

Psalm 8

O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.
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 them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honour.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

“When Life is a Fire Drill”

Rev. Charles Schuster

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We begin to express the depth of appreciation that we have for the college students we have been privileged to work with over the past few years. At the 10:45 service we're going to officially say goodbye to some of the graduates who are with us. Gretchen is in our choir with her parents. They've been the leader of our group this past year, and her two parents are United Methodist pastors in Ohio. I think Jon Wilderdink is in the here in the congregation, if you are Jon would you stand up. Jon was the coordinator of the program, he's currently a student at Garrett, a theological seminary in Chicago. A.J. Bush, who has been attending our church, led us in the worship service this morning and played the piano, and she will be preaching today at Wellington in the church that we're

trying to start from our church. The contributions that have been made by the students to our congregation, we can't begin to thank you for that.

I know you can tell a lot about a person by watching how they do in a crisis. Three weeks ago, someone in our congregation, who's here today, passed out while we were singing one of the hymns that I chose. There was a doctor sitting near, and people in the pews nearby, and someone who is a nurse walked up and told me what was going on. 911 was called, the ambulance and paramedics came. I informed the congregation what was going on, the person who passed out was then conscious and was headed for the hospital, and was later released with some changes in medication, and I promise we will never sing that hymn again.

The point is, you can tell a lot about people in how they handle a crisis, and we handled it. There's a family that was camping up in the Big Thompson River area the day the flood came, and they were airlifted out, and I can tell you they are different people because of what they went through. There's a woman in our congregation who was standing below the tower at the University of Texas when Charles Whitman opened fire and innocent people were killed, and that woman's a different person because of having been at that place at that time. An Iliff student studying for ministry served as a chaplain intern in a hospital in Atlanta when Martin Luther King's mother was shot by a deranged gunman while she was playing the organ at church. Steve worked with Daddy King, and said that Daddy King, Martin Luther King's father, was the kindest man he ever met. A pastor at our annual conference was at Parkland Hospital when John Kennedy was assassinated. Gilbert was assigned to work with Governor Connolly's family, you may remember John Connolly, the governor of Texas, was shot as well. In Denver, the day President Eisenhower had his heart attack at Fitzsimmons Hospital, Charlie recalls watching Vice President Nixon wandering the corridors, wondering was there something he should do.

The first church I served as a pastor alone, there was a fire that almost destroyed it. I'd been there a month. It was set by an arsonist. Up till then, I thought I knew everything about how to run a church. I remember calling my district superintendent and telling him about the fire, anticipating that he would say, "Chuck, we're so sad to send you to such an unstable place, we will find another church for you, don't you worry." Or at least words of comfort, when he said, and I've said this before, was "Schuster, we expected you to build a fire under these people but this is not what we had in mind." That fire happened on a Friday afternoon. I remember the people from the church coming by, looking at the flames, watching the firefighters trying to extinguish their church. I remember seeing tears in their eyes, and I remember how that turned to an absolute resolve: We will rebuild this place, and it will be better than it was. They did. It was.

You can tell a lot about people by the way they handle a crisis. When life is a fire drill, when life is a crisis, what we do. I don't mean for this sermon to me depressing or negative or pessimistic. Clearly, however, the Gospel is good news, but the Gospel is good news put into the context of life as it is. The Gospel good news reminds us of the way things are, and the way things only seem to be, but we must not fool ourselves by

naively thinking. The Seattle Fish Company truck I saw this past week had its slogan written on the side of the truck – “If it swims, we have it.” The slogan that we could have written on the side of our walls as human beings would say, “If we live, we’re in crisis.” Life is a crisis. To be alive is to be in crisis. We don’t have to wait for a crisis to know that we are in one. There’s a crisis of survival, and a crisis of meaning. There’s a crisis of birth and raising children, you people know about that, don’t you. Yes you do. There’s the crisis of growth and the crisis of being around someone you care about dying, and the crisis of death. Every age and stage has its own crisis, every day has its crisis. Annie Dillard understands this in a book that she wrote, *Teaching the Stones to Talk*. She reminds us, “The planet itself is a sojourner in airless space. It’s a wet ball flung across nowhere. The coherence of matter dwindles and crumbles toward stillness,” she writes. “Our soulless solar system as a whole is careening through space, and it is a course without direction, it is out, and we are cast.”

