

God of Creation, We Praise You Psalm 104 Earth Day Seed Day

Last Monday, April 22, was Earth Day. Earth Day is celebrated annually on April 22 with events worldwide in support of the environment and to raise awareness for the environmental care and protection of our planet. Also, March 20 is Plant a Seed Day and April 26 is International Seed Day, so I thought since today is close to these days, it would be good to focus on creation.

Earth Day on April 22, 1970 is considered to be the birthday of the modern environmental protection movement. More than one billion people worldwide take part in activities on Earth Day. This makes it one of the world's most widely observed secular holidays. In many communities the Earth Day celebrations are part of Earth Week, a week of activities.

Whether we buy into or not, global warming or climate change, and the economic, political and science arguments, for and against, it still is important to reflect together on scripture that ties together our Creator, creation and the sphere we live on. Since we are instructed in the Bible to care for the earth, we should from time to time reflect on this command from **Genesis 2:15**.

“The LORD God took the man & put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it, and keep it.” So God gave humankind a responsibility and told us that we must tend or keep the garden. The Hebrew word for “tend” or as some translations say, is “keep.” The word is “shamar” and it means more than just keep it neat and tidy. The Hebrew word means “to guard” or “to watch and protect,” take care of.

The other Hebrew word in this verse that's very important is the word “work” or as some translations more accurately say “to cultivate.” It's from the Hebrew word “‘abad” meaning “to serve.” So Genesis 2:15 would better read as: “The Lord God took us & put us in the Garden of Eden to serve it, guard, cultivate & protect it.”

That means we are stewards of the earth and the Master will require of us an account on how we've been curators of what we have been given. I think

it's appropriate to say, we could be better guardians of this earth. And we want to pass on a beautiful and sustainable earth to our children.

On the drive Wednesday from Regina, there was an interesting conversation between 4 women on the radio. They discussed climate change and why or why not to have children based on what we know about the condition of the earth, as well as what we know we can do now to keep life sustainable for our children. Can we be hopeful about what we are passing on to our children?

A more controversial verse is, Genesis 1:26. “Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our likeness, to have dominion, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, over the livestock, all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

The word “dominion or rule over” and how we define it, is one humans argue about. I think God gave humankind dominion over the earth, to use it and benefit from it, but also to not misuse it at any cost, for any reason. We are damaging many areas of the planet to suit our own needs, both to get rich as well as to have a better lifestyle. But what are the limits? Regardless of the debates and answers, we have this Biblical command to care for and manage the earth for both short term and long term needs.

So I think God commands us to keep, tend, and care for the earth. But God's edict to have dominion over the earth doesn't mean to completely exploit it to the point of ruining it. Sadly, this is what is happening; we continue to pollute the air, water and land, denude the forests, strip-mine the hills, burn through the resources, and gut the earth. In the process, God's creatures often mistreat the people and creatures who live on the land. This is the only place that we have and if we chose to abuse it, it will be a choice our children will live to regret. There is no plan B place for us to live. Also, I think it's a lesser cost to manage our natural resources well now, than to have to fix them and clean up the world later.

Before we dive into Psalm 104, I came across an interesting story. A survey was done at a junior high school about their religious and science beliefs.

One question was something like this: “**Do you think that God understands things like nuclear physics, molecular biology and so on?**” A surprising number of students who believed in God answered that no, they didn’t think God understood those things. God, to them, was obviously a simple old man who lived in Bible times when people thought that snakes talked and you could walk on water. They thought the modern scientific world was too much for God. So our work is cut out for us to help people understand the Bible, our responsibility for this world, as well as our Creator.

In Psalm 104 the writer of this great hymn of worship has a different attitude. He looks around in **wonder at all** that God has made and says, “O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all.” I would make the argument that this is another way to understand creation. We should lay it beside the creation stories of Genesis. Genesis 1 outlines the 7 days of creation. Genesis 2 describes how Adam and Eve were created. Each of these stories has a specific purpose.

