Duke NICHOLAS INSTITUTE *for* ENERGY, ENVIRONMENT & SUSTAINABILITY

An Ecological Bible Study of Psalm 104

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When considering Bible study curricula that take the natural world and the climate crisis into account, leaders must know their congregation well—considering factors like these when selecting the text. The Bible study presented here—an in-depth reading of Psalm 104 from an ecological and creation care perspective—is best taught over two to four weeks to give groups ample time for discussion.

In some cases, the study may challenge overly reductive readings a congregation might have learned, for example, regarding humans' dominion over the earth. Pursuing this kind of study also may involve a degree of re-enchantment, both of the Biblical world in the text and of the natural world surrounding the congregation. The congregation, in order to move into new methods of reading and interpreting scripture, must first be shown not only why reading scripture in this "new" way is necessary, but also why it is compelling and beautiful. They must be able to imagine themselves within this new reading, to take this new reading as their own.

For this reason, specific texts may be more helpful than others. Old Testament laws, for example, contain regard for the natural world and our responsibility to it (e.g., Genesis 1:28, Genesis 2:15, and Leviticus 25:23–25). However, the legal texts of the Old Testament are notoriously technical and un-enchanting for the modern reader. Furthermore, a congregation resistant to new readings may be quick to dismiss these texts as only being relevant to ancient Israel, those under the Old Covenant. As those under New Covenant, the law of grace, it may be difficult for a congregation to read themselves into the narratives of Old Testament Law. Revelation, likewise, is filled with images about a restored natural world and Christ coming back to a new earth in an arboreal temple/city (e.g., Revelation 21:1–4 and Revelation 22:1–3). But like Leviticus, it is technical reading, and much modern stigma surrounds apocalyptic literature.

To avoid these distractions and theological rabbit trails, the Psalms are perhaps the best starting point for a congregation's first foray into ecologically informed study of the Bible. While the Psalms are indeed from the Old Testament, they are typically void of the juridical technicalities of other Old Testament texts and are frequently cited in the New Testament. Additionally, they are written—and in many Christian traditions are used liturgically—as prayers voiced in the first person. When a congregation reads a Psalm together, they take the words of the Psalm as their own. This feature of the texts will go a long way in re-educating, but also re-enchanting and reshaping the hearts and minds of a church community.

This Bible study of Psalm 104 will draw heavily from James Luther Mays' commentary, *Psalms,* as well as William P. Brown's article, "'Deep Calls to Deep': The Ecology of Praise in

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the Psalms," found in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible and Ecology*.[1, 2] In his article, Brown identifies three "orienting issues that direct our attention to how the Psalms value creation:"

1. Creation's integrity
2. God's relationship to creation
3. Humanity's relationship to creation

While Brown notes a litany of Psalms to explore these three orienting issues, Psalm 104 is the only Psalm he mentions that speaks to all three. This Psalm, then, which Mays titles "The Lord God Made Them All" will be our focus text, provided below in the NRSVUE:

1 Bless the LORD, O my soul.
O LORD my God, you are very great.
You are clothed with honor and majesty,
2 wrapped in light as with a garment.
You stretch out the heavens like a tent;
3 you set the beams of your[a] chambers on the waters;
you make the clouds your[b] chariot;
you ride on the wings of the wind;
4 you make the winds your[c] messengers,
fire and flame your[d] ministers.

5 You set the earth on its foundations,
so that it shall never be shaken.
6 You cover it with the deep as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.
7 At your rebuke they flee;
at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.
8 They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys,
to the place that you appointed for them.
9 You set a boundary that they may not pass,
so that they might not again cover the earth.

10 You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
they flow between the hills,
11 giving drink to every wild animal;
the wild asses quench their thirst.
12 By the streams[e] the birds of the air have their habitation;

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a 104.3 Heb *his*

b 104.3 Heb *his*

c 104.4 Heb *his*

d 104.4 Heb *his*

e 104.12 Heb *By them*

they sing among the branches.
13 From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

14 You cause the grass to grow for the cattle
and plants for people to cultivate,
to bring forth food from the earth
15 and wine to gladden the human heart,
oil to make the face shine
and bread to strengthen the human heart.
16 The trees of the field[f] are watered abundantly,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.
17 In them the birds build their nests;
the stork has its home in the fir trees.
18 The high mountains are for the wild goats;
the rocks are a refuge for the coneys.
19 You have made the moon to mark the seasons;
the sun knows its time for setting.
20 You make darkness, and it is night,
when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.
21 The young lions roar for their prey,
seeking their food from God.
22 When the sun rises, they withdraw
and lie down in their dens.
23 People go out to their work
and to their labor until the evening.

24 O LORD, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
25 There is the sea, great and wide;
creeping things innumerable are there,
living things both small and great.
26 There go the ships
and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

27 These all look to you
to give them their food in due season;
28 when you give to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
29 When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.

