

“Fixer of the Bounds”
(Home Part 4 of 4)
Psalm 148
First Sunday after Christmas

John 1:3b-5, 9, 14

What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it... ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.

Psalm 148

¹Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights!

²Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!

³Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!

⁴Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!

⁵Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for he commanded and they were created.

⁶He established them forever and ever;
he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

⁷Praise the LORD from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps,
⁸fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!

⁹Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!

¹⁰Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!

¹¹Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!

¹²Young men and women alike, old and young together!

¹³Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.

¹⁴He has raised up a horn for his people,
 praise for all his faithful,
 for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the LORD!

Prayer

In the late 12th century, a monk from the area where Northern England meets the border of Scotland, Adam of Dryburgh (c. 1140 – c. 1212), composed a Christmas prayer that seems to compare the unbounded glory of what's going on in the highest heavens with the meager and mundane realities that greet the messiah's birth down here on the earth:

O child, Creator of all!

How humbly you lie in the manger.

You who rule powerfully in heaven!

There the heaven of heavens cannot contain you;

here, however, you are held in the narrowest manger.

There, in the beginning of the world,

you decorated the earth with green grasses that produced seed,

with fruit-bearing trees that produced fruit,

you ornamented the heavens with the sun, the moon, and the stars,

the sky with winged birds, the waters with fish,

you filled the land with reptiles, draft animals, and beasts;

here, however, in the end of the world,

you are wrapped in swaddling clothes!

O majesty!

O lowness!

O sublimity!

O humility!

O immense, eternal, and Ancient of Days!

O small, temporal infant whose life

is not yet one day upon the earth!ⁱ

The Sermon

Valentino Achak Deng was a boy growing up in Sudan when catastrophe came in the early 1980s.

The term “civil war” is always inadequate; a civil war is usually a series of atrocities, perpetrated with supreme cruelty and brutality by armies or armed militias against civilian populations in cities or towns or villages.

When the horror came to his village and his family, Achak was able to run away, and became one of the tens of thousands who became known as the Lost Boys of Sudan—itsself an inadequate term since there were girls, too. They were literally running for their lives, for days and then weeks and then months—

and then, years that became decades, trying to find a place in the world that could become some approximation of home. In the agonizingly endless meantime, they became, individually, as so many millions are today all over the world, transient residents of shelters and refugee camps.

From living their lives and loving their homes and families one day, they suddenly became displaced, and eventually, international refugees. Even for those who made it to the United States, years of frustration and futility were the norm, not the exception, as they ran repeatedly into ambivalence and outright resistance.

Achak eventually wrote: “The Lost Boys is not a nickname appreciated by many among our ranks, but it is apt enough. We fled or were sent from our homes, many of us orphaned, and thousands of us wandered through deserts and forests for what seemed like years.

“In many ways we are alone and in most cases we are unsure of where exactly we’re going.”ⁱⁱ

Early on after the massacre of his village, Achak had joined up with a large and growing number of others who had survived similar tragedies. He said of that time,

“Sleep was a problem. Whenever I woke in the dark hours I saw other eyes open, mouths whispering prayers. I tried to forget these sounds and faces and I closed my eyes and thought of home. I had to bring forth my favorite memories and piece together the best of days. This was a method taught to me by [one of our leaders], who knew that we boys would walk better, would complain less and require less maintenance if we had slept properly.

“‘Imagine your favorite morning!’ he yelled to us... ‘Now your favorite lunch! Your favorite afternoon! Your favorite game of soccer, your favorite evening, the girl you love most!’ He said this while walking along our line of sitting boys, talking to our heads.

“‘Now create in your mind the best of days, and memorize these details, place this day center in your mind, and when you are the most frightened, bring forth this day and place yourself within it. Run through this day and I assure you that before you are finished with your dream-breakfast, you will be asleep.’”ⁱⁱⁱ

Reading that, I was temporarily absorbed in the thought: How would I stitch together my perfect day?

