

Psalm 8 and Genesis 1
May 18, 2008

South Plains
Youth Sunday

Psalm 8, Genesis 1 and
Where the Wild Things Are

Since it was first published in 1963, Maurice Sendak's book for children, Where The Wild Things Are, has become a classic. I'd like to read it today and think about it in the light of Psalm 8 and the first chapter of Genesis.

The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind and another his mother called him "WILD THING!" and Max said "I'LL EAT YOU UP!" so he was sent to bed without eating anything.

That very night in Max's room a forest grew and grew – and grew until his ceiling hung with vines and the walls became the world all around and an ocean tumbled by with a private boat for Max and he sailed off through night and day and in and out of weeks and almost over a year to where the wild things are.

And when he came to the place where the wild things are they roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws till Max said "BE STILL!" and tamed them with the magic trick of staring into all their yellow eyes without blinking once and they were frightened and called him the most wild thing of all and made him king of all wild things.

"And now," cried Max, "let the wild rumpus start!"

"Now stop!" Max said and sent the wild things off to bed without their supper. And Max the king of all wild things was lonely and wanted to be where someone loved him best of all.

Then all around from far away across the world he smelled good things to eat so he gave up being king of where the wild things are.

But the wild things cried, "Oh please don't go – we'll eat you up – we love you so!"

And Max said, "No!"

The wild things roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws but Max stepped into his private boat and waved goodbye and sailed back over a year and in and out of weeks and through a day and into the night of his very own room where he found his supper waiting for him and it was still hot.

Anyone with a glimmer of childhood memories can identify with one or more of these pages that are full of trouble, play, punishment, and the eventual return to the civilized world of loving relationships. The story begins with Max making "mischief of one kind and another."

"Mischief" is another word for sin in the King James Bible where it appears no less than 49 times. Most modern translations don't talk about "mischief," because we think mischief is fun. Max was having fun all right, but what was fun for Max was not fun for his mother.

His mother called him, “Wild Thing!” and Max replied by telling his mother, “I’ll eat you up!”

I’m sure Max thought he was just having more fun with his mother. But, what he was really saying was, “Leave me alone to make as much mischief as I want.” Isn’t that the essence of sin? A little rebellion, or, in this case, just being plain rude.

His mother knew what to do. Max “was sent to bed without eating anything.”

God knew what to do when we started making mischief. He sent Adam and Eve out of the garden of Eden. Instead of having all the good things of the garden to eat, they had to work to grow food.

Max was determined not to let his punishment spoil his mischief. In contrast to the garden of Eden, his room sprouts a jungle with an ocean. He sails away on a private boat “to where the wild things are.”

Think back to the very first verses of the Bible. “In the beginning... the earth was a formless void... the face of the waters (Genesis 1, 2).” The Israelites were landlubbers. All through the Old Testament, they regard the sea as the wild place. So when Moses held back the waters of the Red Sea, they saw that as God’s triumph over the wild place. And, when Jesus calmed the storm with a word, the disciples knew they were dealing with none other than God. By sailing across the sea, Max fulfills his dream of a world as full of mischief as he is.

On the shore, the wild things “roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws till Max said, “BE STILL!” Do you recognize those words from the gospel?

“The wonderful thing about the first chapter of Genesis and Psalm 8 is that they see humanity as having “dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth (Genesis 1:28).” We are the tamers of wild things, the creature charged to take responsibility for every other creature.

So Max becomes “king of all wild things.”

The psalmist says we are “a little lower than God,” reflecting something of the honor and glory of the Creator, reflecting the image of the King of the Universe. Like Max, we are little kings with the job of managing creation. Thus, we live in relationship, first, to our Creator, and second, to the whole creation.

But, Max doesn’t see it that way. His first act as king is a proclamation, “And now, ...let the wild rumpus start!”

I love that word “rumpus.” If the world was not such a tragic place, “a wild rumpus” would be an apt description of the craziness of child soldiers in Uganda, earthquakes in China, or airplanes flying into the Twin Towers, or the animal behavior of Abu Ghraib. It’s easy to misuse our position of power in the world. Today, we are tired of the wild rumpus.

And, Max gets tired. He “sent the wild things off to bed without their supper.”

Eventually, even sin is unsatisfying, even when you are a little king. The place where the wild things are is not a community of love. Max was lonely.

As he sits there alone, Max “smelled good things to eat, so he gave up being king of where the wild things are.”

I think we all have a memory of blessings. It may be an image in our mind of a better time, a taste, a smell, a touch, a sound from a time when we were cared for and loved. People with absolutely none of those memories are called sociopaths. People who don't respond to those memories are called unhappy. Max decides to leave.

The wild things cried, “Oh please don't go --... we love you so.”

Make no mistake. Mischief has its attractions and often they take the name of “love.” But this love is not the same as the love from someone who puts our best interests ahead of their own fun.

So Max sails back to “his very own room where he found his supper waiting for him.”

He sails under those stars and moon the psalmist is singing about. Like the prodigal son in the parable of Jesus, Max came to himself.

And “his supper was waiting for him...and it was still hot.”

The best stories end with a delicious meal, the same way scripture describes heaven as the wedding feast of the Lamb of God. Despite the mischief we have done, God welcomes us home with a feast.

I don't know whether Maurice Sendak intended to write a parable with biblical overtones. But, if I were going to preach a sermon on this parable, it would have three points:

1. Mischief always looks like fun. That's why we sin again and again.
2. We eventually get tired of mischief, no matter how much fun it seems like in the beginning.
3. And, when we come to ourselves and leave the mischief behind us, God welcomes us home. Amen.