

“On Earth as it is in Heaven”

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My sixteen-year-old Gabbie has reached the age where she has started to reflect on her childhood. Just this past week, she was remembering her Elementary years, and we were talking about her love of nature that began at a very young age. I learned early on that any trip that involved walking outside whether to the car or a longer walk to the park required us to leave at least a half hour early. At first, I would get impatient and tell her to stop dawdling, because I needed to drop her off at pre-school, so I wouldn't be late to my seminary classes. It wasn't long before I realized the hypocrisy of writing a paper on the theological doctrine of creation and telling my child that we don't have time to stop and inspect and smell every flower along the way. She was literally stopping to smell the roses, and she taught me that I might do well to do the same.

Once I graduated Seminary and she graduated from kindergarten, we moved to Charlotte and lived less than a mile to her school. On nice days, we would leave early and walk to her school, leaving plenty of time to inspect every plant, animal and creature along the way. The wildlife we encountered tended to cluster in different areas, so we began to name different stretches of the sidewalk to school. There was Caterpillar Crossing, Roly Poly Road, and Worm Way. She was careful to pick up every worm and bug she could find on the sidewalk and help it cross safely to the grass, because she was so worried that they would get smashed by a careless jogger or walker. It was through her young, fresh eyes that I rediscovered the wonder of nature and perhaps through her, I caught a glimpse of God's devotion to this wondrous creation in which we live.

This morning we are reading a Psalmist's love poem to God for this amazing world we were chosen to inhabit. As I read it to you, I invite you to close your eyes and picture each image through the young, fresh eyes of a child and allow yourself to be filled with wonder and awe. I invite you to picture God's word to you as it is revealed from Psalm 104:

¹Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honor and majesty, ²wrapped in light as with a garment. You stretch out the heavens like a tent, ³you set the beams of your chambers on the waters, you make the clouds your chariot, you ride on the wings of the wind, ⁴you make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers.

⁵You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken.

⁶You cover it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains.

⁷At your rebuke they flee; at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.

⁸They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys to the place that you appointed for them.

⁹You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth.

¹⁰You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills,

¹¹giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst.

¹²By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches.



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¹³*From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.*

¹⁴*You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth,*

¹⁵*and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart.*

¹⁶*The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.*

¹⁷*In them the birds build their nests; the stork has its home in the fir trees.*

¹⁸*The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the coney.*

¹⁹*You have made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting.*

²⁰*You make darkness, and it is night, when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.*

²¹*The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God.*

²²*When the sun rises, they withdraw and lie down in their dens.*

²³*People go out to their work and to their labor until the evening.*

²⁴*O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.*

²⁵*Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great.*

²⁶*There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.*

²⁷*These all look to you to give them their food in due season;*

²⁸*when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.*

²⁹*When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.*

³⁰*When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.*

³¹*May the glory of the Lord endure forever; may the Lord rejoice in his works—*

³²*who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke.*

³³*I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being.*

³⁴*May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the Lord.*

³⁵*Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more. Bless the Lord, O my soul. Praise the Lord!*

This Psalm is categorized by scholars as a Creation Psalm for obvious reasons. It is hard not to think of Genesis and watch the beginning of creation unfold as the Psalmist painstakingly lists every aspect of the order of creation that he or she could observe at the time. From the mountains to the sea, from the moon to the sun, from the animals and plants to the people, day and night, labor and rest. You can almost picture this joyful, active, creative God dancing across the universe to weave together the perfect elements to create this awe-inspiring world.

I'm guessing we have all had moments where we looked upon creation and felt so small in the very best way. The first time I visited Haiti, I had such a moment. We were gathered at night on the roof of the school staring at the stars. Because we were there in the fall and there was very little light pollution, the Milky Way was positioned directly above us. We could see with our naked eyes parts of outer space that I had only seen in pictures. It was a truly magical night, one of those gifts of a moment where I didn't need to have so much blind faith, because I was face-to-face with God's glory.

One of the questions posed in our book that we've been reading for our summer series, *Grounded*, is "Where does God live?" This also happens to be the title of the book I read for the children's sermon just a few moments ago. The traditional answer to this question is very much like the first answer that Hope received when she asked her mother where God lives. The heavens, the sky, of course. Indeed, we tend to look skyward when we talk about God or talk to God.

This is the focus of the chapter we read for this week entitled "Sky," and Diana Butler Bass talks about this idea that we have ascribed God's realm as limited to the heavens. She talks about how our locating God in heaven has influenced a type of vertical faith in our congregations, and subsequently, we perceive a distant, unreachable God.¹ When looking skyward as we pray over our latest crisis, we can forget that God is actually right here beside us.

