

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
October 16, 2022

The Joy of Creation

Psalm 104:24-35

One college staff member comments about our response to God's creative work:

God looked with delight upon his handiwork at the end of each day of creation having found it good. Part of what it means for us to be created in God's image is to possess a natural appreciation for beauty and the urge to celebrate it and its source.

Anyone who doubts this need only visit the pier at Mallory Square in Key West, Florida around sunset. Tourists from the world over line the railing there each day and watch reverently as the sun sinks silently into the western horizon. In its fading rays a spontaneous response ensues—clapping!

Beholding once this ritual with my own eyes, I couldn't help but wonder. For whom do they think they're clapping?¹

In today's text, the psalmist does a lot of clapping. As he beholds the beauty and wonder of God's world, he breaks forth in praise. "Praise the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, you are very great; you are clothed with splendor and majesty. He wraps himself in light as with a garment" (vv. 1-2a). And God's glory shows up in what he has made, especially its rhythm and the interdependence of its parts.

Right now, we're benefiting from one of the creation's primary rhythms, the change in seasons. There are things about fall—the cooler temperatures, the colorful foliage, the woodsy scents—that draw more of our attention to the outdoors. Hopefully, we take our eyes off our screens and start to notice more of what's happening all around us in each God-given day. "How many are your works, O Lord! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures" (v. 24). This time of the year, some of those creatures gather food in preparation for the coming winter. Some with fur grow thicker coats. Some start migrating toward the Equator to escape the falling temperatures.

Writer and environmentalist Wendell Berry has noted that the Bible is an outdoor book. That's certainly true of today's text. The psalmist couldn't see what he sees and say what he says from inside a house of worship. In this case, the creation is his sanctuary. In fact, maybe I should have suggested holding today's worship service outdoors. In one respect, I could worry that all the natural beauty around you might distract you from hearing what I'm saying in my sermon. Or in another respect it might actually enhance and reinforce what I'm proclaiming. After all, the world God has made has its own unique capacity to preach. As another psalm captures it, "The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge" (19:1-2).

In an interview about a book that he and his daughter wrote, author Andy Crouch talks about how to navigate the possibilities and pitfalls of technology in our lives. He describes how he has cultivated the daily practice of going outside before turning on his phone:

I walk out my front door. We live in a home in a just sort of ordinary Philadelphia suburb neighborhood. I walk outside and I just stand there, sometimes for ten seconds. This morning it was raining. I was only outside for probably 10 seconds. Sixty-seven degrees. Other days it's humid, other days it's frigidly cold, you know. And I just feel what it's like to be a creature, a little creature, because my phone makes me seem really big. Everything on that screen is selected to be important to me. I walk outside; the birds are doing their thing. I know what phase the moon is now. I think there were years where I had no idea what phase the moon was. And it is almost embarrassing how dramatic a spiritual difference this has made in my life that I just begin my day intentionally, every day, wherever I am in the world, outdoors, even if it's just for a moment.²

As I indicated, the burst of praise that opens today's text is written by someone who has spent time outdoors. The opening verse is really the crowning exclamation that summarizes the 23 verses that come before it. So far in this psalm, we've spent most of our time inland, exploring both flora and fauna. We've watched the sky and followed the movement of the clouds. We've climbed mountains and descended into valleys. We've strolled along riverbanks and relaxed on the edges of lakes. We've even gone bird watching. In fact, we've done lots of other creature watching too. And don't forget some plant observation. That was also part of this earth tour. And then, at the end of the day, what better way to cap it all off than by standing in the sand, waves lapping at your feet, watching the sun set, and offering praises to the Lord.

We even catch a glimpse of a great sea monster, what we might characterize as a "whale." It's hard to pin down the precise meaning of the Hebrew term translated as "leviathan." It was perceived as more of a biblical sea monster, a dreaded creature representing the forces of chaos. And yet, in today's text, this enormous and powerful beast is eclipsed by the enormity and power of God. In the presence of God's creative might, leviathan is simply another creature, playfully delighting in the world God has made.

Author Philip Yancey describes a moment of great wonder and awe that he and others experienced in Alaska's wilderness. As he drove down the road, he spotted some cars pulled off to the edge of the highway. So he stopped to see what everyone was looking at. He describes it this way:

Against the slate-gray sky, the water of an ocean inlet had a slight greenish cast, interrupted by small whitecaps. Soon I saw these were not whitecaps at all, but whales—silvery white beluga whales in a pod feeding no more than fifty feet offshore. I stood with the other onlookers for forty minutes, listening to the rhythmic motion of the sea, following the graceful, ghostly crescents of surfacing whales. The crowd was hushed, even reverent. For just that moment, nothing else—dinner reservations, the trip schedule, life back home—mattered. We were confronted with a scene of quiet beauty and a majesty of scale. We felt small. We strangers stood together in silence until the whales moved farther out. Then we climbed the bank together and got in our cars to resume our busy, ordered lives that suddenly seemed less urgent.³

Stopping long enough to behold and experience the wonders of God's world helps put us in perspective. We see ourselves within the larger scope of God's global and cosmic purposes. This doesn't make us human beings insignificant in God's world. On the contrary, it actually enhances our sense of significance because we become more aware of just how attentive God is to his creation, including us. The Lord our God is unfailingly aware of and engaged with the condition and needs of what he has made.

