

Psalm 104

God the Creator and Provider

¹ Bless the LORD, O my soul.

O LORD my God, you are very great.

You are clothed with honor and majesty,

² wrapped in light as with a garment.

You stretch out the heavens like a tent,

³ you set the beams of your^[a] chambers on the waters,

you make the clouds your^[b] chariot,

you ride on the wings of the wind,

⁴ you make the winds your^[c] messengers,

fire and flame your^[d] ministers.

⁵ You set the earth on its foundations,

so that it shall never be shaken.

⁶ You cover it with the deep as with a garment;

the waters stood above the mountains.

⁷ At your rebuke they flee;

at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.

⁸ They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys

to the place that you appointed for them.

⁹ You set a boundary that they may not pass,

so that they might not again cover the earth.

¹⁹ You have made the moon to mark the seasons;

the sun knows its time for setting.

²⁰ You make darkness, and it is night,

when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.

²¹ The young lions roar for their prey,

seeking their food from God.

²² When the sun rises, they withdraw

and lie down in their dens.

²³ People go out to their work

and to their labor until the evening.

²⁴O LORD, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.

²⁵Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
creeping things innumerable are there,
living things both small and great.

²⁶There go the ships,
and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

²⁷These all look to you
to give them their food in due season;
²⁸when you give to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

²⁹When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.

³⁰When you send forth your spirit,^[a] they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground.

³¹May the glory of the LORD endure forever;
may the LORD rejoice in his works—

³²who looks on the earth and it trembles,
who touches the mountains and they smoke.

³³I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.

³⁴May my meditation be pleasing to him,
for I rejoice in the LORD.

John 1:14-18

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son,^[d] full of grace and truth. ¹⁵(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son,^[e] who is close to the Father's heart,^[f] who has made him known.

Andrew Bowman Ordination

“Nature and Grace: Ancient Wisdom, Modern Truth”

Psalm 104, John 1:14-18

Kerra Becker English

Andrew is what you would probably call the “outdoorsy” type. I dare say that having a national forest and a spectacular lake nearby helped you tremendously in enticing him to take the call to be your pastor. So, when I ended up getting a highly coveted spot off the waitlist at a retreat called the “Song of Sacred Earth” the week before coming to preach at his Ordination, I figured that was a whisper in my ear from the Holy Spirit to pay attention. The retreat I attended was part of a series on raising Celtic Consciousness, going back through the development of Christianity in Scotland, Ireland and Wales, which happened to have a bit of a different trajectory than what was happening on the European mainland. In those island communities, the people didn’t feel it was quite so necessary to have four walls and a steeple to praise God. Their Cathedral, as they called it, was the Cathedral of earth, sea, and sky.

As you might be able to guess, there came a time, indeed a couple of times when the hierarchical stone cathedral church of centralized Roman Christianity and the more egalitarian natural cathedral church of the Celtic islands came into conflict with each other. They had different ways of looking at the world, and for at least one trajectory, I’ll let you guess which one, there was only one right answer. Conformity to the ways of the Roman Empire were expected – not only through conquests of land, but through the dissemination of religious practices. I won’t try to get all the history right – that’s not my area of expertise, and I’m pretty sure it wouldn’t be a good idea to take all that I learned in three days and try to squish it into today’s time frame, though I’m happy to send a book list if you want it. However, what I do want

to get right is a message that comes from a Celtic thinker of the 9th century, John Scotus Eriugena, who left his home and found a spiritual refuge in France. Eriugena had learned through both schools of thought, Celtic and Roman, and he taught that there were two books that reveal God's self to humanity. He called the Bible the "little book" and the whole of creation the "big book" and articulated that both were important to us spiritually. Studying the Bible helps us to know the intimacy of God's voice and love for humankind; and honoring creation gives us perspective on the vastness of the universe and the Creator who set it all in motion.

So, if we're going to talk ancient wisdom for today's world, let's go to the very beginning, shall we? Both the Hebrew scriptures and the gospels contain "beginning" stories, right? In Genesis, in the beginning... *God created the heavens and the earth.* How about in John's gospel? In the beginning... *was the Word, and the Word was with God and was God.* There's a natural beginning, and then there's the beginning of a particular divine/human relationship that we acknowledge as coming to us through Jesus Christ. Both nature and grace have origin stories, and those origins connect God's story with our story. And in my prayerful discernment about what message I needed to bring to you today, I sense that Andrew's particular calling as your pastor is to connect you to both of these ancient truths and then to be a conversation partner with you as you imagine how nature and grace will continue to shape your particular community in your particular context.

