

## For the Birds

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Psalm 104

Grace Presbyterian Church, 5/19/19

This past Wednesday, those of us who were able to be here for the Spring Luncheon heard an engaging presentation about climate change given by Fred Stoss. We learned about the impact of warming on hurricanes. We pretended to understand the jet stream and the polar vortex. And we saw graph after graph showing the clear data about the unprecedented pace of global warming. Climate change is not a little problem that requires us to make a few tweaks here and there to our technology and then we'll be fine. This is a train driving swiftly towards the edge of a cliff, which is frankly why most of the time I prefer not to think about it. During the presentation, I found myself thinking with dismay, "what is the world that I will be leaving to my children?" As Stoss wrapped up, I and the person next to me looked at each other, and sighed, and said, "Where is the hope?"

Meanwhile the psalmist, looking at the created world, cataloguing its wonders, cries with *great* hope: "Bless the Lord, O my soul. May the Lord rejoice in his works!" The contrast is disheartening.

Then there are the headlines. 84 degrees in the Arctic Circle this weekend!<sup>1</sup> Central American refugees head to the U.S. fleeing Climate Change!<sup>2</sup> And just last week in the *New York Times*, Humans are speeding extinctions at an unprecedented pace!<sup>3</sup>

In that last one, a new UN report looks in depth at the decline in biodiversity across the world. Over the past century, human activities have rapidly altered the natural world, increasing extinctions up and down the food chain, of creatures small and great, everything from insects to the now-extremely-endangered Bengal tiger. This UN report highlights the social and economic effects of decreasing biodiversity. Bees and other pollinators are disappearing at cost to the food system. Fewer crop varieties makes food more susceptible to pests. Declining reefs and mangroves will lead to increased flooding.

Meanwhile the psalmist *celebrates* the biodiversity of God's creation and the human place within it: Creatures great and small! Manifold and abundant works! Grass, trees, birds, goats, lions, sea creatures! The contrast is disheartening.

Given the contrast between the newspaper of scarcity and the psalm of abundance, one is tempted to ask: which one is true? Or which one is worth listening to? Surely the psalm, while

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<sup>1</sup> Jason Samenow, "It was 84 degrees near the Arctic Ocean this weekend as carbon dioxide hit its highest level in human history," *Washington Post*, May 14, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2019/05/14/it-was-degrees-near-arctic-ocean-this-weekend-carbon-dioxide-hit-its-highest-level-human-history/?utm\\_term=.72104016e93f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2019/05/14/it-was-degrees-near-arctic-ocean-this-weekend-carbon-dioxide-hit-its-highest-level-human-history/?utm_term=.72104016e93f).

<sup>2</sup> Kirk Semple, "Central American Farmers Head to the U.S., fleeing Climate Change," *New York Times*, Apr 13, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/13/world/americas/coffee-climate-change-migration.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Brad Plumer, "Humans Are Speeding Extinction and Altering the Natural World at an 'Unprecedented' Pace," *New York Times*, May 6, 2019, [https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/06/climate/biodiversity-extinction-united-nations.html?fbclid=IwAR1NF1WM8pKN5OLos4ml6mziFcX8WSZr1uupBbZSLo\\_voFcfL5AZa4n1vR4](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/06/climate/biodiversity-extinction-united-nations.html?fbclid=IwAR1NF1WM8pKN5OLos4ml6mziFcX8WSZr1uupBbZSLo_voFcfL5AZa4n1vR4).

lovely, is a relic of a time gone by. Its relevance to our threatened ecosystem today is minimal. It's a good psalm to pull out when we're sitting in the middle of the Grand Canyon where we retain that sense of awe and wonder, but it has little to say to the many environmental crises we face. The Bible as a whole, in fact, seems hopelessly outdated in terms of teaching us how to face global climate change or any other environmental issue of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It's science and policy we must turn to, if we are so inclined. And if we're not so inclined, well, that's okay, because the Bible doesn't require us to think about such things.

