



“Revering God’s Creation”

Scripture – Psalm 104

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, February 23, 2025

When we find ourselves in a panic – a loved one is seriously ill, or the money is running short or we are walking down a dark street and hear footsteps behind us – it is easy to slip into bargaining with God. “God, if you save me from disaster, I’ll go to church every week.”

It is not the most mature view of God to think that God could prevent disaster from striking but is sitting calmly on the royal throne waiting to see what kind of deal we are willing to strike. Our God is not a transactional Being.

One of the reasons I have not been the number one fan of the Book of Psalms is that some of them sound overly simplistic. “I was in trouble, but I prayed, and God saved me from calamity. Hallelujah!”

No matter how much we might wish that is the way this world works, it just doesn’t match with reality. Some days, life is fabulous and we express effusive gratitude for the precious gift of life. But that is not every day, is it?

Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, helped me better understand the psalms when he proposed a simple three category system for appreciating them. The categories are Orientation, Disorientation, and New Orientation. Brueggemann is clear that we cannot use his formula like some sort of straitjacket into which we cram each of the 150 Psalms. However, his proposal helps us to comprehend many of the psalms that might otherwise frustrate us.

Psalms of Orientation are those psalms that express a confidence in the trustworthiness of God. Life is good and we thank God for making it so. These are psalms that express exuberant praise for the goodness of life. Psalm 104 falls into this category and is thus the starting point of our sermon series.

There are also Psalms of Disorientation. These psalms are raw expressions of distress because life has fallen apart. All hell has broken loose, and the individual or community behind these psalms lament a disaster that has come upon them and wonder if God cares. We will look at a couple of these psalms in the coming weeks because they seem especially timely.

Brueggemann's third category is New Orientation. These psalms come from the mouths of those who have experienced difficult times and know that life can be dark, yet praise God as the result of trust that God can also transform situations of despair into new life. We will end our series with one of these.

When we approach the Book of Psalms, it helps to remember that we are encountering poems, prayers, and hymns. They are not sermons or well-reasoned theological arguments. They were created as materials to be used when the congregation gathered for worship as well as for individual devotion.

We begin our series with Psalm 104, in which the author praises God for the amazing world God has created. The psalmist writes: "Bless the LORD, O my soul. O LORD my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honor and majesty, wrapped in light as with a garment...You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animal...By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation...they sing among the branches...You cause the grass to grow for the cattle and plants for people to cultivate, to bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the human heart...The trees of the field are watered abundantly...In them the birds build their nests...The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the badgers. You have made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting...O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures."

Psalm 104 is an unmistakable echo of the opening words of the Bible. In the first chapter of Genesis, we encounter the language of poetry that seeks to make sense of the origin of this amazing world. One of the primal questions that we humans ask is: How did all of this come about? The vast oceans, the majestic mountains, the rich soil of the earth that constantly ushers forth the tremendous varieties of plants, the enormous number of living creatures, the sun and the moon and the stars. What is the origin of all of these wonders? The magnificent poem communicates a profound answer: "In the beginning, when God began to create the heavens and the earth..."

The Bible's first insight into the character of God is that God is the Creator. And coupled with this insight is this: in the eyes of God, the entire cosmos is precious. The poem speaks of the stages of creation as if they were days of the week and, at the end of each day, God calls the creation *good*. And once humans are created, we are put in charge. We are to take care of one another, we are to take care of the other living creatures, and we are to take care of the very earth itself.

Psalm 104 is a psalm of praise that seeks to evoke in us a sense of wonder and deep, deep gratitude to God for this remarkable world that produces what we need to sustain life.

One of the sad commentaries on modernity is that many have lost their sense of wonder. But you can still spot curious amazement in children who wonder at a tiny caterpillar inching up the bark of a tree or stand mesmerized by the night sky. The world of reason has not yet robbed them of their sense of awe. And yet, adults are not entirely desensitized to the marvels of the world. Peer into the face of a newborn and most of us feel a sense of joy and stirrings in our soul.

