

Pentecost 20, Proper 22
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

October 6, 2024
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True Mastery

In the summer between my Jr. and Sr. years of High School, I decided to go visit my friend Laurie. He lived with his parents on a mission station high in the mountains, while my parents lived in a house in a town at the foot of the mountains, close to where the Tsachi people live. With appropriate permissions and arrangements in place, I took a bus up the mountains to the capital of Quito, and another south, down the inter-Andean corridor, to Rio Bamba. From there I had to get another bus headed further south, and ask the driver to drop me off at the entrance to the village of Colta, where Laurie lived. We left Rio Bamba in the evening, and by the time I was dropped off it was almost 11 at night.

I walked the mile or so up the lane under a perfectly clear sky and no moon. The Milky Way was so vividly bright in the clear mountain air that it provided all the light I needed. I found myself singing Psalm 8 out loud in Spanish.

*O Jehovah, Señor nuestro,
Cuan glorioso es tu nombre en toda la tierra...*

I sang with all my heart and soul, transported at the wonder of the heavens. When we read this psalm it's hard not to put myself once again on that lane under that exultant sky and be filled once again with wonder, and I can't help but think that the author of these words may have had a similar experience.

*O Lord our Governor, how exalted is your Name in all the world!
Out of the mouths of infants and children
your majesty is praised above the heavens.
When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars you have set in their courses,*

The real wonder in the author's voice follows this, however. Given all that magnificence, that glory of the heavens, what really surprises the author is the regard God seems to have for humankind.

*What is man that you should be mindful of him,
the son of man that you should seek him out?
You have made him but little lower than the angels;
you adorn him with glory and honor;*

In the midst of all this wonder, the place of human beings in the heart of God is cause for even more wonder. Why? The psalmist answers.

*You give him mastery over the works of your hands;
you put all things under his feet:*

*All sheep and oxen, even the wild beasts of the field,
The birds of the air, the fish of the sea,
and whatsoever walks in the paths of the sea.*

According to the ancient Hebrew scheme of things, humanity is right up there, just a little lower than angels, even more central to the grand plan than the wonder of the heavens. In fact, we're supposed to be in charge.

Frankly, I balk at that word, "mastery." I find it bogged down with the baggage of the despoiling of creation that is threatening human and non-human life around the globe. There is history here. The Enlightenment, focusing on reason over against mystery (usually termed disparagingly as superstition,) ravaged our inner planet, imagining it as a machine with no sacred dimension, a world without God. Of course, a world without God is impossible, so the final effect was to cut ourselves off at the knees, and give us permission to do the same to the world around us by consuming it as a commodity. I think of the giant trunks of Cedars and Douglas Firs that stand in the forests of the Cascades, notched up 5 and 6 feet where wedges were driven, on which planks were laid so loggers could harvest them. That we would run out of old-growth forest or salmon or whales or bison was unimaginable—and yet it almost happened. We have the power to burn the house down around our own ears.

Is this "mastery?" No, I think it's consumption. It's objectification, reducing the created order to an "it" rather than a "thou." There is no real relationship between an "it" and a "thou." There is just exploitation. "Master" means something more relational. Yes, it implies a vertical relationship, but masters are masters of something, and a master who does not take care of that something is no master, but a consumer. Our friend, Jay Bowen, Skagit elder, calls me a holy man, and that designation comes with great respect and deference in their society. His sister Kay always answers the phone with me with (first in Lushootseed, then in English,) "How are you, honorable man?" Both are quick to say that no honor, no gift is ever conferred for the use of oneself. It is always in service to the community. There is no true mastery without vital responsibility.

In the Hebrew tradition from which our faith springs, we are made of the dust of the earth and the breath of God. Part heaven, part earth, we join them. We stand as divinely appointed stewards. How we treat creation, with all the power conferred on us, reflects our relationship with Creator of said world.