Maybe. But for the next ten minutes, let's suspend judgment, and not give up so fast on the relevance of the psalms. The great 20<sup>th</sup> century Reformed theologian Karl Barth advised, "Take your Bible and your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible."<sup>4</sup> If God's word is living and active and inspired than it can speak even to our most modern issues. So let's take a moment to ask if Psalm 104, in its brilliant depiction of God's abundant, diverse creation, might have something to say about a world where that abundance and diversity seems threatened. To ask if the psalmist might point us towards an answer to the question, "Where is the hope?"

Psalm 104 is a parade through the wonder of God's world. The psalmist takes time to attend to the joyous details. Water, for example: the psalmist ponders the oceans, the springs in the valleys, the streams that provide habitat for birds, the rain that waters the earth. Then there are the plants: grass for cattle, crops for human cultivation, trees for the birds to nest in. And then the animals: wild animals and cattle, singing birds and storks, wild goats and coneys, young lions, creeping crawly sea creatures, even the monstrous and mysterious Leviathan.

And God's provision for all of these creatures is plentiful. To humans, God gives not only bread but also wine to gladden the heart and oil to make the face shine; not only a time of day to work but also a time for singing and praise. We're not talking bare necessities. We're talking a God of extravagant blessing.

God's abundant provision and creation are not *only* for us humans. We are creatures blessed by the Lord, but we are not the only creatures blessed by the Lord. According to the psalmist, vegetation and habitats are shared by humans and other creatures. Grass is *for the cattle*. Mountains are *for the wild goats* and rocks are *for the coneys*. Daytime may be for the people to work, but nighttime is *for the young lions*. The ocean has space for human ships, but also *for innumerable creeping things* and even *for the Leviathan*. The Leviathan was typically depicted as a terrifying sea creature, the nemesis of humans and a threat to all who go near the ocean. But here, it is a playmate for the Creator—a wondrous creature who "sports" in the water. It seems God takes joy in all the creation, even the creatures that humans would typically disdain. And because God takes joy in it, we can, too.

Perhaps my favorite line, though, is vv.16-17. The cedars of Lebanon, which were typically celebrated for their role in human warfare, for their lumber and profit potential, are here celebrated as habitat *for the birds*. The ups and downs of human power and politics and

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<sup>4</sup> "Barth in Retirement," *TIME Magazine*, May 31 1963,  
<http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,896838,00.html>

economics are sidelined here in view of a larger reality, that of a God who provides not only for humans but just as much *for the birds*.

In short, the psalm presents what OT scholar Bill Brown has called an “ecocentric” view of creation,<sup>5</sup> where all interdependent creatures, great and small, matter to God and are granted God’s provision. This contrasts with the usual anthropocentric view, which puts humans at the center in God’s plan. Psalm 104 reminds us to take our rightful place—a place of joy, a place of importance, but also a place of humility. If not at the center, if not to subdue and dominate, what is the role of humans? Brown suggests that it is to respond in joy back to the rejoicing creator and sustainer.<sup>6</sup> *I will sing to the Lord as long as I live! I will sing praise to my God!*

All of this, I imagine, is relatively easy to identify with. If you’ve ever had your breath taken away by the Rockies or the Grand Canyon. If you’ve come across a bear while hiking, a fox in Brookfield park or an eagle flying above Lake Accotink. If you’ve enjoyed gardening, birding, camping, or kitties. You know that non-human creatures and non-human creation reflect the joy of the Creator. You know that there is a majesty to this world that God made, an abundance and wildness that invokes awe and joy. You’re more than happy to praise God for all this. But it still doesn’t answer our essential questions. What does that joyful praise and thanks have to do with the newspaper articles? How does gratitude for the abundance help us face the scarcity of the world, with droughts and dying pollinators and extinctions?

