

“Creation’s Praise and Hope” GPPC 4-23-17  
Psalm 104, Romans 8:18-25

Near the end of the 1990 movie “Pretty Woman,” the “money is all that matters,” zillionaire Edward played by Richard Gere has had his life turned upside down and transformed by Vivian, the good-hearted “woman for hire” played by Julia Roberts. Vivian approaches life with kindness and an amazed sort of wonder and that begins to rub off on Edward.

Near the end of the movie, Vivian insists that her relationship with Edward no longer be user and used but a relationship of mutuality, commitment, and love. But Edward is struggling with this possibility. As he puzzles about it, what does he do? Do you remember? After a business meeting in which Edward uncharacteristically decides not to tear a company apart for personal gain but instead to build it up for mutual benefit, he goes outside and hands his briefcase to his chauffeur. And wearing a suit, Edward takes off his dress shoes, rolls up his pants legs, and goes for a barefooted walk in the grass. Back and forth he

Jeff Paschal

walks and thinks. So he becomes grounded figuratively and literally for the new life of love he will finally choose.

Unlike many sermons when the homework comes at the end, this one begins and ends with an assignment. “Your mission, if you choose to accept it,” is to get outside for a walk in creation this week. You don’t have to take your shoes off. But get outside for a walk, if you can, and try to use all five senses to pay close attention to the creation around you.

Look around. Look up and down. What do you see? What colors explode from God’s canvas?

Get quiet. What do you hear? Wind blowing? Birds singing? A brook babbling? A frog croaking?

Take a good sniff of the air, or bend toward a flower. Notice the fragrance.

Touch something—a leaf, a tree, a flower, grass. Catch something—a bug, a frog, a toad, a lizard, a turtle, a snake—whatever you dare. What does it feel like? Do you feel life throbbing through its veins?

Jeff Paschal

Can you even taste something of the creation? Maybe the ocean's salt water. Or a strawberry fresh from the garden.

“Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honor and majesty, wrapped in light as with a garment. You stretch out the heavens like a tent...”

The Psalmist reminds us of some of our core beliefs. We bless the Lord because God is not just great, but God is *very* great. And what's so great about God? Well, the Psalmist must have kicked off his dress shoes and gone for a walk. Just listen to him.

He says, “You make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers.” “You set the earth on its foundations...” “You make springs gush forth in the valleys...giving drink to every wild animal.” “By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches.” “You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use...wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine...” “You have made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting. You make darkness, and it is night, when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.”

Jeff Paschal

Now this diverse creation is not actually God but creation is a reflection of God's glory. But why did God make so much different things anyway? Why not just a few things? Because, as Annie Dillard says, "the creator loves pizzazz." (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 137.) And we are given not just a few plants and animals but a menagerie, and not just the essentials bread and water but wine and oil—unnecessary extras for enjoyment. So creation gives us just a tiny hint of how amazing God is.

And God not only creates, but God also sustains. God does not set up creation like a windup clock and then walk away (deism). No. Creation is always utterly dependent upon God's involvement. Creation does not power itself. God powers it. Creation does not feed and water itself. God does. As one scholar puts it, "Without the presence of God's face (that is his concern) humans are dismayed, overwhelmed; when God withdraws their breath, they return to the dust from which they were shaped." (John H. Hayes in *Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year B, Lent, Holy Week, Easter*, 238.) All life depends upon the breath of God.

And God creates boundaries. Light and dark. Land and water. Flat surface and soaring mountain. Inanimate and living creature.

Jeff Paschal

And creation responds. The Psalmist says, “The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God.” Is this a way of saying that the young lions roar a prayer to God, just as the hills and mountains are said to clap their hands for God? (See Mark Miller-McLemore in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3, 9.*)

And the Psalmist says, “There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.” Whatever this mysterious Leviathan, this sea monster is, it’s nothing compared to God. We may be afraid of it, but God created it just to play with it like a toy in a bathtub.

As we try to take in this vast horizon of creation, we’re left breathless; it is beyond us to capture. So we simply acknowledge that the creation is not our possession; it is God’s. And we’re called to care for what belongs to God. We are called to stewardship. So we sing praise and thanksgiving for all that God has so generously lent to us. And we pray with the Psalmist for sin and wickedness to cease. Praise the Lord!