In our text, we see how God cares for and provides for the creatures that inhabit his world. The psalmist has already observed how springs gush forth to provide water for wild animals (vv. 10-11). Vegetation grows in order to supply food for cattle and human beings (v. 14).

The variety of trees serve as homes for different birds (vv. 16-17). Mountains provide homes for goats and other hoofed animals (v. 18). These are just a few examples of how life in God's creation is interconnected and interdependent, relying on the presence and provision of God in order to thrive.

Without the breath of God, the Spirit of life, we as human beings, and the rest of God's creation, experience the power of death. The psalmist says of all God's creatures, "When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth" (vv. 29-30). As much as we enjoy having the psalmist as our guide on this tour of the world's wonder and beauty, we also realize that creation's goodness is marred by the realities of sin and death. Humanity's fallenness afflicts the whole created order. But the gospel tells us that just as earth has shared in the fall of humankind, so it also participates in our redemption. We heard testimony to this in today's reading from Romans where Paul lays hold of the promise that through Christ and the work of the Spirit "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (8:21).

Yes, we marvel at the scenery in today's psalm. But we do so with full awareness that the same glorious creation is also home to hurricanes, wildfires, floods, tornadoes, volcanic eruptions, droughts, famines, and other forms of devastation and destruction. As one preacher has put it, "The psalms not only encourage us to lift up our eyes to the hills and to rejoice in the heavens which declare the glory of God; they also contain vivid accounts of the rage of the elements and their destructive power."⁴ What's more, we're getting a clearer, and increasingly urgent, understanding of how our own human activities and patterns of behavior contribute to the planet's violence and sufferings. Long before the concepts of climate change and environmental destruction became part of our vocabulary, the Scriptures testified to how the earth is affected by humanity's rebellion against God.

And yet, all of God's creation, the human and the nonhuman, has hope through Christ. And coupled with that hope is joy. In fact, joy is a central theme, if not the main tone, of today's text. According to one commentator, "God delights in the creation, and we, the created, delight in this world and in the God who made it. The world is made from joy and for joy."⁵

Christian philosopher Dallas Willard once wrote that God is "the most joyous being in the universe." He illustrated with the following story:

While I was teaching in South Africa some time ago, a young man ... took me out to see the beaches near his home in Port Elizabeth. I was totally unprepared for the experience. I had seen beaches, or so I thought. But when we came over the rise where the sea and land opened up to us, I stood in stunned silence and then slowly walked toward the waves. Words cannot capture the view that confronted me

[I realized] that God sees this all the time. He sees it, experiences it, knows it from every possible point of view, this and billions of other scenes like and unlike it, in this and billions of other worlds. Great tidal waves of joy must constantly wash through his being

We pay a lot of money to get a tank with a few tropical fish in it and never tire of looking at their [beauty] and marvelous forms and movements. But God has *seas full of them*, which he constantly enjoys We are enraptured by a well-done movie sequence or by a few bars from an opera or lines from a poem. We treasure our great experiences for a lifetime, and we may have very few of them. But he is simply one great inexhaustible and eternal experience of all that is good and true and beautiful and right

Willard concludes, "All of the good and beautiful things from which we occasionally drink tiny droplets of soul-exhilarating joy, God continuously experiences in all their breadth and depth and richness."⁶

In a few minutes, after I've led our closing prayer, you'll open your eyes and behold some of God's creation, the people gathered around you here in this place of worship. And you'll be able to see one another partly because of the sunlight that makes its way through our windows and illuminates our sanctuary. Then, as you leave this place and pass through the front door, you'll enter another sanctuary, the world God has created and where his glory and power are revealed for you to behold. God's own joyfulness is displayed in what he has made. And we ourselves are called to respond with joyful praise. This is the joy of creation.

¹ Greg Hollifield, Associate Dean for Assessment and Reporting, Memphis College of Urban and Theological Studies.

² Andy and Amy Crouch, "Online Conversation | Living a Tech-Wise Life with Andy and Amy Crouch." Interview by Cherie Harder. The Trinity Forum. June 11, 2021. <https://www.ttf.org/portfolios/online-conversation-andy-and-amy-crouch/> (October 14, 2022).

³ Steve DeWitt, *Eyes Wide Open: Enjoying God in Everything* (Edmond: Credo House, 2012) 68.

⁴ David H. C. Read, "The Greening of the Earth: Some Disturbing Reflections." *The Living Pulpit* (April-June 1993) 5.

⁵ Elizabeth Webb, Commentary on Psalm 104:24-34, 35b. Working Preacher. June 8, 2014. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/day-of-pentecost/commentary-on-psalm-10424-34-35b-9> (October 14, 2022).

⁶ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (New York: HarperOne, 1998) 62-64.