

Sermon  
April 19, 2020  
Celebration of Earth Day  
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**Psalm 24:1 and Psalm 104:10-24, 30**

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it;  
the world and those who live in it.  
For you, O God, have founded it on the seas,  
and established it on the rivers.

You make springs gush forth in the valleys;  
they flow between the hills,  
giving drink to every wild animal;  
the wild donkeys quench their thirst.

By the streams the birds of the air have their  
habitation;  
they sing among the branches.  
From your lofty abode you water the mountains;  
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,  
and plants for people to use,  
to bring forth food from the earth,  
and wine to gladden the human heart,  
oil to make the face shine,  
and bread to strengthen the human heart.

The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly,  
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.

In them the birds build their nests;  
the stork has its home in the fir trees.

The high mountains are for the wild goats;  
the rocks are a refuge for the coney.

You have made the moon to mark the seasons;  
the sun knows its time for setting.  
You make darkness, and it is night,  
when all the animals of the forest come creeping  
out.

The young lions roar for their prey,  
seeking their food from God.  
When the sun rises, they withdraw  
and lie down in their dens.  
People go out to their work  
and to their labor until the evening.

O Lord, how manifold are your works!  
In wisdom you have made them all;  
the earth is full of your creatures.

When you send forth your spirit, they are created;  
and you renew the face of the ground.

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it.

ALL that is in it. The birds, insects, worms, dirt, trees, plants, animals...All that is in it.

Nothing falls outside of God's care and interest. Nothing is outside of God's love.

We are part of that ALL. But we are not the only part. And we are more interconnected than we tend to remember in our daily, modern lives. This morning, we're going to pause and attempt to bring some more awareness of this web of creation.

Those are familiar words from Psalm 24. But we may be less familiar with Psalm 104. In the whole of the psalm, humans are mentioned or assumed in only 6 of the 35 verses. Three of those verses you heard read today.

14b and plants for people to use,  
to bring forth food from the earth,  
15 and wine to gladden the human heart,  
oil to make the face shine,  
and bread to strengthen the human heart.

23 People go out to their work  
and to their labor until the evening.

The other 3 come at the end of the Psalm, a portion that wasn't read:

33 I will sing to the Lord as long as I live...  
34 May my meditation be pleasing to God...  
35 Let sinners be consumed from the earth...

All seemingly references to a human or humans.

Yet, outside of those last 3 verses of the psalm, the majority do not set humans apart, but have them alongside the rest of creation in the telling of how God cares for and makes all of creation flourish. The mention of humankind is woven together with the creatures.

Verse 14 begins with "You cause the grass to grow for the cattle AND plants for people to use to bring forth food from the earth" Provisions for the cows at the same time as provisions for people. And as a side note, we also are with the cows in Genesis 1 when we are both created on the sixth day. Along with creeping things and wild animals.

Back to Psalm 104, in verses 19 and 20 the psalmist points out that God creates rhythms for creation...the moon marks the seasons, the sun sets so that there is darkness and night, when all the animals of the forest come creeping out. And then in verse 22, the sun rises, and the animals withdraw and lie down in their dens. And that's when the people do their work until evening.

The mention of humankind again woven together with the creatures. People are another part of the rhythm of creation set by God.

We are not trained to be aware of how interconnected we are with creation. Especially when reading Scripture. For centuries, Christians have been influenced more by the idea that humans have dominion over creation, rather than by the idea of needing creation. We are dependent on the resilient yet delicate ecosystems to survive as a species.

But the Biblical writers and communities had a different understanding of creation. And so this morning, on the Sunday before Earth Day, we're going to open our minds a bit toward their worldview.

*Every Creature Singing: Embracing the Good News for Planet Earth* written by Jennifer Schrock for Mennonite Creation Care Network.

This study names that a Hebrew value was to live as if the Earth belongs to God. To know that we are part of the creation, but we by no means own creation. The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it. Psalm 104 also shows us creation with its own relationship to God. One that isn't dependent on humans. Schrock says:

“God is no absentee landlord, but rather a homemaker, engaged moment-by-moment, breath-by-breath in the affairs of creation. God discerns what habitat is right for each creature and offers food and abundant water for all.”

Another part of the Hebrew worldview was to value all parts of nature. In the Hebrew creation accounts, God created nature in peace not out of war as most ancient creation stories depict. And God declared that it was good.

Valuing all parts of God's good creation means that nature has value, even if humans don't find it useful. The coney in verse 18 were somewhat like groundhogs but were not something that the people ate or had any economic value. (Julian's picture of a coney:

<https://travelfricamag.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/rock-hyrax-Mike-Unwin.jpg>)

The same is true for the lions or the sea serpent, called the Leviathan in verse 26. There was not a direct value to humans for all of these animals from Psalm 104. And yet they are valued because God made them and provides for them.

