

April 22, 2012 Earth Sabbath

On Holy Ground

Psalm 104

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Scripture Psalm 104

Sermon: Holy Ground

Happy Earth Day—Blessed Earth Day, a time to be grateful for God’s gifts in creation. In Psalm 104 David gives us a sense of how keen an observer he was, both of nature and of scripture; and he beautifully captures his love for the wonders of creation and his sense of the majesty of the creator. Psalm 104 in its entirety is divided into 6 segments that reflect the six days of creation in the Genesis account.

Let us pray, From Psalm 19: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

So let’s read responsively this slightly abbreviated Psalm.

Bless the Lord, O my soul.

O Lord my God, you are very great.

You are clothed with honor and majesty,
wrapped in light as with a garment.

You stretch out the heavens like a tent,
you set the beams of your chambers on the waters,
you make the clouds your chariot,
you ride on the wings of the wind,
you make the winds your messengers,
fire and flame your ministers.

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

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

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

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

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

You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
they flow between the hills,
giving drink to every wild animal;
the wild asses quench their thirst.

By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation;

they sing among the branches.
From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.
**You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to use,
to bring forth food from the earth,
and wine to gladden the human heart,
oil to make the face shine,
and bread to strengthen the human heart.**
The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.
In them the birds build their nests;
the stork has its home in the fir trees.
**The high mountains are for the wild goats;
the rocks are a refuge for rabbits.**
You have made the moon to mark the seasons;
the sun knows its time for setting.
You make darkness, and it is night,
when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.
The young lions roar for their prey,
seeking their food from God.
When the sun rises, they withdraw
and lie down in their dens.
People go out to their work
and to their labour until the evening.
**O Lord, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.**
**Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
creeping things innumerable are there,
living things both small and great...**
May the glory of the Lord endure for ever;
may the Lord rejoice in his works—
who looks on the earth and it trembles,
who touches the mountains and they smoke.

**I will sing to the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being...**
**Bless the Lord, O my soul.
Praise the Lord!**

Sermon: Holy Ground

Psalm after Psalm, verse after verse, not just in Psalms, but throughout scripture, describe the care with which God created our intricate and beautiful universe. God sets skies and seas in their courses, creating light and land, seasons and seeds, animals, and fish and birds, and the food they need. And not least, creating us as an integral part of this infinitely complex world that God loves.

I was at a clergy meeting, and someone asked, “Where did God surprise you this Easter?” And immediately what came to mind was the long silence we held at the sunrise service. For moments, I’m not sure how many moments— I was lost in wonder, love and praise— for a blessed space, we were silent, but it was not quiet; all around us sang the song of creation that was here before humans walked the earth, birds singing, different voice joining in, a symphony more lovely than any we can write; the breeze in the trees, and the soft pastels of the sky as morning was breaking, *like the first morning of the first day*. I was blessed by those quiet moments. They linger with me. I felt so much part of that holy space, of God’s creation. I was caught up in it. *Mine was the sunlight, mine was the morning born of the one light, Eden saw play*. And like the psalmist, like David, I wanted to *Praise with elation God's recreation of the new day*.

Words can’t do that for us. Study can’t. Life draws us into wonder. Typically, for me, the wonder drew me to research, to words, not to the world! Old habits die hard. I was drawn to Celtic Spirituality that is so much better than I at expressing the ineffable joy I felt at Easter Dawn.

J .Phillip Newell’s *Book of Creation* is an introduction to Celtic Spirituality. He quotes the Scottish poet Kenneth White,

*I open the Book
And the words
fly out of the page.*

“And the book that he is referring to is creation.” Newell writes, “(Creation) is, as one Celtic teacher says, ‘The grand volume of God’s utterance.’ That is where the creator speaks, in and through all that has been created.”

The high stone crosses that mark the Irish countryside have on one side carvings of scripture stories and events, and on the other, carvings of nature. They were erected not in not sanctuaries built by human hands but outside in sanctuaries of earth, sea and sky. They reflect an old and central truth.

In the 7th Century, St. John of Damascus wrote, “The whole earth is a living icon of the face of God.” Augustine wrote, “Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Note it. Read it. God, whom you want to discover, never wrote that

book with ink. Instead He set before your eyes the things that He had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that? Why, heaven and earth shout to you: "God made me!"

St. Basil the Great, writing in the 4th Century said, "I want creation to penetrate you with so much admiration that wherever you go, the least plant may bring you a clear remembrance of the Creator.... One blade of grass or one speck of dust is enough to occupy your entire mind in beholding the art with which it has been made."

