of us that he was willing to die for every one of us. Each of us he accounted worthy of his own life. But that’s not how the world thinks. This child isn’t worthy of life because he comes at an inconvenient time. That one isn’t worthy because he has an extra chromosome.

The Bible teaches all of life is sacred, and not to be taken by murder or suicide. But the world thinks otherwise. Go to certain parts of Milwaukee and look at someone the

wrong way and you may lose your life. Or, if you decide that the quality of life is so low it's not worth living anymore, there's a growing list of places in the US and around the world that will help you out of life.

“You made us a little lower than the angels and crowned us with glory and honor. You made us ruler over the works of your hands.” Things go badly when we forget that original glory. Things go badly when we start living down to today's low expectations of us. Sin is not just pride and selfishness, thinking too highly of ourselves . . . but sin can also mean not thinking highly enough, not living up to God's expectations of us. The ancient church called it “sloth.” It means not caring, not engaging the world, being a passive victim rather than a responsible agent. We allude to it in our confession of sin. “We have sinned against you by what we've done, and by what we've left undone . . . we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.” Sins of omission are at least as much a problem as intentional evil.

After the Holocaust of World War II, many were asking how could such a thing have happened? Some asked, “Where was God?” Perhaps a better question is “Where were all the men and women of whom God has great expectations? Did they participate? Did they avert their eyes? Did they decide they couldn't do anything so they didn't try?”

One who did try was a Lutheran pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Living comfortably and teaching in America, he returned to his native Germany in 1939 to try to help turn things around, both in the Lutheran church and in Nazi Germany. He joined an effort to assassinate Hitler. It failed and Bonhoeffer was arrested and executed a few days before the war's end. He was one of the most promising theologians of the day. He wrote, “The sin of respectable people is fleeing from responsibility.” Bonhoeffer reminded us that our discipleship is in the world. Christian discipleship is not about cocooning yourself or your children from the world, retreating from the world, insulating your

lives from the world. It's about interacting with the world in responsible ways.

Sometimes we think Christian ethics is only about what we say "no" to, what to avoid. At least as important, maybe more so, is saying "yes," accepting responsibility, living responsibly, being God's partners in the world. Clearly, he has much greater expectations of us than we have of ourselves.

Remember who you are. Remember who you are. Just a little lower than the angels. Sinners yes, to the core, but redeemed also, washed clean by the blood of Christ, therefore not just sinners but also saints simultaneously.

You've been baptized. So no matter how much or how little you have achieved, how much or how little you have accomplished, how much or how little responsibility you have taken, still you are a child of God, God's son, God's daughter, crowned with glory.

He has the very highest expectations of you, for sure, for he said, "Be perfect, even as I the Lord your God am perfect." But he has an even a greater redeeming love for you, for it is unconditional. We see it in how Jesus interacted with the tax collectors and prostitutes: so gentle and gracious. We see it in the parables he told, the desperate, filthy prodigal coming home to the father's embrace. We see it most clearly on the cross, where he took responsibility . . . responsibility for your sin and mine, for your death and mine, as if it was all his own. Jesus Christ lived to show us what humans are supposed to look like, what the image of God looks like in a human. And he died to restore that image of God in us. Jesus came to remind us that we, you and I, were made a little lower than the angels and crowned with glory and honor. Jesus Christ came to remind us also that we, you and I, are children of God, loved unconditionally and infinitely by God.

Remember who you are. Never, never forget whose you are. Amen.