But for now sin and wickedness have not ceased and the creation itself is caught in the crosshairs. Environmentalist Joanna Macy said, “At this point in our history, we don’t know whether we’re hospice

Jeff Paschal

workers or midwives!” (*Weavings*, July/August, 2008, 11.) And there are plenty of signs that it’s hospice work we’re up to.

Climate change accelerates and poor people in low-lying areas are already losing their homes and livelihoods.

The polar bears in the arctic are moving toward extinction as their habitat melts away.

Writer and farmer Wendell Berry says, “Now the two great aims of industrialism—replacement of people by technology and concentration of wealth into the hands of a small plutocracy—seem close to fulfillment.” Communities and lives are being destroyed by industrialism, and so is the environment. “The evidences of it are everywhere [he says]: eroded, wasted, or degraded soils; damaged or destroyed ecosystems; extinction of species; whole landscapes defaced, gouged, flooded, or blown up; pollution of the whole atmosphere and of the water cycle; ‘dead zones’ in the coastal waters; thoughtless squandering of fossil fuels and fossil waters, of mineable minerals and ores; natural health and beauty replaced by a heartless and sickening ugliness.” (Wendell Berry, *It All Turns on Affection*, 22.)

Jeff Paschal

When he was in town a few months ago, writer and professor Michael Pollan pointed out that, yes, the U.S. food system is now able to feed an incredible number of people at what appears to be a low cost. But because we are so reliant on fossil fuels for the production of this food, the real cost is vastly underestimated. When everything is factored in, that Big Mac actually cost about two hundred dollars. Our food production system so reliant upon fossil fuels instead of the power of the sun is ultimately unsustainable.

So the creation is in jeopardy, not just for us, but especially for our children and grandchildren. What will we leave behind for them?

We turn to Paul's letter to the Roman church. He says, "The creation waits with eager longing..." "The whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves..." Though much evidence may speak otherwise, Paul does not believe we are hospice workers. He says we're part of something new that is going to be born, something we have not seen, but something we hope for. He looks ahead and sees a creation no longer "in bondage

Jeff Paschal

to decay,” a creation healed and made whole and set free, just as we ourselves will be healed, made whole, and set free.

So here is our second homework assignment. In spite of the destruction and threats of destruction to creation happening right now, we’re called to live into hope. We are called to praise God and live into the hope of the redemption that is coming.

We already have the first homework assignment--take a walk in creation this week and pay attention.

Here’s the second homework assignment. Find some other ways to live into our hope in the redemption of the world. For some of us that may begin with more education about the pitfalls, as well as the possibilities of what we face.

A few facts from the World Bank. “A healthy environment is fundamental to poverty reduction...One in eleven people are lifted out of extreme poverty thanks to forests. Without policies and action to address climate change, an estimated 100 million more people will move into poverty by 2030...Getting it right on climate change is also an opportunity to create jobs, economic growth and other benefits. Air

Jeff Paschal

pollution is the fourth largest risk factor for premature deaths, causing one in ten deaths globally. Last year in the U.S. jobs in solar energy overtook those in fossil fuel extraction for the first time—solar jobs grew 12 times faster than overall job creation...reducing the global fishing effort would allow fish stocks to recover from overexploitation and boost the profitability of the fisheries sector from an estimated \$3 billion a year to \$86 billion...Restoring deforested and degraded lands promises huge benefits for the economy and climate.” We have the opportunity to do better, don’t we?

Some of us may join an environmental action group, such as the Sierra Club or the League of Conservation Voters. Some of us may plant a garden or eat locally grown food or buy produce from the farmers’ market. We may drive cars that get better gas mileage. We might be more intentional about recycling. We might push our elected officials to pursue policies that protect the planet that belongs to God. After all, as scripture says over and over, we are not to abuse the creation; we are to nurture it. God loves us, but God will hold us accountable for our stewardship of the world entrusted to us for a time.

Jeff Paschal

This week, take a walk in creation and become grounded to live in wonder and the love of God and of the amazing creation God has placed into our care. And then let's each one of us take some steps to live into the hope we have, a creation set free from decay and pollution and bondage to brokenness. A creation reborn.

Bless the Lord, O my soul. You are clothed with honor and majesty, wrapped in light as with a garment.

O Lord, your glory is showing again. Yes it is. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal