

Creation

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Preacher: Rev. Jim Salladin

[0 : 00] Hello, everyone. Hi, everyone. Oh, there we go. Okay, now I feel more comfortable. Let's pray.

And keep your Bibles open, please, if you would, to that reading. Almighty Father, as we've just described, describe who you are, who the Son is, who the Holy Spirit is.

And even as we describe these things in that creed, we know somewhere deep within ourselves that we are describing things that are well past our imagining and our understanding.

But it is our great comfort that you are a God who intervenes in our lives.

You are a God who breaks in. You are a God who draws to yourself by your Spirit, draws us to your Son such that we can cry out, Abba, Father.

[1 : 09] And so we ask that you will intervene. Even right now, as we consider your Word, intervene in our lives, intervene in our minds, intervene in our hearts. Grant us to hear your Word deeply.

Grant us, above all, to see the glory of Jesus Christ. In his name we pray. Amen. Friends, it's great to be with you. Whenever we're here at St. John's, it feels like we're at home.

And of all of St. John's, the evening service feels particularly like home. We love you. And so thank you for letting me hang out with you tonight. We get to look at Psalm 104.

And Psalm 104 is this big, giant celebration of God's creation and his work of creation. And it brings up just the whole notion of the natural world.

As you know, my family and I live in Manhattan. Manhattan is not known for nature. We've got a great park.

[2 : 14] But it's not known for nature. And my son, this week, we were, I think we were up in Lynn Valley, something like that. And he was fording a stream and feeling like he was in touch with nature. And he said, Daddy, I love Vancouver.

And I said, me too. Why do you love Vancouver? And he said, because it's the perfect mixture of city and nature. And I think that's right. Nature looms large in this place.

And for a lot of us. In fact, my guess is that if we went around the room and we were to ask each other, where is it that you have experienced transcendence? What do I mean? Where is it that you have experienced in your life a deep sense of connection with something bigger than you, grander than you?

You felt small next to this great big thing, but you felt small in a good kind of way. My guess is that for a lot of us, we would tell some sort of story about nature. And I think that that might be particularly true for those of us who might be a little suspicious of the identity of being Christian.

Maybe you call yourself religious, spiritual but not religious, something like that. Very often, nature is where we explore that deep sense of transcendence.

[3 : 29] Years ago, there was a book called Life After God, kind of a novel, a series of short stories. And it traces a few Vancouver young people, young adults, as they try to find meaning and purpose and transcendence without God.

Kind of explicitly atheistic engagement with these ideas. And there's this wonderful moment, remarkable moment at least, where one of the main characters throws himself into this mountain river.

And he's immersed in this cold, rushing water. His breath is taken away. And he feels connected to something much bigger than himself.

And it's one of his first glimpses of transcendence. And for a lot of us, we can kind of identify with that to some extent. Nature can be a cathedral of transcendence for us.

So some of us will identify with that. But some of us hear that, and there's something in us that gets a little suspicious. Are you in this camp? You hear that, and you're like, nature is a cathedral of transcendence.

[4 : 39] That sounds hopelessly hippie. Or something like that. And you say, no, no, no, no. We're Christians. Real transcendence happens. When you go deep in doctrine, you go deep in the gospel, you go deep in the scriptures, and so forth.

Now, I don't know which kind of camp you lean towards, but here's why I'm saying this. Psalm 104 is going to challenge both groups, in a way.

To one group, the group that's kind of suspicious of the role of nature in spirituality, to those people, Psalm 104 is going to say, be careful not to underestimate God's gift of nature.

Creation displays the Trinity's grace. And on the other hand, to the spiritual but not religious, who maybe exclusively find transcendence in nature, Psalm 104 is going to say, do not be too easily satisfied, because the transcendence you experience in nature is an appetizer, but there's more.

All right. Look for those two things. Let's get into the text. Look at verse 1, and I want you to notice the explosion of joy that happens in verse 1. Bless the Lord, O my soul.

[5 : 51] O Lord, my God, you are very great. Now, I look at that, and I say, wow, this psalm is clearly very excited. Why? What's with the joy? And the psalm comes back to me and says, look at what it is that God has made, and you'll understand the joy.

So look at verse 3. He says, God has laid the beams of his chambers on the waters. Verse 5, he sets the earth on its foundations so that it can never be moved.

Verse 6, God clothes the earth with the sea like a robe. And here's part of the point. Psalm 104 is captivated by God because, in a way, God is a good architect or sometimes a good, almost like a fashion designer.

Here's what I mean. A well-designed building carries a meaning. A palace is meant to display the majesty of the queen.

A well-designed house is meant to facilitate relationship. A well-designed clothing is meant to draw out the personality of the person who's wearing it.

[7 : 01] Design has meaning. And Psalm 104 says that that is true of the entire universe. The entire universe is designed by God in order to display God.

Now, be careful. It's nature is not God, and God is not nature. However, behind the beauty of this natural world and behind the elegance of nature that compels us and draws us in, we find that there is not just a something, there's a someone.