Well remember, joy and praise are great motivators. Far better motivators, in fact, than rules and policies, than guilt or fear. If, as the science and the newspapers suggest, the only way to stop climate change and species loss and preserve a world for future generations is to take decisive action NOW, we have a lot of work to do, an overwhelming amount, in fact. What if joy and praise is the way in to that work?

Let me explain what I mean with a story. After college—where, fun fact, I had a minor in environmental studies—I volunteered for a year teaching English in Tanzania. When I returned from this year of simple living literally off the grid, I temporarily moved back into my parents’ house. And, grateful 23-year old daughter that I was, I very humbly posted in our kitchen a list of very moderate suggestions, to help my whole family continue the simple life. The list was entitled “Green Summer!” and included such fun suggestions as “ABSOLUTELY NO DRYER USE. LINE DRY ALL CLOTHES.” And “Cold bucket showers get the job done!” And “Eat local. Do we really need bananas and avocados?” Some unknown guest at our home, apparently left alone in the kitchen for a moment, added a nice piece of graffiti, answering the question about bananas with a resounding, “YES!”

Needless to say, this rules-based approach was not very effective at changing the status quo in our home. My parents refused about 80% of the list items from the get-go. They were simply *not okay* with the provision to leave the toilet unflushed all day until someone pooped. For my part, I quickly remembered how convenient dryers and warm showers were. I started to walk by the list

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<sup>5</sup> William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder* (New York: Oxford, 2010), 147.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

in the kitchen every day and to avert my eyes as I rushed off to work. If I even thought about it, all it accomplished was to make me feel vaguely guilty for not doing enough.

After a few months there, at the invitation of a friend, I moved into a group house with some other young people, of the Christian hippie variety. At the Hyattsville House, the members pooled money for groceries and ate together, and they prayed together a couple mornings a week. One member of the house was a seasoned bike commuter, and he took me out one day to give me the know-how and confidence to start my own commute by bike. There were people to teach me about compost and vegetable gardening, too.

I did all of this not from guilt or because it was on a list of rules, but because the shared work gave me joy. I can't tell you how much more I enjoyed riding my bike than sitting in traffic. I can't tell you how refreshing it was to spend fifteen minutes every morning in the dewy outdoors, singing a hymn as I watered the vegetables with a hose connected to a rain barrel. I harvested mini-eggplants from the garden with delight, and felt awe as the squash plant sprawled fruitfully along the side of the house.

I am certain that my time at the Hyattsville House was the time in my life with the smallest carbon footprint. I say this not with pride, but with gratitude. It was easy to live in hope and intentional care for the earth when it sprung from deep community and true joy. I see a spark of something like this in Psalm 104. The psalmist projects a sense of joy at being part of the community of God's creatures, a desire to stay humble, stay connected to it all, respond in praise.

The psalmist also shows a deep awareness of the fragile nature of this creation. The created world is dependent on God's provision of food, dependent on God continuing to send for the breath, the spirit, needed to sustain life. The psalmist recognizes that God can withdraw the breath at any time; God can hide God's face. So in that final stanza, when the psalmist says, "May the Lord rejoice in his works" it seems there's a sense of urgency. A hope that the Lord will continue to find joy in the world, because joy is what sustains all creatures.

Perhaps the same could be said of us, humans. There's an urgency that we continue to rejoice in the beautiful earth God made—and in the communal practices that sustain it. That's not easy, with all the schedules and conveniences that cut us off from this deep and local connection with the earth. And I'm not saying that caring for God's creation will never require actions that feel more like work than play. But that's why we need each other, because the joy of loving the earth can be shared and multiplied in community. That's what happened to me at Hyattsville House. Why not also here at Grace? Many of you are already planting native plants and riding public transit or bikes to work and cleaning up the Accotink. Many of you find joy in sharing produce from your garden at the summer crop table.

I ask you to share those gifts, those joys, those hopes for the world, with me and with one another. I ask you to take your role in creation as the one who can praise: returning thanks to God for the gift of this world, calling on God and on each other to preserve and sustain it.