

## You Renew the Face of the Earth

Scripture and Sermon for Earth Stewardship Sunday, April 26, 2009

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### **Psalm 104:24-35 (NIV)**

<sup>24</sup> How many are your works, O LORD!  
In wisdom you made them all;  
the earth is full of your creatures.  
<sup>25</sup> There is the sea, vast and spacious,  
teeming with creatures beyond number—  
living things both large and small.  
<sup>26</sup> There the ships go to and fro,  
and the leviathan, which you formed to frolic there.  
<sup>27</sup> These all look to you  
to give them their food at the proper time.  
<sup>28</sup> When you give it to them,  
they gather it up;  
when you open your hand,  
they are satisfied with good things.  
<sup>29</sup> When you hide your face,  
they are terrified;  
when you take away their breath,  
they die and return to the dust.  
<sup>30</sup> When you send your Spirit,  
they are created,  
and you renew the face of the earth.  
<sup>31</sup> May the glory of the LORD endure forever;  
may the LORD rejoice in his works—  
<sup>32</sup> he who looks at the earth, and it trembles,  
who touches the mountains, and they smoke.  
<sup>33</sup> I will sing to the LORD all my life;  
I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.  
<sup>34</sup> May my meditation be pleasing to him,  
as I rejoice in the LORD.  
<sup>35</sup> But may sinners vanish from the earth  
and the wicked be no more.  
Praise the LORD, O my soul.  
Praise the LORD.

This ancient hymn of praise reflects the psalmist's reverence for the Creator realized in the awesome majesty of Creation. In this psalm, David acknowledges seven assumptions about God and the world that God has created:

- God is the source of the earth and all the creatures that inhabit it (v.24-25). In this section of the psalm (v. 24-32) land and sea are mentioned specifically, while air is mentioned earlier in the chapter. In wisdom God created an immeasurable multitude and diversity of creatures (v. 24). Scarcity of resources was not part of God's plan for Creation. God created an abundance of natural resources. Over time many creatures, such as the leviathan mentioned in v. 26, have become extinct, due to the effects of climate changes, both natural and human-caused, and by pollution, overconsumption, and other human behaviors.
- All creatures depend on God's created order for sustenance and are satisfied by God's presence (v.27, 28). There is a sense that something beyond the physical is missing when the divinely established order of nature is disrupted. Who doesn't feel closer to God in a natural setting than in a built environment? While we may like the creature comforts and conveniences of city life, our souls long to get back to nature. We hunger for the more pronounced presence of God in the wild and untamed corners of the earth, in the slower pace of rural life, in the silence of a starlit night or the crashing of waves and thunder.
- All creatures are intensely frightened by God's absence, as they depend on God for their very breath and will die without God's support (v. 29). Oxygen is essential for almost all life on earth, certainly for all forms of life we can observe without a microscope. To be deprived of oxygen is to be deprived of life. Millions of children and adults around the world are becoming sick and dying from air and water pollution from manufacturing processes, agricultural chemicals, lawn care products, and motor vehicle exhaust. Pollutants in the air fall to the ground and into bodies of water in the form of rain and snow. Pollutants on the land wash into rivers, streams, lakes, ponds, and oceans when it rains, evaporate, and then pollute the air.
- God as Spirit is continually recreating, thus renewing the earth (v.30). The psalmist views God's act of creation not as a once and only event at the beginning of time, but as an ongoing activity demonstrated in the natural processes of birth, life, and death. The Hebrew word *Ruwach* translated in v. 29 as *breath* also means *wind*, and is translated in v. 30 as *Spirit*. The wind is always moving, or it is not wind. There is an inhalation and exhalation of the breath or one is not breathing. The implication here is that God, or Spirit, is always moving, sometimes as seemingly unpredictable as the wind, and sometimes in an observable pattern or cycle like breathing. In the midst of so many threats to the life on Earth, this is encouraging. This is hopeful. This is good news, indeed. One might almost picture God renewing the face of the earth by giving mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to a dying planet.
- God is engaged in an intimate and dynamic relationship with the earth. The psalmist uses the poetic device of personification with both the Creator and the Creation. God is described in very human terms, specifically male terms in this context, as he opens his hand (v. 28) hides his face (v. 29), looks at the earth, and touches the mountains (v. 32). Not only is God poetically personified, but so is the planet. Earth herself is described as a living being that has a face (v. 30), thus allowing for a face-to-face encounter between

Creator and Creation. Might we imagine the Creator offering a sign of affection, perhaps even a holy kiss, to his precious Creation?

- The relationship between Creator and Creation is meant to be an experience of enduring joy. The psalmist calls for God to rejoice in what God has created and asks that it may last forever (v. 31). David determines to sing praises to God for all of his life and desires for God to be pleased with the way his thoughts of Creation have caused him to rejoice in its Creator (v. 34). Like so many others who have had the opportunity of being in a remote and pristine natural area, the psalmist seems to sense his own smallness in relation to the vast and transcendent glory of nature. He realizes his own dependency upon the Creator and the necessity to value the gift of Creation with which he is inextricably linked in a web of mutual dependency.
- Failure to honor the Creator by failing to value Creation is a sin. To neglect our duty to care for the earth as stewards of Creation is to dishonor God. To intentionally continue in such sin when it threatens to harm or destroy the earth, sea, or air, as well those creatures, including humans, who inhabit these environments is an especially wicked offence to God. Apparently realizing the dire consequences of environmental sin, David calls for drastic measures, asking God to intervene by any means necessary. Keenly aware of his own predisposition to sin, the psalmist pleads with his own soul to praise God. If his soul praises God, then his actions will proceed from a pure heart and a clear mind. In this way, he can be assured at least that his sin will vanish from the earth and his wickedness will be more. With a spirit of true repentance, he can cooperate with God in renewing the face of the earth.

Psalm 104 reminds us that as part of Creation, we depend on God and are accountable to God. We are creatures, but not helpless creatures. We are created with the capacity to think, to feel, and to act. We are responsible for the way we interact with our Creator and with the rest of Creation. We have a symbiotic relationship with every other creature on earth, and with the planet itself. As part of God's beloved Creation, we are in an intimate and dynamic relationship with God that has the potential to produce deep fulfillment and enduring joy in our lives, as long as we honor the Creator and value Creation. To disregard, abuse, or fail to care for any part of Creation is sin and a wicked offence to God. When we repent of sin, God is "faithful and just to forgive us of all unrighteousness." God's redeeming grace is available to us when we heed Jesus' call to "sin no more."

You may be familiar with the Three Rs of Environmental Stewardship: "Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle." Many environmentalists have added a fourth R: "Renew" to encourage the transition to renewable resources. I long for the day when we all repent of the sin of environmental injustice and sin no more by reducing what we buy, reusing what we have, recycling what we no longer need, and switch to renewable resources. Then, the psalmist's prayer will be answered, and, perhaps, God will rejoice, turn to face us, and say, "You renew the face of the earth."