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Hallelujah! Bless the Lord, O My Soul (Psalm 104)

AARON METCALF

“**B**less the Lord, O my soul.” Indeed! It’s hard for a soul to not bless the Lord after reading these words—so many images pile up in wonderful exhortation of what God has done, is doing, and will do in the work of creation. These words take us inside of God’s creative power, inside God’s workroom, praising God for the majesty of his creation, and the only response is, “Bless the Lord, O my soul.”

Those who know me know that I am one who is prone to hyperbole. My friends in college, years ago, developed an equation in which whatever I said could be reduced by 30% for accuracy. I tend to overshoot numbers and enhance details so listeners will be even more amazed at whatever mostly true tale I’m weaving. I exaggerate about a million times a day, in fact. It’s a flaw I’ve worked on over the years, but it’s a hard habit to break because it’s so...well...to be honest, it’s just fun! It’s fun to exaggerate and hyperbolize, I must say.

One of my favorite parts of preaching through Psalm 104 is that even I can’t exaggerate the declarations and exhortations of these words! Even I, an expert in hyperbole, can’t possibly overdo the majestic images our psalmist gives us. Finally, a text that nobody can accuse me of embellishing! Finally, a hyperbole-proof text!

And if we pause long enough on what is being exhorted, if we stop to notice the great and grandiose images flying by us in these bold, exaggeration-resistant images we come face to face with a new and—for many of us—different way of experiencing God, a new way of communing, even, with the Lord of heaven and earth. The images and declarations made by Psalm 104 introduce us to a new way of thinking about God and how God works within his good world. Let’s lean in to these words.

These words...these words practically lift us out of our seats and hoist us off the ground into a beautiful swirling squall of images that invite us into the world of God’s creative kingship. We get a special seat next to God as he moves, acts, pauses, and creates the world. We discover early on that God is dressed in a garment of light, clothed with honor and majesty; God is king and we get to watch the king create and spin his world into beautiful being.

Right after meeting God the creator king in the first few verses, powerful verbs rain down on us, one after the other. God works and it’s clear he is truly the one working as the verbs all belong to him: “You stretch, you set, you make, you ride, you cover, you cause, you give, you open, you send, you renew...” These images carry us away in the world of God creating and God’s power is pervasive, jumping off the page. God creates the water, clouds, wind, the earth and its very foundation with might and grace.

Our king creator God forms the foundation, water, and earth and then quickly works to set up proper boundaries for the waters, which seem to want to take over, challenging the king in verse 6 by standing over the mountain. But by verse 7 the water runs away in fear, “At your rebuke they flee; at the sound of your thunder they take to flight,” hightailing it down the valleys into the proper places God has prepared. From the beginning God is both creating this earth and protecting this earth. There is freedom and there are boundaries. The earth is good and will be kept good and safe by the great king creator: “You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth” (v. 9).

With the foundation set and water held at bay, springs begin gushing, giving life to all forms of living things, “giving drink to every wild animal” (v. 11). Wild animals and birds have water to drink the very earth itself, “is satisfied with the fruit of your work” (v. 13).

Grass grows for cattle and the earth provides all sorts of food for animals and people. Everything from wine to oil to bread (what more do we need?) comes up from the ground. “The trees of the Lord” (v. 16) give habitat to birds as the mountains give habitat to goats. Even the rocks on the mountain are put to use, providing refuge for the coneys (some sort of an extinct rabbit). The moon marks seasons and the darkness plays an important role, providing safety for animals to creep around and cool air for young lions to hunt and roar for their prey, “seeking their food from God.” (v. 21). And then when the sun comes up and those night animals bed down, people rise and begin to labor and work until evening.

We pause in verse 24 for a burst of sheer joy and praise, like a commercial to remind readers that this program has been brought to us by “O Lord, how manifold are your works!”—just in case we’ve forgotten. Our psalmist seemingly must pause to shout for joy just thinking about all the animals and the care that God has put in to providing for them. Everything has a place, a protected and provided place.

Our great creator king is not done, however, and right after his commercial he’s back at it, creating and sustaining even the sea—an image, in the ancient Near East, of chaos and disorder. Here, however, we find no chaos but a home for all manner of creatures, “both small and great” (v. 25). Even the sea creature Leviathan, usually seen as a beast of chaos, is something of a tamed animal in the sea God has provided for him to sport in (v. 26): the most feared chaos beast is really just God’s pet, in the grand scheme of things, splashing around in God’s sea.

And then in verse 27 we move to God’s sustaining work. It’s all done, the whole earth and everything in it has been created, and while we might expect to be put down out of this squall of creative images, we soon discover that God is not done. God goes on creating and sustaining. Seasons, food, and the very spirit (or breath) of God continue to give life and sustenance to God’s creation. The world is created and renewed by God’s spirit. God’s good world continues because of God’s good presence.

Our psalmist moves to language of blessing. In an interesting theological turn, our psalmist prays that God will rejoice in what God has done. “May the Lord rejoice in his works—who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke.” (vv. 31–32). The psalmist prays that God will pause and rejoice in what he has done—it’s that good. “Hey God, I hope you pause and notice how amazing this all is! I know you busy still doing it and everything, but seriously, check this out! You should rejoice in this!”

The psalmist concludes this sweeping squall-like creation experience by inviting sinners to be consumed from the earth and the wicked to be no more, which is a way of offering a blessing over the earth’s protection, that those who would hurt it would be erased. Sinners and those who live in wickedness have no place in a world so good and ordered. And then, in proper poetic form, the psalmist ends in the way the psalm begins, “Bless the Lord, O my soul” and then shouts, “Hallelujah!” or “Praise the Lord!” at the end as a final tagline.