And a someone who has planted the beauty of this world in order to allure us to himself in love. In other words, the whole universe is a gift of God to draw us to God.

How does that strike you? But then there's more. Not only is God a good designer, a good architect, God is also a good gardener.

He doesn't quite use that language exactly, but what I mean is that throughout this psalm, God is attentively involved to cultivate life. Verse 10. Verse 10. You make springs gush forth in the valleys.

[8 : 16] They flow between the hills. They give drink to every beast of the field. The wild donkeys quench their thirst, and beside them the birds of the heavens dwell, and they sing among the branches. From your lofty abode you water the mountains, and the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

Now, look at those verses. Can you see how active God is, and how generous God is, and how God is cultivating life? In particular, verse 13.

The earth is satisfied with the fruit of God's moment-by-moment labor. And this is very important, because the psalm is not just saying that God created a really, really good world, wound up the clock, and stepped away.

It's not saying that at all. Rather, it's saying that God works every single moment. Every moment God is working to preserve, and that explains why it is that you're breathing right now.

All right. What does this have to do with us? Some of us worry a lot about work. Do you worry a lot about work?

[9 : 29] Some of us fret about work. Some of us work too much. Some of us work crazy, and then we get home, and we totally check out whatever it is.

Why? Why do we do that? Lots of reasons. Here's one reason. We don't believe, verse 13. We don't think that God's work satisfies us today.

In other words, we believe that God is a bad gardener. What's a bad gardener? A bad gardener, I think, plants, but then gives up and doesn't cultivate, and everything dies. And we think that God's a bad gardener.

We never say it this way, but there's something deep down in us that says, sure, lovely God, you created the world a long time ago. That was lovely. Got a lot done in six days. Good for you.

But right now, what's that done for me lately? I've got to work like crazy seven days a week. My work is the work that really matters, and everything in my world tells me that that's true, and therefore, we fret away our lives, and we kill our joy.

[10 : 36] Can I show you a different model? Look at verse 21. The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God.

Now, look at that verse. Who is it that gives the lion their food? I mean, surely, lions of all the creatures of the world, surely, lions are the ones that can be self-reliant.

Surely, what really matters is their long claws and their sharp teeth. And their muscles, and that they can run down things and eat them. But no. According to this psalm, despite all their power, lions still ultimately rely on God's grace for food.

And that explains why they neither fret nor fear. See, friends, if God created this world by his grace and by his gift, and if God cultivates this world moment by moment, breath by breath, by his grace and by his gift, then if we belong to a God like that, then like the lions, we can rely on him.

Are you saying I don't need to go to work in the morning? No. No. Verse 23. Human work is a gift from God too. But we are to work relying upon God's work to really satisfy.

[12 : 03] God does the heavy lifting, not us. All right. Here's the point. God created the world in order to show you his kind generosity and his grace.

God cares for you moment by moment and breath by breath by that same generosity and grace, which put it together and it means that creation is animated by God's grace alone.

Is that the world you think you're living in? But it brings up a question. And the question it brings up for me is what is the end game? What's God's aim? What's God's purpose in giving us this great gift of creation?

Well, think about gifts for a second. Gifts, at least good gifts, are meant to strengthen relationship.

My father-in-law makes leather things. And he made me this wallet I don't know how many years ago. And he gave me this wallet.

[13 : 11] His aim is not just so that I have a place to put my debit cards, although it does work well for that. I appreciate that. He gave it to me in order to be a sign of his care for me.

It's one of the ways he does that. And therefore, the meaning of this wallet is that when I look at it, I think of him.

I'm grateful not just for the object and the gift. I'm grateful for the one who gave it. Now, that's what Psalm 104 is all about. It starts with, bless the Lord, O my soul, relationship.

It ends with, bless the Lord, O my soul, relationship. And in between, it's a celebration of the showering, moment by moment, breath by breath, gift and grace of God. God's end game in pouring out grace upon us in the natural world is to draw us to himself in love.

And what this means for us is that Psalm 104 teaches us that we can look at God and we can say, God, your world is wonderful.

[14 : 16] You designed it beautifully. Admire the design. And not only did you design a wonderful world, you care for me specifically, moment by moment, breath by breath.

God, your world is beautiful. But you are more beautiful by far. And I love you. So that transcendence that you feel in nature, it's real.

Don't discount it. And don't imagine that it's not real. Psalm 104 says that experience is designed to allure you to the grace of God and to the love of God.

Okay. But I can hear an objection. Imagine somebody coming back at me and saying, Jim, that sounds lovely.

But I can imagine somebody saying, Jim, I don't know what world you think you're living in, but the world that I live in isn't that pretty all the time. The world I live in has cruelty and cancer and disease and disaster.

[15 : 30] And those are just the respectable, ugly things to talk about. I can imagine somebody saying, but if you knew my life and you don't know my life, if you knew my life, you wouldn't talk about beauty.

Somebody's got to talk about ugly. And that's absolutely right. And so the question is, is Psalm 104 asking us to kind of close our eyes to the ugly, evil, suffering, wickedness?

