

We, the Created

I imagine that many of you, like me, are particularly drawn to verses 3 through 8 of this morning's psalm. Making up a full half of this beautiful song is a sweeping account of the whole of God's creation. The Jerusalem Bible's translation actually calls Psalm 148 a 'cosmic hymn of praise'. How beautiful is that?!

It's no surprise if this section grabs your heart and imagination; after all, we live in a place that lets us experience some of the best parts of creation every day. Humans have always found God in the world around us; it is the first place our early ancestors saw the divine. The seasons, weather, the sun and moon; all of them were attributed to deities of different sorts by virtually every early human culture. Creation has been the subject of human musing, myth, ode, poem, and song, including a good chunk of Psalm 148. Some of the most beautiful writing on the creation from a Christian standpoint has been collected in a book called The Sermon of All Creation, edited by Judith and Michael Fitzgerald, from which I will be quoting today.

In verses 3 and 4, we can see how the author indicates that God is greater than creation; greater even than the highest heavens and whatever may lie beyond. God commands, controls, rules, and has dominion over all that is, seen and unseen. The psalmist writes:

Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars! Praise him you highest heavens and you waters above the skies!

Indulge me, if you will, to explain verse 4 for just a moment. According to ancient Hebrew mythology as defined by the creation story in Genesis 1, the earth and the heavens were all surrounded by deep waters. The Hebrew term for these waters is *tohu w'bohu* and it generally used to define wild or unknowable chaos. When we remember that these were a desert-dwelling people generally unfamiliar with open water, it makes sense why they might use water to define the unknown or the frightening.

Even more interesting, however, is that the Hebrews believed that the part of the world they could see with their eyes was surrounded on all sides, bordered, and hemmed-in, by this unknowable water. Even in their mythology, they seemed to know that God was master of those things they could not control, understand, or even see.

From the creation, learn to admire the Lord! And if any of the things you see exceed your own comprehension, and you are not able to find the reason for its existence, then for this reason glorify the Creator that the wisdom of His works surpasses your own understanding. – John Chrysostom, writing in the 4th century

The creation is miraculous, mystifying, and beautiful. The entire ecosystem of Earth works together in balance – or is supposed to. It is one of the most bafflingly intricate, inter-related and inter-connected systems imaginable.

One of my favorite examples of how important even insignificant or invisible features can be comes not from some sweeping alpine vista but from one of the little bits of creation each of us is most intimate with – a tiny little thing in the human kidney called the Loop of Henle. (Forgive me if you’ve heard me say this before.) I’m sure any doctors in the congregation may want to clarify my understanding of this part after the service, but here is how the Loop of Henle was explained to me years ago, in a nutshell: it is a feature in the kidney that actually handles the filtration of blood through a series of chemical interactions. Each kidney contains about a million of these intricate little systems that would total about 50 miles in length, spread end-to-end. Without the tiny Loop of Henle continual recycling fluids from our blood supply, I was told, humans wouldn’t have time to do anything with their lives except, well, urinate.

God made us so wonderfully, so thoughtfully and intricately, that we have such features buried within our own bodies where most of us will never even know about them. Saint Columba of Iona wrote in the 6th century:

If you want to understand the Creator, seek to understand created things.

And in the 12th century, Aelred of Rievaulx wrote:

If you were to look at every creature from the beginning of creation to the end of time, whether it were the most radiant angel or the tiniest worm, you would see in it signs of God’s goodness and his overflowing love.

Because of what it does, I choose to see God’s overflowing love in the Loop of Henle, but that’s just me.

I think the reason humans see beauty in creation, in mountains and valleys and forests and seas, is because we can see in it some shadow of the Creator. Something in the majesty of landscapes and oceans and skies triggers in us an awareness of God. Perhaps, at some unknown level, we recognize the image of God – the *imago dei* – in what He has made. We see through the process of evaporation and stand in awe of thunder-headed cumulonimbus clouds towering over the Great Plains – or maybe we don’t even see the process at all. We don’t think about the minute, imperceptibly slow but inexorable processes of erosion that created the Grand Canyon over untold millions of years; we only see the grandeur and color and shapes of cliffs and battlements.

Listen to the sermon preached to you by the flowers, the trees, the shrubs, the sky, and the whole world. Notice how they preach to you a sermon full of love, of praise of God, and how they invite you to glorify the sublimity of that sovereign Artist who has given them being.”

– Paul of the Cross, writing in the 18th century

So how do we praise God? More importantly, how are the inanimate members of creation supposed to do so? Whenever I read any of the parts of the Bible – and there are a couple of them – in which creation is commanded to praise God, I am always reminded of the story of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem as told in the gospel of Luke. When the disciples and the crowd were praising God and glorifying him, the Pharisees basically told Jesus to shut them up. He replied:

“I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

I don't know about you, but if the rocks and trees ever do begin crying out with voices, I, for one, will be afraid to go into the woods by myself! That would freak me out.

No, creation praises God by being the created: by reflecting God's omniscient wisdom and His overwhelming artistry.

Creation is a great book. Look above you; look below you! Note it; read it! God didn't write that book with ink. Instead, He set before your eyes the things that He had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that? Why, heaven and earth cry out, "God made me!" – Saint Augustine of Hippo, writing in the 4th century

I think the same is true for humans. Yes we can write and sing hymns of praise, and we can build soaring cathedrals with gorgeous stained-glass windows. But don't we best praise God by being the people He created us to be, as demonstrated by Jesus Christ? Mechtild of Magdeburg wrote in the 13th century:

The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw, and knew I saw, all things in God and God in all things.

Do we see God in all things? Do we see God in one another? More importantly, do others see God in us? Is that not our highest calling, as God's created children, made *imago dei* to reflect him to our broken and hurting world just as Jesus did? I believe there is great truth in the old saying "You may be the only Jesus some people ever meet."

Verse 14 ends the psalm, as verse 1 began it, with the simple command 'praise the Lord'. That's really the human mission in a nutshell. God doesn't need us for anything – except maybe that. The Heidelberg Catechism, an early and well-known teaching document of the reformed faith, is constructed of a series of questions and answers. The very first question in this document asks, "What is the chief end of man?" to which the student was to answer, "To glorify God and enjoy Him forever." We are the created; it is our job to give glory to the one who created us.

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines 'glorify' as: "to make glorious by bestowing honor, praise, or admiration". So, if the Heidelberg Catechism is to be believed, then the primary purpose of humanity is to praise God. But if Psalm 148 is to be believed, it is the primary purpose of all creation to praise God. I think all Christians, all humans – we, the created – must strive to be a people who are part of God's great creation and who praise Him through our doing, but more so, through our very being.

The heavens declare the glory of God. How then, tell me, do they declare it? By means of the spectacle itself! For when you see the beauty, the breadth, the height, the position, the form, the stability thereof during so long a period, hearing as it were a voice, and being instructed by the spectacle itself, thou admirest Him who created a body so fair and strange! The heavens may be silent, but the sight of them emits a voice that is louder than a trumpet's sound. – John Chrysostom, writing in the 4th century