

You Are Created in God's Image
Series – “Eight Encouraging Words”
Psalm 8 – September 15, 2024
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A fundamental teaching of scripture is that we are created in the image of God. It's often referred to by its Latin translation: *Imago Dei*. The term comes from Genesis 1: “God created humankind in his image; male and female he created them.”

It's a generous, expansive description that has room for people of every body type, skin color, IQ, age, and ability. There's room for freckles and birthmarks and wrinkles, too.

Plain and simple, friends, you bear the image of God, and it is beautiful! That image is more than skin deep, of course. It permeates us from inside out. It shows up in the way we think and move and function. If you're good at math or can play the trumpet like the angel Gabriel, that's the image of God. If you have a quick wit or can easily express your feelings to others, that's the image of God. And on the less-lofty side of things, if you have an unsteady gait or an occasional senior moment, that's the image of God, too.

To be honest, this can be difficult for us to comprehend. The message that we are created in God's image runs counter to much of what we see and hear in our stylized, photoshopped world. It's hard enough for confident, well-adjusted people to believe it. If you happen to have low self-esteem or chronic pain or a learning disorder, it can be nigh unto impossible. So let me say it again: Whoever you are, you bear the image of God, and it is beautiful!

A couple years ago we saw the first soaring pictures from the Webb Telescope. Remember? Those amazing pictures could make a person feel small, a little like looking up at a star-filled sky on a dark night. For Eric Smith, lead scientist on the Webb project, it was just the opposite. “When I see those pictures,” he said, “they make me feel powerful.”

So, is that a good thing? Maybe. A lot of it depends on what we do with the feelings inside of us. For Eric Smith, I think, the pictures from the Webb Telescope restored his faith in humanity. He marveled, “When we set out to do something, we find that we *can* actually do it!”

The theme of Psalm 8 is not so far removed from Eric Smith's thinking. But here's the difference: the psalmist views humanity as *powerful*, not necessarily because of what we've accomplished, but because we are created in the very image of God. We're "a little lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor." And the crucial point is this: "God has given us dominion over the works of God's hands." *Amazing!*

The word in Hebrew is *radah*. It's regularly translated as "dominion," but it's sometimes wrongly understood as "domination." *Radah* is also used in the Hebrew Bible to describe the rule of a king over his people – his dominion.

When we studied the psalms this past summer, we noted that Psalm 2 is one of the royal psalms. It was used at the coronation of a new king. At that coronation, the king was adopted as God's own son. We heard that God's intention for a king was not one of absolute power, however. The king's primary responsibility was to provide a place where people could live in safety and peace, raise their animals and grow their crops, be treated with dignity and respect, and be cared for when they were not able to care for themselves. In other words, kings were to strive for kindness and well-being and enough for all.

According to Psalm 8, those responsibilities may have been part of the job description of the king, but they were also part of the job description of every human being. Each of us is to strive for kindness and well-being and enough for all. Each of us is to protect and preserve God's creation – the plants and animals and people. That's dominion. That's the heart and soul of what it means to be created in the image of God.

And truth be told, that's usually where we run into trouble. In our increasingly divisive world, we often don't have the bandwidth for understanding and accepting those not in our tribe. Whether our division is the result of partisan media, or the rhetoric spouted by our political leaders, or the information silos in which we find ourselves, most days our responsibility for caring for the well-being of God's creation can seem far beyond our reach.

Unfortunately, our divisive thinking can have dangerous consequences. In her book *Braving the Wilderness*, Brene Brown calls out our tendency to dehumanize those with whom we disagree. Our brains like to keep things simple, Brown says, so we end up with categories such as: *we are good* and *they are bad*. Just walk through a neighborhood, look at the lawn signs, and

see if you don't start generalizing about who is living in that house. And if you overhear a mean-spirited conversation, see if you don't wonder how *they* could possibly reflect the image of God.

We saw an example of this this one July 4 weekend in Minneapolis. There were disturbances at the Stone Arch Bridge. Minneapolis City Council member Michael Rainville singled out the disturbers not simply as youth, but as *Somali American* youth. With a tone of angry indignation, Rainville said he planned to sit down with Somali American leaders and tell them that "*their* children could no longer have that type of behavior."

Now, maybe this reaction was meant to be helpful, until you think about how often we readily give kids the benefit of the doubt – kids being kids. But what happens when we hold up a certain group of *them* as the troublemakers? It's bound to feel more personal. And speaking from my own experience, because I have a Somali American daughter-in-law, I get concerned that any future grandchildren I might have could be looked upon as suspect because of that label.

Michael Rainville eventually apologized. I give him credit for that. It's a reminder, though, that we need to be careful. Our words have power. There can be lasting, hurtful consequences in how we speak about others.

Michael Gerson, former columnist for the Washington Post, wrote an article about the responsibility that Christians bear in relating to others. He said: "During every generation across two millennia, Christians have faced the question: do they oppose and confront the worst elements of the culture, or do they simply reflect and amplify them?"

Gerson made the point: "In our time – and in just about every time – the most dangerous human failure is the dehumanization of others. To justify our callousness and cruelty, we tend to diminish the value and dignity of others. It is dehumanization that results in racism. It is dehumanization that breaks the bonds between citizens and turns disagreement into hatred and violence."

Gerson concluded: "People of faith are not the only source of humanizing morality in our society. But they are called to stand for the ideal that every human being is created equally valuable in the image of God."

Friends, please hear me: believing that all people are created “equally valuable” and “in the image of God” is a tremendous challenge. It does not mean nodding politely and moving on when there are wrongs to be righted. No, in the face of wrong and injustice, we are called to speak boldly. Indeed, that is a central element of exercising dominion. Until there is kindness and well-being and enough for all, then any kindness for which we strive may ring hollow.

As we share in the work of God’s vision for the well-being of creation, hopefully our striving will help us more fully bear God’s image. Hopefully our efforts show the face of our Lord Jesus and the grace he so regularly practiced. We bear God’s image when we treat people as individuals, and not simply as labels; when we preserve their dignity instead of dehumanizing them; when we accept that their opinions and experiences are valid, even if they do not match our own; when we work to ascribe positive intent as much as possible because they, like us, may simply be trying to do the best they can.

Friends, you are created in the image of God. I hope you find that encouraging, if not a bit daunting. And don’t forget that that image shows up in Jesus, too. Jesus’ deep and expansive love shows us the way. And it reminds us that we bear Christ’s image to the world – and it is beautiful! Amen.