And the answer is no. Of course it's not. Look at verse one. Do you notice the word Lord, all capital letters? That is a very specific name for God.

It's used all throughout the Psalm. Lord, all capital letters, is the name for God that only Israel used. And Israel only started using it after their experience of the Exodus. So they were slaves in Egypt.

God introduced himself, so to speak, by reaching into their horrible bondage, rescuing them out of it. And then he said, from now on, call me Lord.

[16 : 32] Now, what this means for us and all through the scriptures is that Lord, all capital letters, is the name for the God whom you meet when he barrels into the hell of your life and you meet him as the rescuer.

And when that happens, when the Lord meets you in your hell and his kind grace meets you in that deep part of you, perhaps your shame, perhaps your memories, perhaps your self-loathing, perhaps the suffering that you've experienced watching the lives of others, whatever it may be, when the Lord barrels into that hell and rescues you there, then you are inevitably bound to him in a bond of love.

But when that happens, then Psalm 104 will be your song. Because when that happens, then you will look around you and you will realize that you are in a different kind of world now.

You will realize that the same grace that rescued you has all the time been around you in the natural world, but you couldn't see it previously. So you have to understand that this psalm is not naive.

It takes evil very seriously. It is a hymn to the Lord who rescues us out of the deepest kind of evil. And that explains why verse 35 is there.

[18 : 00] Look at verse 35. The whole song is this unmitigated joy. And then, this kind of jarring verse, let sinners be consumed from the earth and let the wicked be no more.

Did you notice that? And then it goes back to praising God. Why is that there? Remember what we were just saying?

The whole universe is God's gift. God's gift is designed to lead us to a real living relationship with him.

Sin does many things, but one of the things sin does is it takes God's gift, because he can't breathe without God's gift. Sin takes God's gift, but rejects God himself.

And therefore, sin undermines the very purpose of the universe. And that's why sin is not a small thing. It's a cosmic problem. But of course, all of us have done that. All of us are guilty of it.

[19 : 00] And therefore, we, all of us need not only a God who creates, we need a Lord who rescues. And that's why we call Jesus Christ the Lord.

Because Jesus, the eternal Son of God, entered this universe taking nature to himself. Voluntarily taking upon himself sin and guilt.

And when he died, verse 35 was fully answered. Sin was consumed in the death of Jesus Christ. And then Jesus rose again and poured out his Holy Spirit.

And therefore, Jesus Christ is the Lord who barrels into our hell and rescues us out of it. And therefore, when you see the face of Jesus Christ as your rescuer, then Psalm 104 becomes yours.

When you get rescued by Jesus, you will look around you and the whole natural world will shimmer with the face of Jesus Christ. Your soul will be weighed down with the beauty around you in a new and stronger way.

[20 : 05] And you will say, praise the Lord. But at the same time, you will also look around the world and you won't close your eyes to evil. You will see the evil of this world and it will grieve you even more deeply than it did previously.

But it will grieve you with a type of grief that can coexist with hope. Because you'll know that the Lord who rescued you defeated death and raised to life.

And therefore, he holds life and death in his hands. Verse 29 and 30. And if he has defeated death and holds life and death in his hands, then we can trust him to orchestrate all things.

So that one day, if you belong to Jesus Christ, you will look back over the whole of creation's story. And you will see that God's grace reigned supreme over all. So, therefore, Christians.

You have been rescued by Jesus Christ. That's who you are. And you know God's name.

[21 : 17] Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Your job is to open your eyes to the beautiful world God has given you. And realize that every meal is grace.

Every sip of wine is the kindness of Jesus. Did you notice oil and wine in the psalm? There's a super abundance. It's not just what we need. God's grace goes beyond to give a super abundance.

God's grace goes beyond to give a super abundance. Christian, you live in a universe that moment by moment, breath by breath, pulses with the grace of God. You have tasted it when Jesus Christ rescued you.

Now enjoy it in the world around you. And if every moment, breath by breath, moment by moment, is the grace of God, then it also means that your whole life, moment by moment and breath by breath, must be worshiped to him.

Is it? Will it be tomorrow at 11 a.m. When you're really tempted to trust in your own work rather than God's, and you're all stressed out at the meeting?

[22 : 27] And to those of us here who are moved by nature but are suspicious of organized religion, you have reason to be. But may I say this?

You are right to celebrate nature. And it's even better than you suspected. Because the joy that you feel in nature is just the beginning.

It is not the end. You were designed to be moved by beauty. But you were also designed to be known by name by the God who made it all. And the wonderful, remarkable surprise is that when you feel that transcendence in nature, that is God himself looking at you and saying, I knew you before you had a name, and I loved you before the foundation of the world, and I want you to know my name as well.

And you will know his name first when you see that Jesus Christ is Lord. And he will give you his spirit.

And you will be adopted by the Father. And you will join with Psalm 104 and cry out, Praise the Lord. Bless the Lord, O my soul. Amen.

[23 : 44] Amen.