The poet who created Psalm 104 experienced awe as he pondered the splendor of creation. He was compelled to put down in words his praise of our Creator. John Calvin called the physical creation, "The

dazzling theatre of God's glory." Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote: "The world is charged with the grandeur of God."

This psalm not only provides words we can use to praise God, but living as we do, in a time of ecological crisis, it begs the question of how we are treating the works of God.

If we fully embrace this psalm, we begin to realize that what motivates us to care for the creation is not simply to preserve it for future generations. I confess that's reason enough for me. I want my grandchildren to experience the beauty of the earth and not have to contend with soaring temperatures, deadly droughts, and unprecedented storms. However, for people of faith, caring for God's creation is an expression of our devotion to God. You may or may not be gifted in praying. You may or may not have a gift for praising God through music. However, a chief way that each of us expresses our devotion to God is by loving what God has created.

One unfortunate mistake that some contemporary Christians make is to believe that polluting God's creation is simply a political issue. While some of the solutions to climate change, deforestation, and pollution occur in the political arena, care for the environment is a *spiritual* issue. Will we protect, preserve, and enhance God's creation? Or will we try to give ourselves a pass by claiming "It isn't my issue." That's like saying, "Poverty isn't my issue. Justice isn't my issue. Loving my neighbor isn't my issue." Wendell Berry wrote, "There are no unsacred places; there are only sacred places and desecrated places." We express our gratitude to God by revering and defending the natural world.

I don't know if you caught the final verse of today's psalm. On initial reading, I thought the final verse was completely out of place. For 34 verses, the psalm praises God for the sun, moon, oceans, valleys, hills, mountains, birds, grass, trees, plants, animals, and human beings. The psalm heaps effusive praise on God for the majesty and abundance of creation, and then in the final verse, we read: "Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more." Where did that come from?

My first thought was to wonder if a scribe who was copying the manuscript a couple of centuries after its creation, slipped in verse 35 to get in his pet peeve. The words strike a discordant note. *Unless*, as one theologian commented, it means this: "Either you live in praise of God as Creator, Life-giver, and Sustainer, or you undermine God by seeking to harm what God has made."¹ The wicked are those who abuse God's handiwork. Remember the words of Chief Seattle? He said, "The earth is precious, and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its Creator."

As you know, there is a great deal of hate and bigotry these days, and so much dreadful news that it can drown us. We must guard against overdosing on the news. You can only expose yourself to so much negativity before you become jaded and depressed. Don't do a news blackout, but have a news limit.

Make an effort to focus on what is right and true and good: kindness, respect, and gratitude. Surround yourself with the beauty of God's creation. Maybe you could go to Longwood Gardens or take a walk in the snow or spend time watching birds or playing with a cat or dog. Or go online and gaze at the amazing photos of stars and interstellar dust that are being sent back by the James Webb Space Telescope. Those photos might help you recover some of the awe and wonder of God's remarkable creation – God's *sacred* creation.

There is a good deal of mean-spiritedness and strife and cruelty in the world today and it will drain the life from our souls if we do not also drink in the beauty of God's universe.

If your eyes have dulled to this magnificent planet – if all you see now is the brown and gray of a bitter cold February – can you instead sense what is happening underground, and inside of trees. There is activity stirring, spring is coming.

Instead of dread, can you appreciate the sparkle and quietness of snow? Can you find a body of water nearby – the Brandywine River or the ocean – and imagine what creatures that are swirling beneath the surface. When you begin to feel the stirring of life, then perhaps you will regain the sense of what you felt as a child and then your desire to protect and preserve this creation will come alive.

A colleague shares the story about John McConnell, the son of a Pentecostal minister. “He carried the faith he learned at his father’s knee throughout his life. When he saw the first picture of the Earth taken from space in 1968, he was powerfully moved. He thought of humanity hurtling through space on that blue marble, and he thought of the scriptures that speak of God creating the Earth and all that is in it.”

