

## Psalm 104

A sermon for the Season of Lent

Psalm 104 is a creation Psalm about the glory of nature and the whole of creation. This Psalm, like other creation Psalms, is the basis for hymns such as “All creatures of our God and King,” “Let all things now living,” and “All things bright and beautiful.”

As you likely know, in 1965 the British veterinarian, Alf Wight, took the title of the hymn “All things bright and beautiful” and under the pen name James Herriot, wrote a series of poignant stories about the animals he treated and their owners.

I have hesitated to read the whole of Psalm 104; it's thirty-five verses long. But we really need to have it before us. I ask only that while I'm reading it, you have in mind the first two chapters of Genesis. There you have two creation stories. Here in Psalm 104 is also a story of creation:

Read it.

What's important is that there are basically three ways we look at nature and creation, and we don't really have them sorted out in our minds. The first way is that nature and the world about us is like a perpetual clock. It was set going and follows a cycle. The cycle keeps going, but it never goes anywhere. It's the circle of nature. Time is not going forward. We find this in the common thinking today in those who worship nature. For them, God is Gaia. There is that which is perpetual, governed by laws we call the cosmos. This view really goes back to the Greek Stoics.

The second understanding, which is a little bit different, comes out when somebody says: “It's just natural.” What do we mean by that? In 1970 one of the most important Catholic moral thinkers of the Twentieth Century, Charles Curran, was addressing a conference of priests, and he said: “I'm all for ‘natural law,’ as long as you can tell me: What is nature? and: What is law?” He went on from there for two days.

We have this idea that there's “nature,” but what exactly is that? This is not just a Twenty-First Century question. Back in the Eighteenth Century, one book described fourteen different meanings of the word “nature.”

Today when someone says: “It's natural,” it is commonly assumed that nature is like an organism that is alive and follows certain laws. This viewpoint, which goes back to Isaac Newton's thinking in the Seventeenth Century, holds that there is this process, governed by certain laws of space and time, and we know them, and they can make certain things understood. There are laws, and yet there is also change. That's the second way of thinking and it is still common today.

In the Twentieth Century the whole problem of quantum mechanics arose, complicating our understanding of nature. Here are three points about that:

First, people are taught that there are natural laws, but if you get into the really tough thinking about it, what physicists say is that rather than natural laws, there are simply probabilities.

Second, we may think that when we have all these results in physics, we really know something. However, what physicists do is best described by imagining them going into a totally dark room and by feeling around, trying to figure out what's there. They take some sort of instrument and see if they touch anything. Then they test that and touch something else and try to figure out a connection, and after a while, they have certain things they think that are there, but what all is there is really not well known.

Third, about one hundred years ago (1927), Werner Heisenberg, one of the pioneers of quantum mechanics, summed up the significance of what scientists were discovering about nature. He said: "Not only is the universe stranger than we imagine; it's stranger than we can imagine."

This brings us to the third way of understanding nature. Here is where Psalm 104 helps us. We are familiar with Genesis 1 and John 1 that God creates by his word. That is found in Psalm 104 in a secondary way. There is a hint in verse 7 about creation by the word: "At thy rebuke they fled." There is that word of rebuke. And Psalm 104:30 says: "When you sent forth your Spirit (your breath), they are created." That may echo Genesis 1:2: "And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters."

What is really important in this Psalm is evident when we contrast the word "continual" with the word "continuous." We use the word "continual" to mean every so often, as in: "My sister continually bugs me." But the word "continuous" means all the time, 24/7, 365 days a year, always. In Psalm 104 creation is continuous. God is sustaining creation 24/7, 365 days a year. It's not that God gives creation a kick-start. It's not a clock, not even an organism.

Rather, creation is continuous. This comes out in a couple of places. Psalm 104:16: "The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly." That is in the present tense. And 104:21: "The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God." It is a continuous process. Most of all in 104:32, in the present tense, it says the Lord is he ". . . who looks on the earth and it trembles, and touches the mountains and they smoke!" That is, earthquakes and volcanoes. In this way God is working. Not continually, meaning every so often. Rather, he is creating through history.

What's the key to this? For the ancient Hebrews the start of it all is not in Genesis 1. Rather, it starts with the Exodus. In the Exodus those who were slaves, who were nothing, God chose, God delivered, and with them God made a covenant. And because the Lord is God

and he is that kind of a God, therefore he is that way at the beginning, and he is that way in the future. That's God working in history. History is also what creation is.

In Psalm 136 every half verse is the same refrain: "The steadfast love of the Lord continues forever." That's basic. It is his love which is based on his name. As Psalm 8:1 proclaims: "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" That's what it's about.

We will then ask: What about evil? When we think of continuous creation, where does that come in? We have seen that Psalm 104 talks not only about earthquakes and volcanoes, but also about the young lions seeking their food from God. And in the last verse: "Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more!"

How do we sort that out? That's sorted out by the Psalmist, not here but in Psalm 50:21, in which the Lord says: "These things you have done and I have been silent; you thought that I was one like yourself. But now I rebuke you, and lay the charge before you." Holiness cannot abide unholiness.

Yahweh is not only the one who is ("I am"), but also it means "he acts." But it's above us. Evil is a mystery we cannot solve. The Lord is hidden, as it says, especially in Second Isaiah, so that one cannot know God through the creation. We fall into that trap of thinking we can.

This is spelled out in Psalm 19:1 and 3. It starts out: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork . . . [then verse 3] there is no speech and nor are there words; their voice is not heard." The things of creation declare his glory, but they don't tell us who he is.

Only the Son does that. John 1:14: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." John 1:18: "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known." He is the one who acts; he is the one who takes care of the terrible problem of evil. "We beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (John 1:14). The glory of the Lord is what he has done by dying and rising for us in Jesus Christ. "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

Amen