

## *How Majestic Is Your Name in All the Earth*

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,  
Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey  
*Preached on the 27<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, (4 October) 2009.*

Text: Psalm 8:1 “O LORD, our LORD, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”

We said the psalm of the day responsively in our Opening Sentences. At first I thought Psalm 8 was a poem praising God for creation. While creation is a cause the Psalmist had for glorying in the Lord, we should not think the poet is a green romanticist who brings God into his environmentalism.

[The Psalmist] did not try either to bolster faith or to prove God’s existence by the contemplation of an orderly universe. The contemplation of the world of nature is in itself sterile or at least highly ambiguous. [A human being] does not receive anything from such an exercise. He brings to it what he already possesses [and knows].<sup>1</sup>

The Psalmist “was worshipping a God whom he already knew.”<sup>2</sup> It is important to note in the first line the plural possessive, “O LORD, *our* LORD . . .” The poet called upon the actual deity who had saved his tribe and brought them out of Egypt. This was the God of Abraham, a particular God whom the Psalmist knew from his ancestors and Temple. It is the name Moses heard whispered out of the burning bush on Sinai. The actual text in scripture contains the secret name of God but it is always discretely rendered, usually with LORD or *Adonai*, in Hebrew.

Grasping the power of *hashem*—the Hebrew word for “*The Name*”—is the first step in understanding this Psalm.

The wonderful Hebrew benediction I use each week at the conclusion of the services comes from the Torah, from Numbers 6. Moses speaking the word from God told Aaron, “Thus you shall bless the Israelites. . . .” The prayer follows, “The Lord bless you and keep you,” and so forth. But you might miss an important thing if you do not read beyond what follows the prayer. The Lord said, “So [Aaron] shall put *my name* on the Israelites and I will bless them.”<sup>3</sup> In saying the name of God over the children of Israel, God comes upon the people and blesses them. There is power in the name, a power that brings the divine into their midst when it is uttered.

This is also what is behind the stricture in the third commandment: “You shall not make wrongful use of the *name* of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his *name*.”<sup>4</sup> We all grew up assuming this had to do with curse words that had “God” in them, and surely that is part of it, but the fuller meaning requires us to exercise extreme care about how we use God’s name. When the name is called out, God comes to us, into the room, as it were.

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<sup>1</sup> Therrien, Samuel. *The Psalms and Their Meaning for Today*. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1952), 46.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Numbers 6:22-27.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 20:7.

For this reason you see orthodox Jews not spelling out the secret name or even the circumlocutions for the secret name, to avoid speaking it in the wrong circumstances or before people who may not reverence God.

This same discretion about the use of the divine name Christians inherited from our Jewish ancestors. In one of Jesus' final prayers he addressed God saying, "I have made *your name* known to those whom you gave me from the world. They are yours...."<sup>5</sup> Early Christians would pray "in the name of Jesus" and "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." They baptized, healed and taught in the name of the Savior and thereby continued to bring the risen Lord into their work and the life of the early church.<sup>6</sup>

One of the interesting conflicts in the military Chaplain Corps right now concerns this very issue. When Chaplains pray at public events the Christian ones have been in the habit of praying as if their hearers are a Christian congregation, "in the name of Jesus." Increasingly as our nation and her Navy and Marine Corps are more diverse, this usage has rankled the non-Christians. In turn this has hardened the more orthodox Christians who have become even more determined to pray in the name of Jesus. There have been court cases, claims and counter claims. The Corps advises chaplains when praying in non congregational settings to exercise care in vocalizing the name of his or her deity. It is suggested they pray not using "in the name of Jesus" but something like "in the name of our God." It reminds me of the same care the Hebrews used. Instead of invoking the secret name of God, they too prayed in the name of the Holy One or God or the Lord. Even for people that don't believe, *the Name* still seems to hold power!

At times the power of *hashem* comes out in humorous situations. There is the story of a young liberal minister who went to a hospital to visit one of his new and middle aged parishioners. She was very sick, hooked up to all the machines of modern medicine. After sitting by her bedside and talking with her about the illness, he offered to pray and she eagerly asked him to do so. Of course, he prayed for her recovery and healing and ended his prayer, "*in the name of Jesus. Amen.*" At that very moment, she sat bolt upright in bed and began to shout, "*Alleluia! I've been healed!*" She pulled out all the IV lines and buzzers began to sound in the room and down the hallway. Nurses came running but the patient kept proclaiming her divine healing with louder exclamations and dancing in the room. The awestruck, embarrassed preacher stood there not knowing what to do or say. When finally he escaped the room and got back to the parking garage and into his car. He put his hands on the steering wheel and prayed: "*God, don't ever do that to me again.*"

That said, there are still moments when I have learned there is reality to the power of the name. I had not been a minister long and was still learning the power of Scripture's words, the Holy Spirit and finding my preaching voice. I had undertaken a sermon series on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Per usual, I had approached the series academically, reading several books on the topic. One thing I remember: *I was not sure what the Holy Spirit exactly was and thought my church members were in the same boat.* So one of the sermons concerned the reality of the divine Spirit and as I preached, I explored the various texts of the Bible that taught this idea. As the sermon progressed I began to sense something happening to me and to the room full of

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<sup>5</sup> John 17:6.

<sup>6</sup> A few examples, some negative, some positive: Acts 5:28, 40; 8:12; 16:18.

upturned faces. Being modernly educated I was not exactly able to talk about it or say what it was. But later that week I visited one of my older members. She said, “David, the most marvelous thing happened in church this week while you preached! I felt the presence of the Spirit moving slowly among us.” Well, I thought to myself, *I wonder*.... It certainly was not planned by me. But maybe God is real. Imagine, a young, Yale educated divine, converting himself!

We know there is power in *human* names. When I was completing my studies I remember the controversy over the Vietnam Memorial in Washington. A Yale architecture student Maya Lin won the design contest for the Memorial. It is a large black granite wall coming out of the earth and engraved with the names of over 59,000 Americans who perished during that war. To say it was controversial is an understatement. The politics of the war were still raw at the time. But after it was built it became quickly one of the most visited of the many monuments in our nation’s capital. You still see people standing, staring at a name or names. They make rubbings to take a name home. It is the power of all those names that brings home the reality and the memory. If human names can bring the dead back into our consciousness, why are we so casual about the divine name?

One more thing: They call us *Christians* after we are baptized, confess the faith and become part of the church. It harks back to Aaron’s Blessing in Numbers 6. We have the name of Christ put on us. Do we think about that? We are God’s agents and because we carry God’s name upon us, we carry God into the world, as well. It is of greatest importance that we do not use the name of God in vain.

O LORD, our LORD, how majestic is your name in all the earth!  
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
The moon and the stars that you have established;  
What are human beings that you are mindful of [us],  
Mortals that you care for [us]?  
Yet you have made [us] a little lower than God,  
And crowned [us] with glory and honor.  
You have given [us] dominion over the works of your hands....  
O LORD, our LORD, how majestic is your name in all the earth! <sup>7</sup>

End

How Majestic Is Your Name in All the Earth.DOC

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<sup>7</sup> Psalm 8:1, 3-6, 9.