First let's talk about God as Creator and us as Creation. Sadly, we as Presbyterians have mostly inherited the stream of Christian history that has diminished the natural world as a carrier of divine revelation. Theologians of the Protestant Reformation were suspect, the same as some of those early Roman Catholic missionaries, about the dangers of witnessing to the Spirit's presence within all of creation. Their thinking went that if we thought of God as being "in all

things” then we might get too pagan and begin to worship the natural world instead of God. Perhaps there’s a point to be made there – but my concern is that they went too far with making their point and lost touch with the poetic grandeur of creation that is peppered all throughout the scriptures. To get at this understanding, let’s bypass the rigidity of Church Doctrine and draw more closely upon scripture to help us remember what many of us inherently learned as children. The natural world brings us face to face with the One who created it.

O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all. Who are we to discount the wisdom of God’s created order? If you remember, Job got schooled about that when God spoke to him from the whirlwind. And like Job, just when we think that we are owed something out of this life, maybe we lift our eyes up and take a look around as well. To look at the lights of creation, the sun, the moon, the stars... To get close to the creatures of the world... To remember that we are fed from the ground and depend on the flow of the rivers for our water... I think is to know who God is.

My personal advice to Andrew, therefore, is to make sure you are paying attention to the “big book” even as you are expected to know the “little book” as part of your job. In this context, if you choose to spend all your time in the office – you’ll really be missing something important, I think. Get out there and discover the beauty this part of Kentucky has to offer. If a scripture text is giving you trouble in sermon writing, harness up Sasquatch and Yeti and take a walk in the woods. You know, as well as I do, that our dogs, our dogs know how to guide us toward that which is holy. They teach us about unconditional love and hopefully help make us into the humans that they think we are. The tranquility of the trees or of the water will help you quiet yourself to listen, to really listen for what John Philip Newell, presenter at the retreat, calls the heartbeat of God.

Listening for the heartbeat of God is how the Celtic world frames the understanding of God's grace. In that particular flavor of the Christian tradition, they gravitated toward John's gospel more than the others, and with reason. John's gospel begins with Christ at the beginning – the Word present with God from the dawning of time. That shifts the theological framework, reminding us that God is not merely the God of Israel, or the God of Christian believers. No, God is the God of all, all humans, all creatures, all of our planet, all of the universe. ALL. You can't be in a place or a time or an emotional state where God is not. The foundation begins there – a call back to Genesis chapter one where God speaks and the world comes into being.

In Andrew's call here, I expect him to be sharing with you the God who is THIS BIG. The little book is not very little in that way. Knowing Andrew's history, I can tell you that he knows his Bible well. He was brought up in a tradition that considered biblical knowledge to be of utmost importance. And yet, I also know that he's not afraid of challenging scripture in light of the big book. The very vastness of God's creation pushes us to those limits. To know the world as it has grown and evolved over time gives us insight and meaning into the text that was written centuries ago. When you trust the text of scripture, you begin to realize that it won't break if you question it's meaning for today. Ultimately, it will yield to you its answers, or maybe even more importantly, it will take you to the deeper questions. I say this because, when you love the Bible, it will begin to show you where God's love is in and through all of its pages. And when you see that love, it reminds us of how small our human love can be sometimes, and then those pesky verses about loving neighbors, and strangers, and even enemies will challenge us to love even more deeply as Christ loved.

So let me share with you again those verses that describe the origin, the beginnings of grace that can be found in John's gospel. Remember that this text comes right on the heels of that

burst of light at the beginning of creation, the one that continues to shine in our darkness. The text reads:

14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.... 16 From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Grace comes into the world because Jesus, the Son, is the one who is close to the Father's heart. Jesus is the heartbeat of God in the world, the reminder of grace, the bearer of truth. Even though we haven't *seen* God, we have seen God's grace at work in the world. And again, we are called to pay attention, to open our ears and listen, to notice if we can hear God's heartbeat steadily announcing the presence of God's love in our own lives.

I trust that Andrew will share these gifts with you, his love for nature and his trust in God's grace. And I pray that you will share the same strengths with him and introduce him to God's beauty in your slice of the world and demonstrate graciousness in your kindness and patience with him as he grows into his pastoral identity.

Therefore - I will leave you with the promises that these two blessings hold.

May you be blessed with knowing God's presence in nature – for it is the gift of being.

And may you be blessed with knowing the love of God's grace – for it is the gift of well-being. Amen.