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First Presbyterian Church of Athens
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Texts: Psalm 104, Matthew 6:25-30

All Things Bright and Beautiful

I learned to love nature from my father. When we were at our mountain cabin, he would give me a dime for each new wildflower I identified. On summer nights he pointed out the constellations and showed me Jupiter and Saturn in his telescope. He taught me the difference between Eastern hemlocks, where the needles grow flat, like they have been pressed between books, and Carolina hemlocks, where the needles emanate in all directions, more like umbrella spokes.

Daddy was a great birder. I can see him now as he would stop, turn his head to look, and listen when he heard a birdsong. He never traveled without his binoculars. He kept a life list of all the bird species he had seen. There were over a thousand species on his list. When he was 93, he and my mother went to Antarctica, where they traipsed around on a glacier in down coats and boots so he could observe the penguins, which he had seen in zoos, of course, but not in their native habitat.

Unfortunately, I can identify embarrassingly few avian species. However, I do know that there is something special about being outdoors in the woods, or at the beach, or even in my yard. A couple of mornings a week on my way to retrieve the newspaper, I stop and pull weeds for ten or twenty minutes. I think a botanist once lived in our house and took great pleasure in planting a zillion different plants and bushes and flowers. However, it takes vigilance to keep these beautiful beds from being overrun by chickweed and chamberbitter. I grumble about weeding, but I've begun to realize that it's important to my spiritual health. Weeding grounds me—literally. It causes me to enjoy the morning light and to listen to the morning sounds. It even commands a certain awe and respect for the tenacious little organisms whose eradication puts dirt under my fingernails and an ache in my back. In short, weeding connects me with God's creation, and that's a good thing.

The author of Psalm 104 is very connected to God's creation. I hope you heard psalmist's delight in the wonder and diversity of the world God has made. From the sound of thunder to the roar of young lions, from the cedars of Lebanon to springs gushing forth in the valleys, from the wild goats on the mountains to the monster sporting in the sea, from the darkness of night to the sunrise each morning, the psalmist sings a hymn of praise to the divine imagination, which is limitless. What could be more different than a feathery stork and the fir tree where it nests? What could be more unlike than coneys—little, furry, rodent-looking creatures—and the rocks where they find refuge? Yet they all belong in the intricate web of life on earth as God has made it.

Scientists tell us that we are all part a luminous web that was billions of years in the making. And yet, as wondrously diverse as is God's creation, scientists also tell us that we are all one. Our mutual flourishing depends upon the wellbeing of all. Everything is connected to everything else. And what's more, we all are made of the same dust, stardust as it were, from the Big Bang.

Barbara Brown Taylor writing about the connection of religion and science says, Every cell on earth, whether it belongs to a patch of blue-green algae or a human brain, consists of the same fifty organic molecules. . . . We all use four kinds of nucleotides. We all need twenty amino acids. We all carry our blueprints inside of us in the form of DNA or RNA. The cells in our bodies are living fossils over 3.5 billion years old. What they suggest is that all life comes from the same source, which makes us all kin: algae, tadpoles, skunks, and the blue jays, not to mention elephants and cats.ⁱ

In the end, all living creatures return to the dust from which we came as the author of our psalm acknowledges to God: “When you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.” (vs. 29). We are remarkably different and yet remarkably the same.

This amazing universe and our wondrous planet did not happen by accident. Psalm 104 is an ode to our creator. We aren’t just a cosmic hiccup but designs of a divine Artist, a divine Architect, a divine Web Builder. Creation isn’t amoral, it’s good. And it delights God. God’s not just sovereign over the universe but joyful about it. God rejoices in God’s works. And if we are paying attention at all, we do too.

God is not only *behind* all creation, a divine watchmaker, but *in* all creation a little like the way a parent is in her child through her genes. The theological word for this is panentheism; not pantheism, which is everything is God, but panentheism, which is God is in everything. The ninth century Irish theologian John Scotus Eriugena taught that there are two books of revelation: the book of scripture and the book of creation. We know God through the Bible and we know God through nature because God is in nature. We need both to comprehend the fullness of God.ⁱⁱ

The Celts speak about thin places. Thin places are where God’s presence shines through particularly brightly. For some of you, this sanctuary might be such a place. You are missing this room which shimmers with the myriad prayers prayed, sermons preached, vows spoken, tears shed, and thanks uttered. But all of us, I dare say, know one or more places in nature where the veil separating heaven and earth is thin and when we are there, we know we are in the presence of God. Perhaps your thin place is at the lake, or down by the river, or in your own garden. There are sacred places where the craziness of life melts away and we sense peace and oneness and holiness. God is, of course, in all creation, but it’s just more apparent in some spots than others.

Creation isn’t just a one and done thing. It’s ongoing. God’s energy, God’s will, God’s breath sustain it all. We’ve been bottle fed on the myth of independence. But it’s a fallacy to think that we are autonomous operators in this world. All of life is dependent upon God. We are dependent on God. That’s the lesson the Israelites had to learn before they were granted entry to the Promised Land. In the wilderness where they could produce nothing for themselves by their own sweat or wits, they had to rely on God to sustain them daily with manna. It’s not an easy lesson to learn. It took them forty years! We are not self-made. We did not get here by our own bootstraps. Everything we have and are is a gift from God.

So, what is our response? Our response to take care of our planet and the beings that inhabit it. The author of the creation story in Genesis 2 may have been the first published environmentalist. In that story, God forms the human from the dust of the ground and puts him in a garden to till and keep it. God then brings to him animals, also formed from the same ground, to name. So, all living things are related, and our vocation is to be a good steward.

Theology and ecology are joined at the hip.

And, of course, our fellow humans are included in our caretaking charge. When the first human child killed the second, God said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” “I don’t know; am I my brother’s keeper?” Cain’s lame reply reveals to us that we are to keep and protect and do no harm to our fellow humans. Put more positively, we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. That jarring verse near the end of Psalm 104 (“Let sinners be consumed from the earth and let the wicked be no more”) is the psalmist’s way of saying that there is no place in God’s marvelous creation for the perversion of it by the presence of sin and wickedness, by the presence of greed or envy or “man’s inhumanity to man.”

Being a good steward begins with paying attention. It begins with observing what God has made—be it the reddening sky at sunset, the berries ripening on the bush, or your own body. It means becoming familiar with creation--naming the wildflowers, the birds, the weeds. “Look at the birds of the air,” Jesus says. “Consider the lilies of the field.” Pay attention. See how God has made and cares for these seemingly insignificant and fleeting plants and animals. Think, then, how God has made and cared for you. The advice is what we read in our first-grade Dick and Jane primers and what I learned from my birdwatching dad: Stop! Look! Listen!

In this season of sheltering in place, I think we all are suffering from cabin fever. So, turn off your tv, close your laptop, put down your phone, and go outside. Take a walk. Take a drive. Visit your favorite thin place. Or just sit in your lawn chair or by a window and pay attention. If you watch an ant even for several seconds, you can’t help but be in awe. If you contemplate your own breathing, you may become a mystic. Life is a marvelous gift. What a wonder it is. As Albert Einstein is supposed to have said, “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.”

Even amid the chaos and uncertainty of our world, I am betting on the latter. Everything is a miracle. I’m with Psalm 104. “O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all. Praise the Lord!”

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Luminous Web*, (Cambridge/Boston: Cowley Publications, 2000), p. 42.

ⁱⁱ<https://uscatholic.org/articles/201905/12-celtic-spiritual-practices-that-celebrate-god-in-our-world/> on 8/13/20