It begs the question. What kind of masters are we? I was in the woods about 3 weeks ago, sitting quietly at dawn. A screech owl flew by, and then returned to sit on a branch not 15 feet from me. It sat there, and we looked at one another for an extended moment. I opened my heart to the wonder of its presence, and was filled with awe. Then I thought maybe I can communicate with this bird. I began to squeak like a mouse, their favorite prey. It wasn't listening—or didn't like my poor rendition—he flew away. I told Jay Bowen about it and the first thing he said was, "Was it talking to you?" Well, maybe I was doing so much talking, trying to fool it with mousy sounds, that I wasn't really listening. I was aware, however, that owls throughout North and South American native peoples are harbingers of death. Within two weeks I learned of the death of the mother of a good friend of mine in Mexico.

You don't have to be Native American to hear what creation is saying. The other day I was in the kitchen when I caught a glimpse of movement out the window. I had to move to another window to see just what it was. I thought it might be a Mourning Dove, come to eat the seed other birds had knocked out of the bird feeder, but it moved differently. Instead, it was a Sharp-shinned Hawk that had caught a sparrow under the feeder. OK, so we know that when we put out bird feeders, they have secondary consequences. We concentrate songbirds, which draw things that eat songbirds. Now back up a step. Humans move in and change the environment. We create conditions that favor some forms of life and work against others, and creation responds, giving us its own answer to our actions. A bird feeder is a place of inter-species communication, if you are open to it.

What kind of masters are we? The groanings of a planet in the throes of precipitous climate change speak eloquently. Record breaking flooding has devastated parts of the Southeastern US, Mexico, and Nepal reflect a shift in precipitation patterns triggered by global warming. Hundreds are dead, thousands are displaced. Just in this neck of the woods, people who have been here a long time say that they never spoke of a fire season on this side of the Cascades, and yet now we do. I have heard tell that the glaciers off White Horse Peak near Barrington used to be so low kids would go play in the ice caves after school. Now the caves are hundreds of feet up the mountain. The Skagit River used to freeze over so solidly that carts could be driven over it, and ice was harvested for cooling during warming months. Creation is sending us a message, loud and clear.

I was heartened to hear that the new Library Commons is a move in the right direction. With 78 EV charging stations, it is the largest public EV charging site in the nation—and it has infrastructure for 200 more. The formula for the cement used consumes 40% less carbon than standard concrete. The building is designed to take advantage of solar heat. Some of us are listening.

What kind of masters are we? I have a book about eagles written by a friend of mine. He spent some time in Kazakhstan with the Eagle Hunters, practitioners of a tradition millennia old of hunting game with trained Golden Eagles. The book is divided into two sections. The second half is a rundown of all the species of eagles in the world, interesting of itself. The first half is much more interesting to me, because it is a meditation on eagles and humans. He suggests that, if you see one standing on a rocky crag a mile away through your binoculars, be sure it has already seen you with its eyes capable of 8 times the resolution of yours. Whether you as an individual live or die is hardly of concern to the eagle. For a million years, Golden Eagles have lived, hunted, reproduced, expanded and contracted their range, adapted to a dizzying array of habitats, all independent of humans, all the while, plenty willing to take advantage when we inadvertently provide them with things they seek, like pastures full of jack rabbits, or concentrations of livestock of a size they can take. Eagles predate humanity on this earth and are perfectly capable of outliving us. They have their own being and keep their own counsel, independent, but interconnected with us.

We are masters embedded in a web. True mastery begins with the knowledge that we have influence on the web out of proportion with our collective biomass, but we are not free of the

web by virtue of that power, rather, we have a greater responsibility. That responsibility begins with being in relationship, listening, hearing and understanding, then taking action that enhances the web rather than destroys it.

We are masters, charged with duty, serving under the Master Creator. It is in recognition of that web that we gather this afternoon to bless our non-human companions. We will be recognizing the blessedness of all the created order. We will be bestowing on them our good will and positive disposition, and we will be committing ourselves to responsible mastery, taking up the place in the web that we have been granted, and seeking to serve there with dignity and humility.