

“Gratitude and Serving Nature”

Psalm 104; Genesis 1:26-27; Romans 8:19-23

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Pastor James York

There is a story, told of a person who longed for a relationship with God. So the person whispered, “God, speak to me” and a meadowlark sang. But the person did not hear. So the person yelled “God, speak to me” and suddenly thunder and lightning rolled across the sky. But the person did not listen. The person looked around and said, “God let me see you.” And a star shined brightly. But the person did not see. And the person shouted, “God show me a miracle” and a life was born. But the person did not notice. So the person cried out in despair, “Touch me, God, and let me know you are here” whereupon, God reached down and touched the person. But the person brushed the butterfly away and walked on.

This person was probably not Presbyterian. A recent study found that 89% of Presbyterians said “they often feel the presence of God in nature.” Since God reveals Godself through nature, one would likely expect those people are praising God for nature, respecting and caring for nature. Unexpectedly only 50 % considered care of nature a priority. If these statistics hold true for us, then half of you may be surprised by scripture’s instructions to serve nature. Pastor Susan Andrews proclaimed, “It seems that we “discover” God in nature, but then ignore God when we are called to put the well-being of nature before our own personal agenda.”

Nature is not divine, however nature is sacred. We should never worship nature however; nature often reveals God, inspiring us to worship God.

The 104th psalm describes the intricate interconnectedness and subtle interdependence of air, soil, water, plants and animals, including humans. The psalmist points out that we live in God’s world therefore everything we do has an effect on God’s world and thus on God. Nature should inspire us to burst forth with praise, worship and gratitude for God, the creator and sustainer.

The psalmist sings, **Psalm 104 “Let all that I am praise the Lord. O Lord my God, how great you are! You are robed with honor and majesty. You are dressed in a robe of light. You stretch out the starry curtain of the heavens; you lay out the rafters of your home in the rain clouds. You make the clouds your chariot; you ride upon the wings of the wind. The winds are your messengers; flames of fire are your servants. You placed the world on its foundation so it would never be moved. You clothed the earth with floods of water, water that covered even the mountains. At your command, the water fled; at the sound of your thunder, it hurried away. Mountains rose and valleys sank to the levels you decreed. Then you set a firm**

boundary for the seas, so they would never again cover the earth. You make springs pour water into the ravines, so streams gush down from the mountains. They provide water for all the animals, and the wild donkeys quench their thirst. The birds nest beside the streams and sing among the branches of the trees. You send rain on the mountains from your heavenly home, and you fill the earth with the fruit of your labor. You cause grass to grow for the livestock and plants for people to use. You allow them to produce food from the earth—wine to make them glad, olive oil to soothe their skin, and bread to give them strength. The trees of the Lord are well cared for—the cedars of Lebanon that God planted. There the birds make their nests, and the storks make their homes in the cypresses. High in the mountains live the wild goats, and the rocks form a refuge for the badgers. You made the moon to mark the seasons, and the sun knows when to set. You send the darkness, and it becomes night, when all the forest animals prowl about. Then the young lions roar for their prey, stalking the food provided by God. At dawn they slink back into their dens to rest. Then people go off to their work, where they labor until evening. O Lord, what a variety of things you have made! In wisdom you have made them all. The earth is full of your creatures. Here is the ocean, vast and wide, teeming with life of every kind, both large and small. See the ships sailing along, and creatures, which you made to play in the sea. They all depend on you to give them food as they need it. When you supply it, they gather it. You open your hand to feed them, and they are richly satisfied. But if you turn away from them, they panic. When you take away their breath, they die and turn again to dust. When you give them your breath, life is created, and you renew the face of the earth. May the glory of the Lord continue forever! The Lord takes pleasure in all God has made! The earth trembles at God's glance; the mountains smoke at his touch. I will sing to the Lord as long as I live. I will praise my God to my last breath! May all my thoughts be pleasing to God, for I rejoice in the Lord. Let all sinners vanish from the face of the earth; let the wicked disappear forever. Let all that I am praise the Lord. Praise the Lord!

The psalmist is committed to gratefully praising God for nature and caring for nature. The psalm is a lovely hymn except for the jarring discord of verse 35. **Psalm 104:35 "Let all sinners vanish from the face of the earth; let the wicked disappear forever."** For this psalmist, the sinners and the wicked, are those who abuse, use and dominate nature. They are those who view themselves separate from nature rather than interdependent, those who fail to be responsible for nature, those who fail to care and serve nature. The wicked interfere and diminish the beautiful, inspiring rhythms of God's creation. The psalmist is proclaiming that we are slow to learn, that we damage ourselves when we damage nature due to our interconnectedness. Would the psalmist view you as a delight for your service of nature and grateful worship of God for nature? Or would the

psalmist view you as wicked for your disregard and consumption of nature? How do you think the psalmist would view the United States?

Biblical Scholar Clinton McCann writes. "The psalmist's environmental consciousness is of a different sort from that of most contemporary folk. To be sure, regardless of what motivates it, any concern for the environment is better than none at all. Still, it is important to realize that much of our concern for the future of the earth is motivated by our desire to maintain our current standard of living without trashing things so terribly or depleting natural resources so severely that we cannot pass the same style of life on to our children. In other words, our primary concern is ourselves, and our major motivation is fear. While this kind of environmental consciousness may be better than none at all, our efforts to "save" the earth are surely misguided and doomed to failure as long as the focus is on ourselves and our motivation is fear.

