October 4, 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Psalm 8

The psalmist is not alone in claiming that humans are only “a little lower than God.” Can it be any wonder, then, that our faith leaves a great deal of room to disagree about our power in creation?

by Hardy Kim in the September 30, 2015 issue

Christians have long tried to find convincing answers to the questions raised by the persistence of evil in the world. We inherited the questions—and some answers—in the form of writings such as Job. We have come up with adversaries to blame, constructing them from biblical passages such as the Garden of Eden in Genesis, the fallen “Day Star, son of Dawn,” in Isaiah 14, and the wilderness tempter in the synoptic Gospels. We have even gone so far as to claim that any evil we perceive is nothing more than a manifestation of God’s justice toward us, unworthy as we are (Calvin, *Institutes* 3.23.4–7).

At the same time, human beings have claimed special status and power for themselves in the framework of God’s creation. The voice of the psalmist is not alone in claiming that humans are only “a little lower than God, and crowned . . . with glory and honor,” or in affirming that God has “given them dominion over the works of [God’s] hands” and has “put all things under their feet.”

Can it be any wonder, then, that our faith leaves a great deal of room for people to disagree about the extent of our power in creation? Lacking any final and definitive statement about our place in the order of things, even well-intentioned Christians have a tendency to take up the mantle of power when it suits us and then shrug it off when it becomes uncomfortable. We presume the right to use natural resources for human profit, for example, yet remain largely silent when it comes to doing something about climate change.

A strong, theologically grounded understanding of the nature of our power in the world might actually help us be more active when it comes to the problems we see

all around us—especially if this understanding is connected to the brokenness of creation and framed in relationship with God's sovereignty.

The question of our place and our power in the context of God's creation is clearly not a simple one to address. But recent explorations of the problems we face—everything from the social problems of violence and division, to the overwhelming complexity of global financial systems, to the ever-expanding frontiers of modern health care—suggest that our true status probably lies somewhere between the extremes. We are neither pawns in a celestial struggle nor godlike possessors of the wealth of the universe.

The field of epigenetics is one area that helps illuminate how the power dynamics that distinguish between creator and creation are not so straightforward. Where once we believed that God created us with a certain predetermined nature, epigenetics points out that environmental factors can affect the way our individual cells read genes, altering how they are expressed—and that these changes can even be transferred across generations. So we are not beings with an independent physical expression that stands apart from or above our environment. Changes in climate and diet, exposure to external factors like pollutants—these things can affect our expression and experience of who we are.

"Epigenetics is proving we have responsibility for the integrity of our genome," writes biologist Randy Jirtle. "Before, genes predetermined outcomes. Now everything we do—everything we eat or smoke—can affect our gene expression and that of future generations. Epigenetics introduces the concept of free will into our idea of genetics."

It also helps us see that we human beings are much more interconnected with the rest of creation than we previously believed. If that's the case, then our care for the environment is not just about managing a network of resources that exist for our benefit. It's really about embracing our place in the broad picture of God's creation, in a way that creates peace and wholeness for all. The image of God that we claim lives in us is integrally linked to all other things—which in turn have an impact on that divine image and how it shines forth.

New revelations from the world of science give us urgent reason to update our religious understandings of creation and our place in it. "We must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the earth

justifies absolute domination over other creatures," writes Pope Francis in his recent encyclical on the environment. "The biblical texts are to be read in their context," he continues,

> with an appropriate hermeneutic, recognizing that they tell us to "till and keep" the garden of the world (cf. Gen 2:15). "Tilling" refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while "keeping" means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature. Each community can take from the bounty of the earth whatever it needs for subsistence, but it also has the duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations . . . Human beings too are creatures of this world, enjoying a right to life and happiness, and endowed with unique dignity. So we cannot fail to consider the effects on people's lives of environmental deterioration, current models of development and the throwaway culture.