What would be the components of your perfect day? Your favorite way to wake up; your favorite time to roll out of bed; your favorite breakfast; your ideal morning; the best lunch you ever had; the best afternoon;

Your favorite people to spend an afternoon with; the most rewarding dinner of your life; your happiest place to be in the evening; the best night time.

And it occurred to me that when I rest my head on the pillow at the end of the perfect day that I have stitched together,

I see the same moon and stars hanging suspended in the skies overhead that also hover over the bloodsoaked plains of Africa, and everywhere else where people have been forced from their homes and are running for their lives.

The same sun shines in the day; the same angels and hosts look down and see what happens in the world.

And I still imagine, at Christmastime as in every other time of the year, that above the dome that surrounds the earth, beyond the sky, up in the loftiest places, from the uppermost heavens; in the unknowable heights,

all God's angels—*malachim* in Hebrew, literally “messengers”—are singing praises; and all the heavenly host—literally “armies”—sing the eternal glory of God's love.

Sun and moon; all you shining stars; even the celestial heavens themselves; even the endless waters above the heavens—what we know as infinite space:

“Let all of them,” says the Psalm,
 “Let all of them praise the name of the LORD,
 who commanded and they were created.”

It was God who established them for eternity.

It was God who *fixed their bounds*, which cannot be passed.

And so, they praise. All who are in the heavenly realm,
 and the heavenly realm itself, sings God's praises.

And, says the same psalm writer in the same psalm:

Kings *of the earth*, and all peoples,
 princes and all rulers *of the earth*;
 Young men and women alike,
 old and young, together:

Let them all, everyone on earth,
 like the inhabitants and messengers of the highest heavens,
 let them also praise the name of the LORD down here—

here where it's not all sun and moon and stars and angels;
 here where the armies are not hosts of holy messengers,
 but scared kids with heavy weaponry;
 here where their message is not about the reign
 of God's justice, truth and love
 but where especially the most solemn songs
 tend to be about blood and soil and national "purity" and borders.

So, sing praises to God *here*, says the psalmist,
 because the world needs us to be God's messengers in this mess;
 because if God's triumph is going to be as real on the earth
 as it is in the highest reaches of the Holy Cosmos,
 we will have to sing our song of God's love enfleshed in Christ
 louder and better and with deeper nuance and truer expression
 than all the violent and exclusive
 and threatening and defensive anthems
 that ring out over our airwaves
 and in the sounds of our exploding weaponry.

God has fixed the heavenly bounds in the highest places;
 but "My thoughts are not your thoughts,
 nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
 For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
 so are my ways higher than your ways
 and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9).

And when humanity creates borders and boundaries,
they tend to be about anything other than glorifying the love of God.

For sure, boundaries are crucial. In relationships, we are all meant to have our own dignity, and as people created in the image of God, no human being—no human being—deserves to have their own space violated or threatened or taken over by somebody else, in any way.

But we humans also have a capacity for laying boundary lines and tight borders that specifically keep others from the human dignity which God created them to have.

Often, those human-made boundaries are based in fear which is rooted in ignorance, and their rationale collapses in the withering face of the most glorious God.

Henry James Garrett recently published a short piece summarizing the findings of a study done by scientists at the University of Chicago.^{iv}

They started from the observation that “If a rat sees another rat drowning...it will forgo a chunk of chocolate to save its imperiled friend. Its actions are guided by its empathy.”

Exploring further, “they found that a white rat raised among only white rats will do nothing to save a black rat from a trap. Rats, like humans, can be biased in how they act on, or don’t act on, their empathy.

“In a variant of the experiment, a white rat raised among only black rats would save a black rat from a trap—but would fail to save other white rats.

“And a white rat raised among black and white rats rescued rats of both colors.

“The researchers found that it is not the rat’s color that determines which type of rat it will show empathy for, but the social context in which it was raised.

