

First Presbyterian Church
Psalm 33:1-11, “Aligning Praise with Practice”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 8/30/2020

Whenever I get a renewed sense of the vast creative work of God,
it seems like other things get put into perspective.

Through this unbelievable world, God has put on display
what is really important to him.

And when I connect somehow with what God has done
in the rest of creation, I begin to understand what it is
that God has done in creating...me.

It's good isn't it... to remember that
presidential elections, the latest polls, the pandemic,
are not things that shake God's place in the world.

How do we remind ourselves of that?
When we simply look at what GOD has done,
these other things must be humbled,
they get dropped down a few pegs because
God is clearly at work on a much larger scale
and with much greater depth.

Today we get to consider the doctrine of creation
as it is expressed in this Psalm.

The opening focus of the Psalm is praising God.
Three are exhortations to sing joyfully,
to make music,
to sing new songs to God,
to play skillfully and shout for joy.

This is not a quiet, still, centered psalm of praise.
No this is a wave your hands and shout hallelujah psalm of praise.

Can you imagine the thousands of Israelites gathered at the Temple,
singing God's praise joined by harp and lyre and tambourine?

For us, it's hard to replicate that, isn't it?

It's hard to get excited about praising God when we're isolated
in homes and can't hear the contributions
of other congregation members.

But if we go out into the wide world God has made and take in the beauty
and wonder of creation, we'll find that there are places
where God is praised in loud and wonderful ways.

With verse 4 the Psalmist turns his attention to the “word” of Yahweh,
which he describes as right and true, and the “works” of Yahweh,
“he is faithful in all he does.”

The words and deeds of God always go together.
And they always reveal the character of God.

REPEAT

We can also see some parallels between verse 4 and verse 5.

Verse 4 tells us what the words and deeds of Yahweh are like
(they are right, true and faithful),
and then verse 5 tells us what Yahweh himself is like
(he loves righteousness, justice, and his love is unfailing).

Yahweh is a God of integrity then – there's no difference between
promises made and actions taken.

Note verses 6 & 7: **“By the word of Yahweh...
the heavens were made,
their starry host by the breath of his mouth.
He gathers the waters of the sea into jars;
he puts the deep into storehouses.”**

That's an amazing picture.

I grew up watching my mom can peaches in the summer,
and the Psalmist is saying that's the same scale
at which God stores up all the waters of the sea.
God can put them all in jars.

That's amazing. The point here, once again, is that
there is no distinction here between what Yahweh speaks (his word)
and what Yahweh does (creating the universe).

Think about how different that is from how we operate?
It's my prayer that what I say and what I do will be totally connected,
but I'm inconsistent at best and hypocritical at my worst.

If you didn't catch it the first time,
the same theme is found again if we jump down to verse 9,
**"For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm."**

In both verses 7 and 9, God speaks and worlds take shape out of nothing.

But verse 8 is sandwiched in-between these two statements
about the creative power of God's word.

Verse 8 gives us the "so what?" for the doctrine of creation.

It says, **"Let all the earth fear Yahweh,
let all the people of the world revere him."**

When we fail to notice and care for the world around us,
we ignore the beauty of God's character
woven into the world we participate in.

So the first implication is that
when we see the wonders of the world God has made,
it should cause us to revere God
because his character is revealed to us there.

The second implication from this creation account
is that our actions toward what God has made
should be consistent with our words of praise
for what God has made.

You see the problem, don't you? If our mouths tell God—
"Yes, I see you in this grand world you created!
By your word the heavens were made!,"
but at the same our way of life demands everything to be
cheap, quick, prepackaged and ready made,
then we have a major disconnect in our lives.

If *God's* words and deeds are consistent with each other,
and if they reveal his character in his creation,
then our words and deeds should also be consistent.
We revere God when we look at the created world
and then because of that,
we care for and respect the things God has made.

In this way, our words and our actions hold together and support each other.

Now the third implication:

Caring for creation and
caring for people's souls are not separate tasks.

Perhaps the best critique of this doctrine of creation is to say that,
yes, the environment is important,
but *anybody* can save the environment.
You don't need the church to do that.

God put *us* here to save souls!
Aren't people's eternal souls more important than trees and fish?

I'm sure you've heard this one.
Maybe you've even made a similar statement yourself.
I don't want to belittle this very important question:
Aren't people's eternal souls more important
than trees and fish?

I have been helped the most in answering this question
by a Christian farmer, writer, and conservationist
named Wendell Berry.

Wendell makes the simple observation that you cannot
hurt the land without hurting the people who depend on the land.
He writes that **"Sooner or later, governments will have to recognize
that if the land does not prosper,
nothing else can prosper for very long.**

**We can have no industry or trade or wealth or security
if we don't uphold the health of the land
and the people and the people's work.**

**It is merely a fact that the land,
here and everywhere, is suffering."** End quote.

You can't hurt the land without hurting the people who depend on the land.
I would add that you can't hurt people physically
without also impacting them emotionally and spiritually.

A desire to save people's souls without regard
for the well-being of the place they live in
comes from a dramatic misunderstanding of the gospel itself,
and a misunderstanding of the way God has made us.

Our God cares about oceans and plants and bodies and soil—
God came to us in the physical person of Jesus
who worked with his hands and prayed on lonely hilltops.
God has not given us a gospel through Jesus Christ
that is disconnected from this place he has created and given to us.

Instead everything in God's creation is deeply connected,
and it all begins with the connection between God's character
and God's word that creates and sustains everything we see.

So I do not believe we can simply leave others
to deal with the environmental stuff while
we go about the business of saving souls. That's false choice.
In truth, the one feeds into the other, and vice versa.

The church can't just pass this work off
as though we have nothing to contribute.
It's part of our original calling as humans to care for this
garden God has created.

So think about your own lives, but let's also think about our life together—
how do we, as a collective group,
match up our words with our actions?

I'm so grateful for our Earthcare Committee. Please take their work to heart.
They do not accomplish earth care for us – they make clear pathways
for all of us to ensure that our words of praise about creation
and our deeds within creation are aligned.

Little by little, by God's grace, our life together is becoming a vibrant sign
that we are God's representatives here,
and we join in God's work by tending and sustaining
the good world we are a part of. Let's praise God for that.