

Sermon October 18, 2015

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 stretch out the heavens like a tent, You set the beams of Your chambers on the waters, You make the clouds Your chariot, You ride on the wings of the wind, You make the winds Your messengers, fire, and flame Your ministers. You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken. You cover it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above mountains. At Your rebuke they flee; at the sound of Your thunder they take to flight. They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys to the place that You appointed for them. You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth. O Lord, how manifold are Your works! In wisdom You have made them all; the earth is full of Your creatures. Psalm 104: 1-9, 24

In honor of St. Francis, this afternoon is our annual blessing of the animals. Psalm 104 seems like the appropriate scripture to hear on the day we're celebrating and blessing God's four-legged (and since we had a tarantula at last year's blessing) and 8-legged creatures. It also seems today like a scriptural oasis to slip into the Psalms, after the intensity of Mark's gospel the past few weeks. Psalm 104 reminds us of God's beauty, God's creation, offered as a gift to us. It would be easy for that statement to be lost in my witness, so I'll say it again. Creation, all the beauty God has created, has been given to us as a gift from God.

Psalm 104 is a doxology, which means a song of praise to God. It's come to be known as a hymn to the environment, as well. Many years ago I was visiting my cousins in Oregon, and went to the adult Sunday school with them. The class discussion included California earthquakes, clearly being punishment from God for the degenerate life here. Someone mentioned "global warming" (a new term at the time) as another sign of God's displeasure, and there was some laughter. I had to bite my tongue... it was a mystery to me how anything that threatened our earth, our home, could be a source of amusement. I've realized though, the theology that was reflected in that Sunday school conversation was John's vision from the book of Revelation: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away." This theological understanding of the old world passing away.... makes the earth, our home, sound disposable. If my own understanding of the earth was of a temporary structure, drought and global warming and "Great Pacific Garbage Patch" in the ocean might not trouble me. But Psalm 104 tells me that God is the architect and artist who created all of this, and I realize that my theology of the earth comes from the book of Genesis.

Out of darkness and chaos, the authors of Genesis tell us, God created each new thing, carefully, and intentionally; and with great delight, at the end of each day God said, "It is good." That's how I see the earth and "all things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small..." it is good. Psalm 104 tells us that all creation speaks of God, and says, "It is good!" (Say it with me: It is good!) All creation is a witness to God's wisdom and creativity! (Say it again: It is good!) We remember from Genesis that God took time, after every act of creation, to stop, to look at, to admire, to breathe in the beauty and wonder of everything God had created. And God said, (one more time: It is good!)

Psalm 104 says to us that all creation is meant to glorify God... and we are responsible to tend this creation.

We are meant to stand at the ocean and feel the spray on our faces, and look up into the night sky, and be shaded by giant redwood trees, and smell lavender, with that same wonder and delight God had in creating all of it. We are meant to recognize in the ocean, the stars, the changing color of leaves, the flowers, and all creation; the beauty, the artistry, the playfulness, and the majesty, of God.

It's said that science asks, "How?" and religion asks, "Why?" The writer of Psalm 104 answers some of the "Why" of creation: God's creativity is overflowing! God's artistry and imagination are endless! God's nature - God's own Self - is proclaimed in every act of creation! The psalmist paints big, dramatic word pictures of God's creative exercises: stretching out the heavens like a tent; God setting the beams of God's chamber on the waters; God making the clouds God's chariot; God riding the wings of the wind, and making the winds God's messengers; using fire and flame as God's messengers. "Why" create all this beauty and order and majesty out of darkness and chaos? God's home is here, in creation, with us. God has established a dwelling place. With us.

It's too easy for us to see God in nature and not in ourselves, and (certainly) not in other people. Psalm 104 tells us that God's home is the universe. There is no mention of humanity in the psalm; a gentle reminder that we are not the center of the universe. A reminder that creation itself sings reflects and sings praises to its Maker. But we know more of God's story than the psalmist knew. We know about the coming of Jesus Christ, and that God's real home is the human heart. Our hearts are meant to be the dwelling place of God. All creation is a doxology; a hymn of praise and adoration to God. And our hearts are meant to sing the doxology as well. A heart-song of praise, and a life of gratitude, begins to shape us, so that we reflect the beauty and wonder of God. And we, like everything else God has created, we too are a witness to our God.

If you were in worship last week... we had homework. It was to sing, at least once during the week, "*Jesus Loves Me*" as a way to recall childhood's (and life's) most important theological lesson: Jesus loves you. And here we see that recognizing God, and loving God, in nature is... not enough. Nature is too vast, and too impersonal, to have power to shape and transform us. But there is a very tiny space, a dwelling place, in the human heart for Jesus Christ, and His love and grace are life-transforming.

We Christians acknowledge and worship a triune God, one God in three aspects. (Traditionally we have said, "God in three 'persons'" but that's not adequate language because God cannot be defined or contained in "personhood.") God is Creator, Father; God is Redeemer and Savior, the Christ; and God is Sustainer, the Holy Spirit. Psalm 104 is a hymn of praise to God the Creator... so we add that to our theological understanding of who God is, how God is revealed to us. And in that theological mix that is our understanding of God, let's remember that nature alone doesn't tell us of God. Jesus taught that in loving God with everything in us, and by loving others as we love ourselves, God is truly revealed. And the Holy Spirit brings us together to create a body, the Body of Christ. The church is our classroom and internship for faith-formation. Here we practice loving God, loving others, and loving ourselves. Here, regardless of how the past week has gone, we accept Christ's invitation to lay down our burdens, and to forgive ourselves, and others, and rest in Him. Here, over and over again, (because

there is no end to God's love and patience; there is no "three strikes and you're out"; there is an endless supply of God's mercy...) so here we ask the Ruler of the Universe to make God's dwelling place in our hearts.

There's homework again this week. I hope you'll think of it as a take-away, like a good fortune-cookie fortune, or a little box of leftovers from dinner at Artisan Bistro. This week, notice God in all creation. Notice the beauty of the earth. Wonder at all God has created. And say, each time you notice... "It is good."

There was some strong theology that came out of my cousins' Sunday school class that was worth holding onto to. We are (rightly) afraid of earthquakes and global warming; we are pretty much afraid of everything... when we don't know our place in creation. Our place, where we are held, is in God's heart, and in God's hands. We are vulnerable to global and physical change - all kinds of change - but we are not helpless or alone. God is with us. We are not meant to be afraid.

Our Prayer Song, "*This Is My Father's World*" reminds us of this. Verse three says, "This is my Father's world. O let me ne'er forget that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet. The Lord is King; let the heavens ring! God reigns; let the earth be glad!" Please stand as you're able, and let's sing it together.