And **Psalm 104 offers another purpose.** It gives us another view of Creation. Notice in your bulletin insert, the outline of this psalm. It starts and ends with praise. Then it explains how God created the world out of chaos. A lot of space is given to water and its importance. Then God made the sun and moon. So God didn’t just make a space for us to live, our Creator provided time, day & night, & seasons. And put the sea in its proper boundaries. All this to provide food for all of God’s creatures.

And the author has some fun with aspects of creation that I don’t want us to miss. Notice in the **sun and moon section**, lions roar for their prey, but when morning comes they go back to their dens, and people go out to do their work. It was rather clever of God to arrange it that way. The writer is saying; it wouldn’t be wise to have people and lions out at the same time, would it? A great detail of God’s care for his creatures, both humans and lions!

And notice how the writer can’t resist the temptation to mention that **old monster, the sea.** Verse 25 says, “Yonder is the sea, great & wide creeping things innumerable are there, living things both

small & great. There go the ships and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.”

The sea here is not the threatening enemy in the ancient legends – when people believed they could sail off the end of the world. Instead the sea is part of God’s creation just like any other part. Leviathan is a creature in the form of a sea monster from Jewish belief. It’s mentioned in at least 4 books of the Bible. The word over time came to mean “great whale” or sea monster.

But probably the term Leviathan, is a Hebrew version of the ancient Babylonian god Tiamat, the great sea monster and the enemy of the good gods. But who is Leviathan here? Who made him? God made him, to frolic in the sea, or, as some versions have it, “whom you formed for the sport of it.” This is a humorous picture of Leviathan, as being sort of God’s bath time sea toy, his rubber ducky! The message: God controls the big scary beast. And if some people consider Leviathan a god, they just don’t get it!

Notice how much of this psalm is about water. “God set the earth on its foundations.” Verse 5. At God’s rebuke, verse 7, the sea runs away from the place where it covered the earth, and then it becomes something completely different, something beautiful and life-giving rather than life-threatening. Our Creator sets out boundaries for water. (Verses 8 and 9).

Then in the **water section**, we get a picture of water under control from floods; gentle rain falling from heaven onto the mountains, forming into streams, flowing down to the valleys and making the earth fruitful. We have this wonderful picture of how God’s gift of water brings life to all living things, including some specific animals. Water allows grass to grow for cattle, and plants for people to grow to use as food. The psalmist is emphasizing – God made this and it’s awesome! Until we lack fresh clean water.

It’s important to notice the details. Three staples of life are mentioned – **wine, oil, and bread.** They are used in daily life as well as religious ceremonies. Is this a message that God sustains us physically and spiritually?

Another detail that we can easily miss in this creative picturesque creation story is in verses 2 and 3. . “You stretched out the heavens like a tent; you set the beams of your chambers on the waters.” I think this is a deliberate word play. The earth and sky being labeled a **tent** makes sense. The author enlarges our vision of the Creator. God is not contained in a tabernacle, tent or temple or church. This earth, the cosmos, heavens, creation, the universe, is God’s temple. That’s a big God!

We need to notice the word “tent” is connected with Israel’s worship place – the Tabernacle when they were wandering through the wilder-ness. This tent was used until Solomon built the first temple - at the people’s insistence. It wasn’t God’s choice to have a temple. There were social and political forces to build a temple, a central place of worship for the new kingdom. Theologically, symbolically and practically we need to have a physical worship place. And King David wanted to honor his God. But God’s view of a place of worship seems bigger.

God said to King David via the prophet Nathan, (2 Samuel 7: 6-7) “I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling. Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, **did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel**, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?””

It’s like God is saying, “I don’t need a fancy house of worship. Creation is my tent – my place for you and all of creation to worship me.” The biblical writers are well aware that even the heavens are not big enough to contain God; as Solomon prayed at the dedication of the first temple. (1 Kings 8:27) “Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you God, much less this house that I have built!”

Another tidbit to notice. Why would a creation story not mention **people**? Usually, in the Old Testament, people have a very exalted place, as the Genesis creation accounts show. We are made in the image of God. We are called to be stewards of creation. And the Old Testament is the story of a special people, Israel, who God chose & made his own. But this isn’t mentioned here at all. People

are just a part of creation, dependent on God like any other part.