“In short,” wrote Garrett, “rats do not show empathy because of an innate recognition of similarity in physical appearance. Likewise, *when human empathy can be partial, it is because the experiences of people from some groups are hidden from our view*, which limits our empathy toward them.”

And, he concludes, “It’s vital to recognize that prejudice is not baked-in: It is the result of our ignorance. A failure to learn about people (or rats) of different kinds can mean that we fail to recognize their pain as genuine pain. Empathy can be switched off.

“Empathy...becomes an accurate guide for moral action only when combined with knowledge of people of all different backgrounds—knowledge that can be attained only if you are willing to actively listen to people whose voices have been silenced.”^v

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, says the LORD,
nor are your ways my ways.”

What are the boundaries that you cannot cross?

Who are the lab rats that you are slow to rescue, or to whose pain you have been slow to develop a sensitivity?

Did God fix those bounds?

Or did you? Or people who have influenced you—including, possibly, in the Church? We do, after all, have moments in our history when we have been more about the bounds and borders and barriers than about God’s love and justice and mercy.

As a priest once told Anne Lamott, “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”^{vi}

It is God who fixed the bounds of creation, and the scale is greater than cosmic, vaster than the deepest emotional truth, more glorious than any imaginable beauty.

In Christ’s coming, false boundaries are broken,
and unworthy border blockades are removed, by God’s decree.

And now all can live in relationship with one another.

If only we will be willing to be vulnerable enough to learn how.

“In many ways we are alone,
and in most cases we are unsure of where exactly we’re going,”^{vii}
wrote one of the Lost Boys of Sudan
in words that resonate deep within every human soul.

Earthbound leaders and all peoples of the world,
leaders and all rulers of the earth!
Men and women, old and young, gay or straight, native or alien—

All of us, all God’s creation, at home in God’s world,
around Christ’s great banquet table, *together*—
Let them praise the name of the LORD,
whose name alone is exalted;
whose glory is above earth and heaven.

God has already set the boundaries.
This is home.
All people created by God are home.
Everyone on earth is home.

By virtue of the Creator who made us in the image of God,
and the Christ who has lived and died for us and lives again for us,
we all have the right—
every human being has the right—
you have the right—
to be treated as someone who belongs here.
To be treated as someone who is, at long last, home.

“And the table will be wide,” wrote Jan Richardson.
And the welcome will be wide.
And the arms will open wide to gather us in.

And our hearts will open wide to receive.
And we will come as children who trust there is enough.
And we will come unhindered and free.
And our aching will be met with bread.
And our sorrow will be met with wine.

And we will open our hands to the feast without shame.
And we will turn toward each other without fear.
And we will give up our appetite for despair.
And we will taste and know of delight.

And we will become bread for a hungry world.
And we will become drink for those who thirst.
And the blessed will become the blessing.
And everywhere will be the feast.^{viii}

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ⁱ Source: The Roads from Bethlehem (reprinted and distributed as the Plough “Daily Dig” December 24, 2018)

ⁱⁱ Eggers, Dave. What Is the What (p. 16). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ Eggers, Dave. What Is the What (p. 33). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

^{iv} Henry James Garrett “The Kernel of Human (or Rodent) Kindness: What we can learn from lab rats that don’t show empathy for other rats” New York Times (online version), Dec. 28, 2018 (https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/28/opinion/empathy-research-morality-rats.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage&fbclid=IwAR0LC3Rvo0MzIVqb uHnGSvOU_kt7RkZHQebQTD2IEBvPXfni7YtQRf1vHS8)

^v Garrett, “The Kernel of Human (or Rodent) Kindness” (emphases added)

^{vi} (Traveling Mercies; on page 22 of Bird by Bird she attributes this to “my priest friend Tom”)

^{vii} Eggers, What Is the What, 16

^{viii} Jan Richardson, “And the Table Will Be Wide: A Blessing for World Communion Sunday”