Our children's sermon book, the book *Grounded*, and this morning's Psalm, however, invite us to look beyond the heavens to locate God. In the Psalm, to be sure, God stretches out the heavens like a tent, but God doesn't stop there. The beams of God's chambers are down here on the waters, and the clouds, winds, fire and flame are at God's disposal. This Psalm makes it clear that God's address is the entire cosmos, that God has a hand in every aspect of creation that we can imagine. And ultimately, God still resides in those places.

Bass takes another approach in imagining where God lives by extending our definition of heaven to touch the very ground we walk on. She says, "the sky touches the earth, yet its outer edges are infinitely far from us. It is where we always are, what we always breathe, yet at the same time it is a place we can never go without oxygen and special suits and flying machines."² How does this shift our thinking and our worship, for that matter, if we are already walking around in heaven, if God actually resides in a heaven that touches the ground, just as our own feet do? In the Lord's Prayer, we pray for "thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." And there is a theological doctrine called eschatology which posits that the kingdom of God, this heavenly realm, is already here but not quite yet. It is a paradox for another sermon entirely, but the doctrine of eschatology allows for the possibility that we are already residing in heaven, at least in some ways, which would locate God in the here and now. To inhabit the earth is to live in God's house.

Even so, humanity will never be content to keep our feet on the ground. Scientific advancements have enabled us to look deeper into space and have a greater understanding of the technical aspects of creation than we have ever had before. While the Psalmist defines God's acts of creation through poetry, scientists have defined it through mathematical equations and theories of quantum physics. Throughout history, religious authorities and scientists have been at odds over questions of the existence of God and the means by which creation came into being. Martin Luther and our own John Calvin had issues with scientists such as Copernicus, as did the Catholic Church.³

¹ Bass, Diana Butler. "Sky." *Grounded: Finding God in the World A Spiritual Revolution*, HarperOne, 2015.

² Bass, *Grounded*, pp. 100.

³ Taylor, Barbara Brown. "The Physics of Communion." *The Luminous Web: Essays on Science and Religion*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000, pp. 36.

The emergence of the Big Bang Theory, however, has held the most promise in putting religion and science back into dialogue with one another. For those of us who dabble in both science and religion, our studies in cosmology help us to understand our relative insignificance, on the one hand, and God's eternal devotion to us, on the other hand. While both science and religion pursue truth and come to separate conclusions about whether that first spark was divine or by chance, all of those who endeavor to understand creation are left with an overwhelming sense of humility and awe. We have that much in common, and as both sides fall in love with the universe, we can be united in our sense of protectiveness and stewardship of creation.

Bass talked in her book about John 3:16, that famous text most often seen on signs at sporting events. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." The Greek word translated as "world" is *kosmos*. For God so loved the *kosmos* that he gave his only Son. The traditional interpretation usually centers around human salvation, but how does it change the meaning that God gave his only Son for the whole universe? Not just for people, not just for earth, but for animals, bacteria, galaxies beyond our imagining, black holes and dark matter?

Long before the scientific method, a Psalmist fell in love with creation and wrote what we call Psalm 104 as an act of praise and worship. The invitation of this morning's text is to slow down and take a walk down Caterpillar Crossing, Roly Poly Road and Worm Way or perhaps watch Neil deGrasse Tyson's series *Cosmos*. They all lead us to God's magnificence. We are called to fall in love with creation all over again, as it is our home and it is God's home.

Hildegard of Bingen once said, "If we fall in love with creation deeper and deeper, we will respond to its endangerment with passion."⁴ I am reminded of one of my husband's friends who loves Jeeps on an almost obsessive level. One of his favorite things to do is to purchase old, beaten up Jeeps and restore them to their original glory down to the stitching in the seats. It is a labor of love driven by an intimate knowledge of both the mechanical design and inner workings of the Jeep as well as a deep love for its aesthetics.

Like a hobbyist who lovingly restores old cars, perhaps we can lovingly restore creation through our understanding of the technical design as well as a love affair with the beauty of God's creation. Science and religion need not be at odds with one another. I don't have to build a case for the ways that humanity is taking for granted, abusing, and deconstructing our planet. From over-consumption of fossil fuels to pollution of our water to heaping piles of trash, we are very hard on our home and in turn, we are very hard on God's home. Indeed, our text from Romans that Doug read a few moments ago states that creation is groaning to "be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God."⁵

Our own church's commitment to be an EarthCare congregation indicates that we have heard this call. So perhaps, if we can continue to follow the Psalmist's lead, if we can see the hand of God, indeed God's very existence, in the heavens above, in the mountains and the streams, the oceans and the deserts, in the wild, creeping things and fruits that we eat, we might continue and also

⁴ Bass, *Grounded*, pp. 123.

⁵ Romans 8:21.

deepen our response to its endangerment with passion and devotion. It may be the most important act of gratitude, worship, and praise that we can offer to our Creator God. Amen.