The Psalmist said it, “This is the day which the Lord has made, we will rejoice and be glad in it.” What the Psalmist doesn’t quite say about the day is the danger, the day which the Lord has made is a day that we are put into, and it’s up to us to take it and make it. The day itself doesn’t care about our concerns. Jesus understood that. If you read all of the Gospels, you never hear Jesus say to his disciples, “Life is good, it’s easy, and God will protect us.” You don’t hear him saying that. What he said was, “Here’s how it is for me. The birds of the air have nests. I don’t have any place to put my head. And furthermore, the cup that I’ve been given to drink is not easy, in fact, I’m not sure you could drink it.” And then he said, “I’m not sure I could. Let this cup pass.” And then he said, “I have a cross to carry, and if you follow me, you’re going to have to carry a cross.” We don’t expect life to be easy for us. It will be difficult. Things will happen, things we wish would not happen. It will test everything we know about life, and God, and it does.

We know from the stories Jesus taught that he understood this, that the crisis of the parent of the prodigal. The prodigal child who took his inheritance and left. There isn’t a parent here who doesn’t understand what it means to see your child go off somewhere beyond your custodial care, who doesn’t understand that parable. And the man beaten and left by the side of the road understood that life can be cruel, and what it is to be the victim of violence, the object of violence, not to mention the people that passed by on the other side, or the Samaritan who for some reason did the right thing. And the farmer whose neighbor planted weeds in his crops, learned that he had a bigger problem than a bad harvest. He then knew he had a neighbor he couldn’t trust. Or the woman at the well could write a book about her marital crisis when Jesus asked her for a drink of water and she was seeking the living water that would quench her soul. We call them parables, but they are crisis points, and they remind us that to live is to be in crisis, that’s the way it is.

Did you hear about the man who went online and ordered a treehouse for his daughter, and when it came, he noticed those awful words, “Some assembly required.” And as he spread out all the material he’d been sent in his garage, he realized that the instructions directed building a treehouse, but the parts were clearly for a canoe. So he sent an email message to the treehouse company immediately. Within a few hours he received an

apology saying, “We’re sorry for the error, we apologize for the mixup. We don’t know how it could have happened, but there’s a deeper concern, because there’s a man or a woman, somewhere, out on some lake, trying to paddle your treehouse.” And that is the way it is. Some assembly is required, sometimes more than we can handle, and we discover all the parts don’t fit and the job we have is to paddle our treehouse.

I heard a lot of different stories from bishops in sermons at General Conference. I think the best one was a one told by a bishop and I don’t remember which, about a lemonade stand in a neighborhood run by kids, and the man remembers when he was a boy, and it was hot, and how much fun it was to make lemonade and put up a table on the curb and sell it. Pulled up to the curb in his car. “I’ll have a glass of lemonade,” and he gave the kid selling it fifty cents. Lemonade cost a quarter. The man wanted to be generous, he said, “Keep the change.” The man took the paper cup of lemonade and the boy stood there and stared. Fresh lemonade, ice, on a hot day, a paper cut. Finally the kid said to the man, “Are you finished?” “Just about. I told you to keep the change.” The boy kept staring. Finally he said, “Mister, could we have that cup back? It’s the only one we have, and we need it to stay in business.”

Sometimes we have to run our lemonade stands with just one cup. Sometimes we have to work harder than we think it is possible to work, to do the job that’s required, beyond our capacity. Sometimes the only luck it seems we have, if we have any at all, will be bad luck, and we’re forced to picnic in the rain. Sometimes when our plate is full, our hands are tied, and when we’re wanting to get up and go, we’ve lost our getup, and we’ve got no place to go. It’s hard. Life is a crisis, and we should expect it. But there is a second point I want to make, and it’s the most important point of all. The most important thing that’s ever said, from the pulpit of any church, any place. It is this: We are called by God to face it, and are given authority over it. It’s in the 8th Psalm: “O Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! What are we that you are mindful of us? You have given us dominion over the works of God’s hands, and God put all things under our feet.”