Another aspect of the Hebrew worldview was to embrace creation as community members and covenant partners. To see that humans and animals were interwoven. Not exactly the same, but having more in common as both being created by God. Ecclesiastes 3:18-21 says this:

I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals. For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth?

Other creatures were not merely commodities. The Bible talks about non-human creatures praising God 50 times in 25 contexts, mostly in the Psalms and Isaiah. [Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005) 267-268.]

Schrock points out that in Psalm 148, human praise and nature's praise of God complement each other. And in Genesis 9, all living things are part of the covenant God makes with Noah and the other flood survivors. She says, “Such texts depict other creatures as companions, covenant partners and mirrors of God's goodness.”

Of course, other cultures and communities have seen more of an interconnectedness with nature. The indigenous peoples of the land we live on, had a view of nature more like that of the Hebrew worldview.

Kimberly Ferris, a member of the Mississippi Band of the Choctaw tribe and part of Choctaw Christian Church in Mississippi, says this:

“My Native American ancestors felt they were linked with the plants that grew and the animals that lived on the land. They did not worship the land, but they were taught to give respect. They believed the land was sacred. They often prayed to the Creator and were thankful for being given what they needed to survive. They did not use more than what they needed. In modern times, Native Americans have joined the world in contributing to hurting the land, even though the Native communities are greatly impacted by the changing climate.” (*Leader*, Winter 2019-20, pg 28)

Cherokee theologian Randy Woodley suggests that the phrase, “community of creation” would be an appropriate contemporary translation of the Kingdom of God that Jesus preached. For Woodley, the “community of creation” is an important conceptual bridge between Christianity and the emphasis on harmony that is part of First Nations traditions. [Randy Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2012) 39.]

Jenifer Schrock in *Every Creature Singing* says:

“The assumption that dominion is our right has indeed been absorbed into the Western bloodstream along with a dose of imperialism, technical know-how and greed. It has helped to raze forests and prairies, enslave Africans and push Native Americans off their lands.”

Dominion has not served us well.

Recognizing that there are two creation stories, Genesis 1 and then Genesis 2, helps to open our eyes beyond the overly emphasized dominion and ruling over creation. Also, recognizing how we view both stories through a human-centered lens and miss some of the non-human aspects.

For instance, Genesis 1 uses only 3 verses out of 35 to talk about human beings. And did you ever notice that God speaks first to the fish and birds, not to the humans, saying “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.”

And as that verse shows, humans are not the only beings given special roles.

Again from Schrock:

“The earth is called to bring forth plant and animal life, and the sun and moon are told to rule the sky and seasons. Together, humans and animals are given plants for food. We and the animals share the same sustenance and are made from the same substances—God's breath and soil.

Genesis 1 is regal and liturgical; Genesis 2 is earthy and smells like a campfire. In Genesis 1, humans are told to rule other creatures; in Genesis 2, humans are made out of the soil like everything else and are told to serve the earth.

Taken together, the biblical creation stories present a view of human identity that is truthful about our giftedness and the power we wield but tempered by an emphasis on humility and service.

Recognizing our place as dependent members within a complex web of relationships is an important antidote to human arrogance.”

Recognizing our place is an important antidote to human arrogance.

Take for instance, bees...a small insect that stings us. And yet, about a third of our food supplies are pollinated by bees. apples, pears, melons, peaches, beans, tomatoes, onions, carrots, and broccoli. And that's not the whole list. blueberries and cherries are almost completely dependent on honeybee pollination. And almonds are completely dependent on bee pollination during bloom.

Also livestock that feed off of naturally occurring plants such as clover, and wild animals and birds suffer when there is poor bee pollination.

While bees help to produce food for us, we have also hindered their ability to thrive. One way is through the change in farming. Bees need a diversity of plants to be healthy. Yet, we have moved to large farms that produce one main crop and that helps to produce unhealthy bee hives. Just one factor in the crisis happening for bees, and hence creation itself.

Bees are one example of how interconnected creation is. And we are one part of that.

How do we live into our place in creation...a place "that is truthful about our giftedness and the power we wield but tempered by an emphasis on humility and service.”

How can we be like a hummingbird?

In a letter from the Canadian Catholic bishops in 2003 regarding the state of the environmental crisis at that time, they describe three responses: prophetic, aesthetic, and contemplative. All of these are needed as we live into our place in creation.

<http://www.cccb.ca/site/Files/pastoralenvironment.html>

**Prophetic:** speaks out about justice issues and often works on political levels.

Black Americans suffer disproportionately in the environmental toxic burden compared to the middle class. Even worse than predominantly White communities living in deep poverty. This is environmental racism.

And of course climate change only exacerbates the poorer health outcomes for families experiencing insecurity of food, housing, water, and energy.