In Ireland and much of the British Isles, where Celtic Spirituality took shape, they deeply lived this truth expressed through the ages, but lost for awhile to western Christianity. John Scotus Eriugena, an Irish Philosopher who lived in the 9th Century, was the most significant Irish intellectual of his day. He kept the old understanding alive, writing, "Every Creature is a Manifestation of God. Every visible or invisible creature is a theophany or appearance of God. The Christian is the one who, wherever he looks, sees God everywhere and rejoices in Him". The Celtic Christians understood that all of life is interwoven, and all is a gift of God and every created thing is a revelation of God. This is not pantheism, but wonder and awe and gratitude.

Jim Deming, the head of UCC Environmental Ministries who preached here notes, "The Kentucky farmer and poet Wendell Berry writes that, in order to honor all the earth as a gift from a benevolent Creator, Christians need to revisit their traditional concept of the Holy Land. Instead of a far-off place somewhere in the Middle East, the holy land needs to be where we live and work and play and worship. And in this spirit, we are more likely to take care of the gift of holy land than we do now.

"With its tall, fog-shrouded redwoods, John Muir Woods in California is surely holy ground. But so is the backyard that harbors billions of microbes in the soil, living and dying in the ordinary cycle of plant life. With its turtles and high limestone walls, the Buffalo National River in Arkansas is truly a beautiful and mystical gift from God. But so is the small creek that drains a neighborhood or a farm, giving lifeblood to all that grows ... downstream. When you return to your home today," Rev. Deming suggests, "look at the ordinary around you, and ... imagine it as holy land – as a gift to be cherished and loved."

As Meister Eckhardt mystic, theologian and master preacher of the 13th Century wrote, "Apprehend God in all things for God is in all things. Every Single creature is full of God, and is a book about God. Every Creature is a word of God."

We ought not hurry past the lessons God has written for us in every blade of grass. God whispers in the wind, and shines in the river as it flows, in apple blossom and smallest insect, God's will may be made known.

John Moffitt, a modern recluse, from Washington State, a millionaire mailman, who lived in a shack and cared for a pack of nearly wild dogs. loved writing poetry and gardening. He wrote,

*To look at any thing,
if you would know that thing,
You must look at it long:
To look at this green and say
"I have seen spring in these
woods" will not do -- you must
Be the thing you see.
You must enter in
To the small silences between the leaves,
You must take your time
And touch the very peace they issue from.*

"Let nature be your teacher..." Wordsworth recommends

*Come forth into the light of things.
Let nature be your teacher...*

*She has a world of ready wealth,
Our minds and hearts to bless--*

*One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can...*

*Enough of Science and of Art;
Close up those barren leaves;
Come forth, and bring with you a hear
That watches and receives.*

Look at the ordinary around you... as holy land.
Learn how to be idle and blessed.
Take your time.

A Prayer from the Celtic tradition in Iona reads

*There is no plant in the ground
But tells of your beauty O Christ.
There is no creature on the earth
There is no life in the sea
But proclaims your goodness.
There is no bird on the wing*

*There is no star in the sky
There is nothing beneath the sun
But is full of your blessing.
Lighten my understanding
of your presences all around, O Christ.
Kindle my will to be caring for creation.
(Celtic Prayers from Iona ,J. Phillip Newell, Paulist Press)*

We're standing on Holy ground--all the time, for God is present and where God is, is holy.

*Earth's crammed with heaven,
Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries...*

**Oh Mystery you are alive; I feel you all around.
You are the fire in my heart; you are the holy ground,
You are all of life; it is to you that I sing.
Grant that I may feel you, always in everything.**

O Mystery by Jeremy Geffen

*Benediction: An Irish Blessing ~ by Roma Downey
May the blessing of light be upon you
Light on the outside, light on the inside
With God's sunlight shining on you*

*May your heart glow with warmth like a turf fire
That welcomes friends and strangers alike*

*May the light of the Lord shine from your eyes
Like a candle in the window
Welcoming the weary traveler*

*May the blessing of God's soft rain be on you
Falling gently on your head
Refreshing your soul with
The sweetness of little flowers newly blooming*

*May the strength of the winds of heaven bless you
Carrying the rain to wash your spirit clean
Sparkling after in the sunlight*

*May the blessing of God's earth be on you
And as you walk the road
May you always have a kind word to those you meet*

*May you understand the strength and power of God
in a thunder storm and winter
And a quiet beauty of creation in the calm
of a summer sunset
And may you come to realize
That insignificant as you may seem
In this great universe
You are an important part of God's plan.
May God watch over you and keep you safe from harm.*