

What Are We?
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Psalm 103

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The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, better known as the Shakers, was a religious group, founded in 18th century England and then spread to this country, reaching a peak membership here of about 6,000 just before the Civil War. They were a spiritualist group who, as their formal name implies, believed passionately that Christ's second coming was imminent. The Shakers are remembered for their practice of equality between men and women, their dancing in the spirit, their practice of celibacy, and their furniture.

Shaker furniture - there's a picture of a Shaker style chair on the front of your bulletin - is known for its quality, durability, and simplicity. There's a story about a Shaker carpenter who was asked why he took so much time and pains with a chair that he was making. He answered that he built it so carefully because he hoped that one day an angel might sit in it.

There's something wonderful about a humble, wooden chair, fit for a corner of the living room, but also fit for an angel, the manifestation of celestial wonder and glory. This paradox of a Shaker chair is much like our own paradox of what it is to be a human being. We are as ordinary and humble as a Shaker chair. Yet, as our call to worship, Psalm 8, tells us, we are also crowned with glory and honor. In Genesis the paradox is extended from earth to heaven. We are as ordinary as the dust of the earth, yet we are also created in the image of God.

Our scripture for today, Psalm 103, has its own version of this paradox. As mortals our days are like grass or like a flower of the field, "the wind passes over it and it is gone, and its place knows it no more." But yet the psalm also tells us that we have the high honor of being God's covenant partner, which means that we are capable of a relationship with the Creator of the universe,

Thinking about this paradox can be a little mind boggling, maybe a lot mind boggling. But it's not some theological abstraction. It's us, and each day we live with the human paradox of dust and heaven. How do we do this each day without somehow exploding? I'd suggest following the example of the Shaker chair and keep it as simple as possible. A story would help us to do this.

My first job as an ordained minister was an associate pastor at a UCC church in Manchester, New Hampshire. The salary was low, so the church arranged for me to have a second job as a part time job as chaplain at the Hillsborough County Nursing Home. Looking back, I can see

that there were more straightforward ways that the church could have addressed the issue of low pastor's salary, but they chose to set me up with this second job.

As part of my chaplaincy, each Wednesday I led a service and gave a sermon from the stage at the nursing home's auditorium. Do this long enough, week after week, and you start thinking that you are pretty good at what you do. Besides back then I was a lot more certain that I knew what I was talking about than I am now.

Then one Wednesday, I was preaching up a storm when I happened to look down at my shoes. Thankfully they were both tied and both polished, which is to say that the brown one was polished and the black one was polished. Oops!

I owned two pairs of dress shoes at the time, and I'd mixed them up. The thing is, once you become aware that your shoes don't match, you are convinced that everybody else is also aware that your shoes don't match. I don't know about you but for me it's hard to preach when you're trying to cover up one shoe with the other. You feel like a flamingo. I cut the sermon short and got out of there as soon as I could.

Embarrassed as I was then, now it's one of my favorite stories. It's just so true, and I can laugh at it. It's kind of a preacher's variation on the paradox of being human. There I was preaching away, confident that I could expound on eternal truths, while at the same time I hadn't been able to get my shoes to match – the sublime and the ridiculous right there for all to see. I'm Ok with that. It's good and healthy to accept your failings and limitations, to accept your humanity. It's also a good thing to learn from your mistakes. I still have two pairs of dress shoes, only now both pairs are black. Problem solved.

But not all problems – you may have noticed that Psalm 104 is in the bulletin, but Sarah read Psalm 103. My bad. I'd been planning to preach on Psalm 103 all along, had been gathering sermon illustrations for it like a squirrel gathering nuts in October. But when I submitted the bulletin material my hand failed me and I typed a 4 instead of the intended 3. The thing is, I tripled checked the bulletin material before I submitted it, and I still got it wrong. You know what, I can live with that. I am absolutely unable to screen out all errors. I'm human and proud of it. It's another story I can laugh at.

So I think that one answer to the human paradox is to accept it and to be able to laugh at yourself when you get it wrong. Maybe this sounds easy, but if you've even gotten caught up in perfectionism, you know that it can be very hard to accept that you are human and that you're not always going to get it all right. The truth is that making perfectionistic demands on yourself is inhuman. That's exactly what it is: it's inhuman. It's inhuman because it denies what we are human, fallible creatures made out of dirt. Yes we are crowned with glory and honor, but we can't forget where we come from.

The psalm takes this paradox of who we are and brings it to our relationship with God. It ups the ante. Psalm 103 tells us that as we are created in God's image; we are capable of being in a relationship with God, of being in covenant with God. Furthermore we are capable of doing God's will, keeping God's commandments, which Jesus summed up as loving God with our whole being and loving our neighbor as ourselves. We are truly crowned with glory and honor.

Yet so often we don't act like it. The reality is that we often turn our back on both God and our neighbor, break the commandments, and fail to love. As Paul said, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." If we believe that we can be perfect, forget what we are made of, then what Paul says is devastating. But if we accept our humanity, the paradox that is us, then it's a powerful assertion of self-acceptance.

The good news of the psalm, indeed the good news of the gospels, is that God accepts us with all of our very human limitations. All have sinned and all are invited to forgiveness. Psalm 103 is majestic in its description of God's love, compassion and forgiveness. The psalm tells us that God is "merciful and gracious", "abounding in steadfast love" and then offers sweeping words of forgiveness. "For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is God's steadfast love toward those who fear God, as far as the east is from the west, so far God removes our transgressions from us."

The word fear in these verses may be troubling, but it can equally be rendered as awe, wonder, and particularly as amazement. To fear God in this context is to be in appropriate relationship with God. And to be in such a relationship with God is once again our crowning glory. God's forgiveness constantly restores this relationship. We are bonded to the creator of the universe. The paradox of who we are is unceasing.

I think once again of the Shaker carpenter making that chair. Of course we'll never know what he's thinking while he works. Did he really believe that an angel might perch on the chair he was making? Who knows? I'm betting he did and he didn't. So that when he was tempted to cut corners – really, who going to see that this piece doesn't quite fit? Just jam it a little – the part of him that was making a chair for an angel caused him to stop and take the time he needed to get it as right as he could. Not perfect, but make the chair as good as he could. Maybe the angel would know that it was his best chair so far and find it a good chair to sit and rest for a while.

The carpenter found inspiration in the belief that he was making a chair fit for an angel. This inspiration brought out his best. We can find inspiration in our belief that each day we are creating lives worthy of human beings – out of the dust, yet created in the image of God. So inspired, we are drawn to create lives that are transparent to the love and beauty of God are creator. We are just as capable of doing this as we are capable of messing up. And when we

live this way, fully claiming our glory and honor as human beings, well, the truth is that angels are just naturally going to want to hang out with us. Amen.