A prophetic response needs to incorporate both care for the environment and care for those most oppressed or marginalized.

“We have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” - Pope Francis

Two Examples:

POWER Climate Justice: This team and campaign recognizes that we need to be aware that racism, environmental crisis, and economic injustice are interconnected. It's goal is to work towards a climate-just economy, which creates tangible jobs to help lift people out of poverty, while caring for the planet.

- Increase the purchase of local solar power so that 20% of PECO's electricity comes from its local service area by 2025;
- Spur solar installation and community ownership in high unemployment areas, starting in North Philadelphia; and
- Prioritize local wealth building by calling for energy produced by local workers, paid living wages, and by supporting low-income ownership of solar energy production

Earth Day live, April 22-24...a 3 day livestream event. They say: “The fights against the Coronavirus and the climate crisis go hand-in-hand, and as we work to flatten the curve of this pandemic, we must strive toward the longer term goal of building a society rooted in sustainability and justice.”

Care for the earth and care for those unjustly affected.

**Aesthetic** : the bishops use this word to reference the idea of sacrificing for the sake of something greater. Like asceticism that gives up comforts, our actions for the care of the earth and people, may also feel inconvenient or uncomfortable at first.

From the bishop's letter:

“Rather than an attempt to “flee the world,” a new asceticism would enable us all to enter more deeply into the planetary rhythms of restraint from the demands of consumerism. To “fast” from actions that pollute, to embrace whatever inconveniences may arise from running a “greener” household, to decrease our use of fossil fuels and to tithe time, treasure and talent to environmental causes may all be aspects of this response. Buying locally produced goods, organic produce and fairly traded merchandise are increasingly realistic options for many Canadians. We can challenge the hold of the marketplace over our lives by conscious efforts to avoid over-consumption and by using our purchasing power to promote earth-friendly enterprises.”

As Anabaptist we call this discipleship...living out our faith in tangible ways even if it means discomfort

**Contemplative:** giving ourselves space to deepen our kinship and love of creation/nature

From the bishop's letter

“a renewed or deepened appreciation of nature that will sensitize us to the problems and encourage us to work for the solutions that our planet and future generations require.”

In an interview Christine Valters Paintner, author of *Earth as the Original Monastery*, says:

“My own spirituality is nourished by the monastic tradition’s understanding that an intimate, radical encounter with the natural world opens us up to new ways of seeing the world. Ways that move beyond my habits and preconceived ideas.”

Her advice for ways to connect with nature in times of sheltering in place and quarantine are:

“grow something – get a pot, plant a seed, and nurture it. Or a house plant that gives you a connection to something that’s living and breathing and thriving.

Something simple too, paying attention to rhythms of light and darkness outside, to attune yourself to sunrise and sunset. Even watching gorgeous nature documentaries as a prayer practice, as a way of letting the natural world open your heart to this sense of intimacy and connection.

Pay attention to living things that are in your neighborhood, such as a dandelion growing up through the cracks, a tree in a nearby park, or a snail on the wall. These moments invite us to pause and be with the wonder of creation...

If you are in love with [creation] this source of beauty, grace, sustenance and nourishment, you will invest in preserving it however you can.”

APRIL 14, 2020 BY JUNE MEARS DRIEDGER

<https://collegevilleinstitute.org/bearings/earth-as-the-original-monastery/>

A three-fold response in these times of environmental crisis. A three-fold way to take our place in the web of creation. Prophetic, aesthetic, and contemplative. All 3 are needed.

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it;  
the world and everything that lives in it.

May we live like we truly believe this.  
In prophetic, concrete, and contemplative ways.

Amen



## **Ideas or practices to help us live into our place in Creation's web:**

adapted from *Every Creature Singing: Embracing the Good News for Planet Earth* written by Jennifer Schrock for the Mennonite Creation Care Network.

- Select your favorite sections of Psalm 104 and rewrite them, replacing the species and ecosystems the psalmist knew with those found in your area. How does this change your understanding of the text?
- When outside, even if just sitting on your stoop or in your yard, read Psalm 24:1. What difference does it make? What do you notice more closely in the nature around you?
- Add more plants in your outdoor space that help bees thrive.
- Make a list of household items or foods that you use daily. Choose one that came from a living thing and trace it back to the creature and ecosystem it came from.
  - Learn about this species, independent of its usefulness to humans. What does it need to flourish? What might the author of Psalm 104 have said about it?
  - Research the production practices or environmental issues related to this product. Can you lessen your impact by buying fair trade or organic, or making do with less?
- Make your Sabbath a Carbon Sabbath. This means eliminating or reducing use of fossil fuels one day a week and living within whatever limitations result.
- Exercise dominion over an area of your household that you have neglected, such as:
  - finding air leaks and weather stripping
  - checking to make sure your tires are properly inflated
  - setting up a recycling system if you haven't already