It’s worth noting that this is the first time in the psalter that this phrase Hallelujah or Praise the Lord is used. It makes sense, given the sweeping wonder and majesty of this psalm. We have been lifted from our world and taken into God’s creative world to discover how wonderfully and thoughtfully the earth has been put together. If there’s ever a time to shout Hallelujah, it’s at a time like this, when we have been given a tour of God’s creative capabilities. Now is the time to shout!

What’s fascinating for me is this is the first time that I can remember being taken up into the squall of God’s creative activity from Psalm 104. This is the first time I can remember truly listening to these words and allowing them to take me away. This is not a psalm that I have heard preached from often and, frankly, not a vision of God that I have witnessed so up close before.

At its core, Psalm 104 declares that the earth is good and has been created to be good by a good God. And the goodness of the earth runs through all parts of the earth. The earth, our world, is congruent; it’s interconnected; it’s integrated. All parts of it are good. Even the parts that might have seemed bad, like Leviathan and the sea, are part of something much bigger that does make sense and is infused with the good creative genius of God.

God’s goodness runs from the water to the trees, from the smallest animal to the largest animal, and from things that are obviously needed for life (like grass) to the less obviously important elements (like rocks on mountains). They all have their place. Time and space are both filled with God’s goodness and

order. God's world provides during the day and even at night. All day and all night God's world is bursting with his creation and is sustaining everything that he has created. Everything is connected to everything else and all these connections lead back to God, they are evidence of God's activity and they lead to shouts of joy and to songs of praise.

The message about the world that I am used to receiving is that while God is good, the world is...well...not so much. God is good and God created the world to be good, but it's turned from him and so God's basically standing by, getting ready to torch it all when he has enough righteous souls to take up to heaven with him. Obviously, this is an exaggeration of the sermons I've heard—I told you I do that!—but the basic theology is what I remember hearing. The material world is what we avoid in search of the spiritual world. The material is bad; the spiritual is good.

In fact, we've tended to trade in psalms like Psalm 104 for more recently written songs that speak a very contrary message, "This world is not my home / I'm just a' passing through," which communicate that this world is not good and not where we were meant to be in the first place. The goal in such declarations for believers is to sort of survive this stage in our lives, put up with this world, so we can move on to where we really belong.

If the writer of Psalm 104 heard this message, I think the writer would stand up and say, "What? Have you even really looked at this place? It's good!" Or perhaps the writer would walk away sad, with sunken shoulders, and whisper, "You missed it. All the signs are there and you missed it." The writer wouldn't understand our declaration that while God is good his world is not. That's not the coherence the writer professes. There is congruence between God's goodness and the world that perhaps we've simply missed.

There's even room for the reality of evil and chaos within the walls and boundaries of God's goodness. This is the hardest declaration for my modern mind to grasp, but Psalm 104 holds both God's goodness and the presence of those who might work against him up together. Within the bounds of God's creation we have waters that seem to have a mind of their own, the chaos beast Leviathan, troubling sea, and the presence of sinners and the wicked. They are all here, evil is accounted for, and yet the earth is still good and God's goodness still prevails.

The presence of evil does not testify against God's goodness, it testifies to it because it is part of a much bigger story of God creating and renewing, a bigger story than we tend to see, finite and local as we are. In fact, and maybe this is the key to the puzzle, God does not stop creating, but goes on forever (v. 31). So while evil and chaos might rise up from time to time, God continues to set up boundaries, rebuke those forces, remove his breath from them, and then breath new life into other places.

All of these observations lead the singer of Psalm 104 to a place of wonder and ultimately to a place of deep and heartfelt praise. Reflecting on the natural world leads our psalmist to shouts of joy and amazement. I have to confess this joy over the natural world, this profound wonder, is not something I have experienced nearly enough. I need this psalm to sweep me up and away, off my feet, more often to catch a glimpse of God's goodness in this creative squall, with grace raining down on every detail of the world.

I once worked in a church that had a huge window in place of a wall in the fellowship hall we were worshipping in as we awaited the completion of an auditorium. The enormous window looked out to a small stream, a grove of trees with beautiful rolling hills in the distance. There was serious conversation, when I was there, about finding a way to cover the windows because they were becoming a major distraction to the worshippers. And when we finally did finish the auditorium, we made sure the windows were fogged, so we could receive natural light without being tempted to look outside and be distracted by nature. How much did we miss? What could we have seen had we looked outside?

Not long ago one of the Bible teachers for one of our children's Bible classes approached me after church. He is a scientist by training and profession. He had a wide-eyed look of wonder and amazement in his eyes and he said, "Aaron, I have to tell you about the most amazing teaching moment in class today. We were talking about rainbows and I got a chance to teach all the kids about what makes a rainbow. I told them about light refraction and I got to detail what exactly happens to make a rainbow appear...it was wonderful!"

As he shared this with me, the first thought that went through my head was, "Did you bother to teach the Bible in your Bible class?!" As I've reflected on Psalm 104, I can feel the psalmist shaking his head at me.

“You missed it” I can almost hear him say. My gut reaction is that teaching light refraction has nothing to do with what God is up to in the world, a reaction that I think might be seriously flawed. What a wonderful way to speak of God’s activity and care for the world!

What would churches and church practices look like that truly took the psalmist seriously? How might our actions change by spending some time being swept away in a vision of God’s good creative activity? My hunch is we would stand much less defensively against the material world and much more openly to the possibility of finding God in the most interesting and beautiful of places. Places that would leave us wide-eyed in wonder at what God is able to create, sustain, and renew.

If we took this psalm seriously, I wonder if we might regain wonder as we notice the beauty of the world we are living in. Perhaps we will stand in awe, along with this psalmist, at the chance to watch God’s exaggeration-proof activity up close and declare, “Bless the Lord, O my soul!” and shout, “Hallelujah!” maybe for the first time.

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