But we have verse 16. “The trees of the Lord are well watered, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.” This possibly is a worship reference to the physical temple – because these trees were cut to build Solomon’s temple, and they still exist. Some are over 1,000 years old. But they are greatly reduced in number and people claim climate change is killing the remaining ones.

Another reference for trees – a symbol, is at the start of our own statement of purpose at North Star. Psalm 1 (1-3) states: “Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. ***That person is like a tree planted by streams of water***, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither - whatever they do prospers.”

Now it might be a stretch to say that Psalm 104 references humans through the symbolism of **trees**. But the reference to the cedars of Lebanon and how trees are used to describe people who delight in God – and the tie in to the temple. I think there is a connection because the Bible uses analogy and symbolism as another way to communicate. And trees are used a lot in the Bible to tell us theological truths, like we should express joy to God.

Vs 12 of Isaiah 55 is a good example of creation, including people, praising its maker. “You will go out in joy & be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.”

One more tidbit. Did you notice, that the only place **ownership** is mentioned in this psalm is connected to trees. So are we “trees of the Lord, that are well watered, by our Creator?” I would say yes. God gave us this awesome place to enjoy, develop, maintain and marvel in.

So how can we apply this psalm to us today? **First**, the psalm calls us to look around at God’s creation and to worship him for it.

Second, if we pray this psalm and mean it, it will give us a new vision of God as the ultimate owner of everything. We are just stewards, caretakers, tenants. The land was here before we were born and will be here long after we die, if we don't destroy it.

And how did we get to be owners of it? Well, if you trace land ownership back to the first people who thought of themselves as owners, it tended to happen in one of two ways: either they were the first people there and said, "I'll take it for myself, thank you very much!", or they fought a battle and took the land from someone else! But the Bible calls us to see reality as God sees it. God owns the land. He lends it to us for a while.

A **third** way to summarize this psalm and learn from it is to cultivate the attitude to grow the sense of our total dependency on God. Farmers especially know this. The life section in our outline declares this. We are dependent on God for being created, food, for breath, and for good things. God's Spirit is sent to us. These are gifts from our Creator we are thankful for.

A **fourth** attitude we can learn from this psalm is: we are encouraged to take our proper place in God's plan for his creation. This is spelled out in two opposite ways. In verse 34 it's the positive way: 'May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the LORD'. In verse 35 we get the negative side: 'Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more'. So this psalm gives us the gospel message – enjoy the gift of creation God gives us. But don't mess it up!

In Revelations 11:18, when the seventh trumpet is sounded, we find this scary promise. "The nations were angry, and God's wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your people who revere your name, both great and small – **and for destroying those who destroy the earth.**"

It's hard to know exactly what this means. But we do know the word destroy also means corrupt. And this word "destroy" is from a word that can mean either physical or moral destruction. We know there are physical places around the world where you and I would not want to live because the earth

is polluted. And we know a common problem in all societies is corruption, where people are not living as God wants, and other people and creation is harmed by the corruption.

But how marvelous, glorious and big is the world we live in. It's clear when we look around us that God knows the basics of science in order to put this world together. He created science. The book, The Case for a Creator, by Lee Strobel, shows how delicately balanced this world is. It did not come together by accident.

We could say that God is bragging through the way the writer puts the psalm together. He's saying, "Look, see what I've done! I'm real. Pay attention. The earth is not just an accident of time and evolution. I put it together for my creatures, including humans, to live in, to pass on to their children, to enjoy and even more – to know who to worship."

One last bit of information to appreciate. Some doctors in various parts of the world are now prescribing "nature" to help treat a range of afflictions, including high blood pressure, anxiety, stress and depression. Walks, bird watching, cloud gazing, just sit and enjoy the scenery, and so on are all on the menu.

Medical scientists are beginning to see nature as one way to improve physical and psychological health. I guess many people are so disconnected from the earth – that we have to intentionally be instructed to go find some healing in God's miraculous creation! This is another reason to marvel and tend this earth. To pray this psalm and to participate in earth day and seed day. So a **fifth** application is – get out and enjoy God's creation – it's healthy for us! Better yet – be a farmer!