“He believed that God had given the Earth to human beings, and we were screwing it up. Everything from war to plastics were ruining what God had given us. That picture of our planet and the words of faith planted in his soul motivated him to take action.”

“So after a long career as an educator, he began his life’s greatest project: a day set aside to draw attention to the ecological balances we were throwing out of whack. He called it Earth Day it was first celebrated in 1970, and has been celebrated every year since, because the son of a minister took his faith seriously.”²

Phil Calian tells of taking his son Julian on an early morning walk in a park near their home. They “stopped and listened: finches chirped in a nearby tree; two red-winged blackbirds swooped down to ward off a too-close jogger; a lone cicada droned loudly from a nearby bush; and the orb-shaped sun rose in all its glory.”

After soaking in the sights and sounds, little Julian announced, “You know, Dad, to God, every day is Earth Day.”³

And may it be so with us as well.

NOTES

1. Courtney Pace, “Commentary on Psalm 104,” *workingpreacher.org*, May 19, 2024.
2. Quinn Caldwell, “Caption This Photo and Then Do Something About It,” the Daily Devotional of the United Church of Christ.”
3. Phil Calian, “Every Day is Earth Day,” Fourth Church Devotionals, July 15, 2024.

Prayers of the People ~ Randall T. Clayton

Creator God, by your Word you spoke the cosmos into being, bringing light into the darkness, and the sky and dry land on the earth. In your loving creativeness, you made the earth to put forth vegetation, and you put animals on the earth, and humans too. We bless you for your creative power which has not yet ceased but which continues to offer new life and new possibilities. In your love, when we were deep

in sin, even though we turned away from you repeatedly, you sent your Son into this world. Through his life, death, and resurrection you have given us the sure and certain hope of life itself.

As we bless you for the beautiful tapestry that we call the earth we pray for those across the globe for whom the threads of their lives speak of pain and tragedy and devastation. We pray this day for those who are without food, without medicine, or medical personnel to distribute vaccines or medications. We pray for those who live in bombed-out areas of our world, and for those who live in fire devastated places too. Wherever there is pain and struggle, we ask that your healing presence might be found. Show us how we can stand on the side of the poor, stand up for those who are pushed down, and stand beside those who are in pain.

As we bless you for your creation, we pray for the earth and the sky. Show us how we can protect your creation so that it can be a source of life and joy for generations to come. Give us the will even when it is hard to care for creation, to protect the treasure you have given us.

In times that are filled with turmoil and uncertainty, we ask for wisdom to know how we might best respond, and for the courage to stand up for those who find themselves pushed out. We pray, O God, for those who have migrated to this country. Whether they are here legally or illegally, they are your children too, and so we pray for their safety. We pray, O God, for our trans brothers and sisters, your beloved children as well. In a time when they are finding doors closing and opportunities in jeopardy, we pray for their safety, asking that they might be able to access needed services that will make their lives whole and joyful.

We pray this day for those who have suddenly lost their jobs in the past weeks. In these days of uncertainty, help them find the resources they need, and a vision for a future they did not necessarily choose. We also pray for those who are fearing the loss of employment, asking that they might find comfort, hope, and peace even in the midst of their fears for what tomorrow may bring.

We lift up to you this day NGOs and nonprofits who are seeking to meet real human need near and far. As they seek to provide desperately needed services to desperate populations, we ask that you guide their leaders, and we pray for the resources they need to continue to offer food, medicines, medical personnel, and education in some of the most fragile places on the planet.

For those in our community who are grieving, we pray for comfort. For those who are struggling to adapt to life changes they did not want, we pray for hope. For those who are uncertain of their future or whose path toward tomorrow is unclear, provide guidance. Where hurts from days gone by are eating away at life today, provide healing. For those in places of care for their health and wellbeing, we pray for peace and joy.

In this beautiful place, in your beautiful world, we not only bless you, but we remember your love shown both in creation itself and in your Son Jesus who taught us to pray...

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.