The psalmist demonstrates another way... environmental consciousness begins with praising God... and its underlying conviction that the world belongs to God. Gratitude to God for nature is the only thing that will dislodge our arrogant assumption that we can save the world, as if it were ours to save! In biblical terms, salvation means life, and in biblical terms, the world does not need to be saved. God has already done that! Psalm 104 affirms that God has made every arrangement and provision for the life of the world. The only problem will be if someone disrupts God's design and destroys the delicate balance God has put in place. For the contemporary world, verse 35 may be the key verse in the psalm. We have seen the wicked, and it is us! The environmental crisis will be addressed by nothing short of praising God, exalting God, and humbling ourselves." McCann concludes. "If our motivation for facing our own future and the future of the earth were to glorify God, we might even have the humility to ask ourselves what it would really mean to live in partnership with a tree or with a wild goat or with the thousands of species whose disappearance causes hardly a ripple of attention, primarily because we are convinced that nature exists to serve humanity. Quite simply, Psalm 104 asserts that this is not the case. Rather, to serve God will mean ultimately to serve God's creation."

Genesis proclaims **Genesis 1:26-27 "God spoke: "Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature So they can be responsible for the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the cattle, And, yes, Earth itself, and every animal that moves on the face of Earth." God created human beings; God created them godlike, Reflecting God's nature."** We are responsible for nature. Many bible translators have been concerned regarding the way this scripture has often been misunderstood from the old translation "let them have dominion over". Some even further miss understand by thinking dominion means domination. The context is that God has established dominion over chaos and brought forth a good creation. We are created in God's image. We are to relate to nature as God relates to us. Therefore we are to love, care and serve nature as God loves, cares and serves us. The Hebrew word itself means care-giving and nurturing and suggests helping nature along to its fullest possible

potential. God has created a good world and has given us the power and responsibility to cultivate and develop nature's goodness. Worship flows from earth caring.

The Apostle Paul echoes this view writing. **Romans 8: 19-23** **“For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.”** Nature is longing for us to live up to our responsibility as children of God, to reveal the image of God within us by loving, caring and serving nature.

Our excessive consumption of nature causes nature to groan. Since we are interconnected, our over consumption causes us to groan as well. Researchers often confirm ancient truths of the Bible. Research has examined a seesaw effect in people's lives. The more we consume the lower our happiness is, the lower our overall life satisfaction is and we experience lower pleasant day to day emotions. The less we consume, we experience higher our own well-being and the well-being of nature. As we consume more we tend to be less compassionate, cooperative, generous and social. As we lower our consumption, our care for nature goes up. The researchers next found two ways we can consume less and care more. First, we tend to buy and consume when we are insecure, so the next time you have a blow to your self-esteem try to shift from consuming something to spending time with family, friends or going for a walk in nature. Second, the more we volunteer, connect with neighbors, nurture our gifts or do meaningful work, the less we consume.

Francis of Assisi was a rich, over consuming, unhappy young adult. Francis' was renewed after he connected with God through nature. As he began caring for nature, he sold and shared his possessions; in so doing he enjoyed abundant life. Francis prayed, O Most High, Almighty, good Lord God, to you belong praise, glory, honor, and blessing! Praised be my Lord God for all creatures and especially for our sister the moon...and our brother the wind...And our sister water...And our brother fire...And our mother the earth...Praise and bless the Lord, and give thanks. Amen."

One day a group of scientists got together and decided that humanity had come a long way therefore no longer needed God. So one of them said, "God, we have decided that we no longer need you. We can clone people and do many miraculous things, so why don't you retire." God said, "Very well, let's have a people-making contest. We are going to do this just like I did back in the old days with Adam." The scientist said, "Sure, no problem" and bent down and grabbed herself a handful of dirt." God said, "No, you are cheating. You must create your own dirt!" Everything that we create ultimately comes for

God for we always start with some building block or concept we have borrowed from nature. A good borrower cares for all they borrow.

A pastor walked into the sanctuary to find a young man sitting in a chair with his feet propped up on the communion table. The pastor demanded, "Take your feet off that table. That is a holy table." "Where shall I put them?" he asked. "Isn't all of nature holy?" Indeed the earth belongs to God. There is no place we can put our feet that is not holy.

God revealed Godself to Moses through nature, through a burning bush. God told Moses to take off his sandals for he was standing on holy ground. Moses was in the wilderness. Horeb literally means "wasteland." There was no sanctuary, no religious shrine, no significant history that set that place aside to signify or symbolize anything extraordinary or holy, just ordinary dirt. All of nature is holy for God created, sustains and reveals God self through nature.

God owns everything. God has given you responsibility for nature. Sallie McFague views nature as God's house and recommends three rules for our global household. First, take only your share. Second, clean up after yourself. Third, keep the house in good repair.

Be grateful to God for nature. Love, care and serve nature. Amen