We were called by God to face the crisis. We were given authority. It’s the reason we are. We are the work of God’s hands. It’s our job on earth. When Moses called out to God, when he was trying to get his people to leave Egypt on the Exodus journey, and the people were saying to Moses, “What’s the matter, weren’t there enough graves in Egypt, you brought us out here to die?” and Moses said to God, like any pastor to his or her district superintendent, “Why did you give me these people?” And Moses heard God say, “Put out your hand, shut your mouth, and tell the people to move forward. You can do it, you’re the man.” When the disciples faced the risen Christ with all their doubts about the recent past and the distant future, and the crisis of faith that they had that caused them to run for their lives, Jesus told his friends, they heard the risen Christ say, “Go out into all nations and make disciples, and I’m going to be with you to the end of the earth.” Be apostles, make disciples. We are called to the crisis we have, and we are called to face it. It may not be what we want, but it is our destiny. It is our mission, and we have authority.

She looked at the floor when they told her that her husband had not survived and she thought of her children and how she would tell them, and she thought of even bigger

issues. She thought about how they will survive the next week or the next year, how they will make it. And at one point she said to herself, and others heard her say it, "I can't do it, I just can't do it." And yet on a clear morning weeks later when the sky was bright and the air was crisp and the sun was shining and the horizon looked less menacing, she knew it. She could do it. She was up to it. And she faced it with calm resolve and she said it and she wrote it down. Mary Fisher wrote it down in a book entitled *I'll Not Go Quietly*. Mary Fisher's husband died of AIDS. Mary too was infected. Katie Couric called her that every morning Mary wakes up in the shadow of death. She calls her son's names, holds them closely. From that moment on, she spends every hour seeking the strength and courage to fulfill her mission. Katie Couric said of Mary, "She is a shining light for all of us who sit in darkness." Mary's favorite story, it's in her book. Young woman planning a family Thanksgiving dinner calls her sister's house, just for some quick final advice. She's in a hurry. When the four-year-old nephew answers the phone, she's not pleased. She bypasses all the playfulness. "Honey, let me talk to your mommy." "She can't come to the phone right now." "Isn't she there?" "She can't come to the phone," he whispers. "Well, let me talk to your daddy." "He can't come to the phone right now." "Well, is there anybody else there?" "Yes." "Who?" "The police and the firemen." "Are you okay? Did you mom leave the stove on again? What's everybody doing over there?" And the little boy said, "They're looking for me." Mary Fisher's favorite story. Little boy, every one of us want to run and hide like the disciples ran and hid. Mary Fisher reminds us we don't have to run, we don't have to hide when we're in a crisis, we can face it, we can prepare for it. God calls us to face it, gives us authority over it.

Today we're going to have a fire drill. It happens that every fire drill needs a person who's what's called the incident commander, someone in charge. None of us wanted to be the incident commander. None of us wanted to be in charge. I didn't want to do it, other staff members didn't want to do it, but it was decided that whoever the man or woman who's the preacher for that day, that person would be the incident commander. It was then we learned that if you're the incident commander, you get to carry the bullhorn and use it. So I've been carrying this bullhorn around all week, using it to call people into my office, setting off the whistle to annoy them now and then. Now every member of the staff is looking forward to being the incident commander, and they'd all like the bullhorn. They'd all like it. I think some of them want the bullhorn out of my control, because it gives us authority in a crisis, provides dominion. It says, "I can face it, I don't need to hide."

God is looking for each of us to take the crisis points of our lives when we want to run and hide. God is saying, "You don't need to run, you don't need to hide." Paul is saying it in a different way. Nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. And Jesus is saying "I will be with you always." Never back down because we're afraid. Always step up, if we think someone should. There is no crisis that is bigger than our will to face it, no problem that is greater than our capacity to handle it, and there is no journey that we cannot accomplish if we're willing at least to take the first step. If not now, when? If not us, whom? If not this, what? So we take the bull by the horns, or the bullhorn, and push the volume up. And prepare for the worst, knowing that there is nothing worse than to be unprepared except to be afraid to face it when it comes. To live

is to be in crisis, and how we face a crisis will determine who we are, and more than that, will determine who we are called to be.

I've been trying to think about how I should end this, and I've been wondering if we ought to sing another hymn. My favorite hymn, "Amazing Grace," I really don't like that hymn, I'm just thinking maybe we ought to sing "Amazing Grace." But I don't know whether we should or not sing "Amazing Grace," because there's probably a division about that. There's that part of "Amazing Grace" where it says "saved a wretch like me." I just don't like that part. But it's a beautiful hymn.

(Fire drill siren)