

Psalms 104:1-9, 24, 35c
October 18, 2009

South Plains

Stewards of Creation

Praise God!

Another day surrounded by beauty,

Another breath to draw with air refreshed by rain and

Cleansed by mountainsides flush with trees,

Another time allotted in this life for the joy of friends,

The light of music

A steady handshake

And the blessing of the leaves.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

Everywhere we turn, the evidence of our rich heritage confronts us and calls out to us to bless God's name. There are lots of reasons to be thankful as we move into another stewardship season. But, the most generic motivation for joining in Christ's mission to the world is creation itself, all that the Lord has provided for our good, the full storehouse of wonderful things.

Regardless of the bounty we see around us, it is also true that the world is not an inexhaustible storehouse. There's only so much land that will grow crops, so much water in the ground, so much oil to be pumped, so many whales to watch. Our job is to manage what God has given in nature so it will be a lasting reminder of divine providence, a means not only of our survival, but the means of prosperity for all creatures.

For the past several years, this church has encouraged each household to ask this question: What is God asking us to give to the church during the coming year in thanks for the blessings we receive? Throughout the rest of the year, our session wrestles with other stewardship issues: How much should we spend on mission and maintenance and education and all the various dimensions of church life? Can we do more in this area or that? What new ventures are we called to explore? What will they cost?

But before we commit ourselves to a church budget, the prior question for each of us is this: What would God have us do individually with what God has given us? When we have answered that question and the treasurer has added up all the estimates of giving for 2010, then the session commits to a budget. The stewardship of creation acknowledges one part of the tremendous generosity of God for which we give thanks.

Stewardship for the Christian who worships the Creator of heaven and earth can encompass as much as the human mind can comprehend. Today I'd like to think with you about our role as stewards of creation.

God is the original steward of the earth. Out of nothing, the Lord fashioned universes, galaxies, and planets, including our world. Astrophysicists speculate that before the Big Bang some 13 billion years ago, our universe was a point. Not the point on a pin, but a point

with no height, depth, no width at all. Nothing but a point in space. From this nothingness God exploded the stars and planets that make up our universe. The great Inventor, Engineer, Developer and Gardener set aside one tiny sphere in the vastness of outer space in order to nurture life. Perhaps there are other planets with life. We only know of a single planet in all the worlds we can study, a single planet that supports life as we know it. We are the apple of God's eye.

It's easy to take our world for granted as though we somehow deserve this beauty, the regularity of the seasons, the warmth of the sun and the rich, red clay of Albemarle County. For all his patience and piety, the Old Testament character Job seems to have slipped into that mindset that assumes the world should reward his diligence. When he questions the disasters that befell him, the Lord demands that first Job must answer some questions his Creator puts to him:

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements – surely you know!

On what were its bases sunk,

or who laid its cornerstone

when the morning stars sang together

and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

(Job 38:5-7)

The Lord uses cutting sarcasm to make his point that how the world runs is the responsibility of no one

else but God. Every time I read the book of Job, I'm reminded of what a tiny speck of dust I am in the machinery of creation. And, yet, the Lord listens to my concerns. The Lord sent his Son Jesus Christ to answer my deepest needs with abundant life, forgiven life, life eternal.

Every part of the created world has a destiny to fulfill: quarks and positrons, suns and black holes; plankton that feeds the whales and mosquitoes that feed the purple martins. From the tadpole to tyrannosaurus rex, from the gnat to the grizzly, from the stinkbugs in my garden to the great blue herons, everything has its purpose in the divine scheme. I cannot know why the H1N1 virus has appeared. I can only trust that God's comforting hand will gently rest on sufferers and lend us strength of body and spirit. The ministry of Jesus is exhibit A as evidence of God's desire to heal and comfort. The resurrection of Jesus is exhibit B for the hope we have beyond the trials of this world.

John Calvin saw the world as the theater of God's glory. "This magnificent theater of heaven and earth, crammed with innumerable miracles, Paul calls the 'wisdom of God (*Institutes* II.6.1)." In Genesis we learn that "a wind from God," the Holy Spirit "swept over the face of the waters" in the beginning. At the right time, that Spirit blew life into the universe. Not by chance, but by divine probability the solar wind blew until all the elements for life coalesced and human beings took their first breath from God. Ever since, the exchange of

oxygen and carbon dioxide, the cycle of life, has been by the grace of God.

Those of us who came of age in the twentieth century have fallen into the habit of a certain kind of language. Our concepts and words come from economics. We speak the dialect of consumption and efficiency and usefulness and cash value. Nature is a natural resource, literally grist for our industrial mills. There's nothing inherently wrong with seeing the world that way. Part of our stewardship requires managing the stuff around us.

But, using stuff to satisfy human acquisitiveness is only part of good stewardship. The raw materials of creation also should swell our hearts with wonder at the beauty of autumn and the magnificence of a mountain. It is the language of worship that can acknowledge our Creator with thanks and appreciation for God's handiwork. Only worship praises the provider of life. Only worship anticipates the new heaven and earth, restored not by human science, but according to God's plan foreshadowed in Jesus' resurrection. Only worship prepares us to be stewards, God's managers of a marvelous inheritance.

I believe we will break ground for Kirk Hall soon. I won't predict when we'll break ground until Albemarle County gives us a building permit. Part of gaining government approval has involved a careful assessment of the magnificent trees on our property, planning for

erosion control, and insuring that construction will add to the beauty of our community. It's been hard work; and I've been proud of the eagerness of the church to conserve what God has given us. Building carefully is part of our stewardship.

There are other steps we will want to consider to be good stewards of the land and water. In a time of economic hardship, it's tempting for the county and state to cut back on conservation efforts. We need to resist those temptations. When we move into a new kitchen, we will want to look at using fewer disposable products in order to reduce our contribution to the landfill. In our homes, we can each find ways to soften and reduce our carbon footprint. Most importantly, we can pray with gratitude for the gift of an environment that soothes our spirits and gladdens our hearts.

May the glories of creation lift our praise as the sun rises in the morning.

May the closing of each day fill us with peace.

Let birdsong add blessing to the Maker of all living things,

And even the rocks add their weight to the glory that belongs to God.

Give thanks waving trees, rustling grasses, and running waters,

For your Lord takes pleasure in you.

Your Ruler basks in the light of creation,

And waits with joy for the worship of his people.