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f 104.16 Gk: Heb *trees of the Lord*

30 When you send forth your spirit,[g] they are created,
and you renew the face of the ground.

31 May the glory of the LORD endure forever;
may the LORD rejoice in his works—
32 who looks on the earth and it trembles,
who touches the mountains and they smoke.
33 I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.
34 May my meditation be pleasing to him,
for I rejoice in the LORD.
35 Let sinners be consumed from the earth,
and let the wicked be no more.
Bless the LORD, O my soul.
Praise the LORD!

To begin this study, one or several members should read through Psalm 104 in full before looking more closely at its individual sections. Upon first read, and especially within the first several verses, Mays notes that what we are reading—and indeed, praying—is a poetic and prayerful reimagining of Genesis 1 (331). A question that may help prime the discussion and highlight the unique benefit of the Psalms may be:

What is the difference between simply reading the creation narrative of Genesis 1 and praying it as a Psalm?

As members share their answers, try to guide discussion toward a couple of key points. Firstly, praying the creation narrative emphasizes creation's utter dependence on God. Secondly, this prayer casts creation not as a completed historical event, but as an *ongoing* event enacted by God in every moment.

Note that the psalmist uses the present, and not the past, tense. Note also that in this Psalm, there is no mention of humanity having "dominion" over creation. We are just one small piece of God's immense, majestic universe. This is not to discount the Genesis narrative, but this Psalm should put tension on the conventional, troubled understanding of human dominion over the world. In the conventional understanding, it is commonly thought that humans are provided with the raw materials of the world and are tasked with making something useful and productive out of them. Here, though, the psalmist praises God for creating an ordered world that, by its own God-given faculties, sustains and multiplies abundant life, a process in which we are invited to participate.

Brown draws particular attention to vv.13–17. He writes:

> *"The psalmist lingers admiringly over the mighty cedars of Lebanon, whose timber was a prized commodity among the mighty empires of antiquity in the Fertile Crescent. Armies from Mesopotamia would march westward, conquering*

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g 104.30 Or *your breath*

cities and territories in their path, to get to the cedar forests near the Mediterranean seaboard, cut them down, and use the lumber for constructing their monumental palaces and temples. These trees once grew in dense forests on the slopes of Lebanon's mountains. Few remain today. The psalmist, however, prizes these trees not for their lumber but for their majesty and their capacity to accommodate life. In God's creation even trees have standing!" (173)

Brown's highlighting of these verses provides a Biblical corrective of human avarice that puts so many of our natural landscapes in danger. Rather than viewing nature for its commodity value, the psalmist celebrates the cedar tree and other natural "resources" for how beautifully they reflect their Creator.

In vv.18–24, the psalmist draws attention to the sheer multitude of God's creation. Mays notes that this Psalm provides an "exclamation of amazement at how many creatures the Lord in His wisdom has made" (334). The list provided in the Psalm is only the beginning and cannot be completed: "The emphasis is on all" (334). In the concluding lines of this section, the psalmist notes humanity's place and role in this wider litany and ends with praise: "O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures" (v.24). A question that emerges out of this section may be:

Does this view of the natural world reflect our own view, in our local community, or in our country? How might this Psalm instruct our dealings with our natural landscapes?

The following section speaks of the mighty Leviathan (v.36). Brown notes that "elsewhere in biblical tradition, Leviathan is a multiheaded sea dragon, a monster of chaos, God's mortal enemy slated for destruction (see Ps 74:12–14; Isa 27:1)" (177). Here, however, Leviathan is included among the rest of God's good creation, delighting in the good things received from God's open hand. Where we expect to see fear and chaos, we instead see God's benevolence.

Brown contrasts this from the concluding verses, in which we see a tinge of fear embedded within thanksgiving (vv.31–35). "Here is an authentic assessment," he writes, "of creation as it stands, a world in which the purveyors of chaos are not mythically theriomorphic—monsters made in the image of animals—but monstrously human" (178). In his concluding reflection on Psalm 104, Brown poses questions—along with some potential answers—that are worth reflecting on in a congregational setting:

"Ecologically, the psalmist helps contemporary readers to see the enemy more clearly, the enemy in the mirror. No other species has changed the face of the earth more than Homo sapiens*, particularly within the last fifty years. The collective power that humanity wields exceeds anything else on Earth. And what are we doing with that power, the psalmist would ask? We are destroying precisely those marvelous features and forms of creation the psalmist commends to God's enjoyment: habitats and their diverse inhabitants. We are systematically eliminating the very reasons for God to enjoy creation. According to Psalm 104,*

God enjoys the world for its sheer diversity; hence, the loss of natural habitats across land and sea only diminishes God's joy" (178).

When participants have answered the questions posed, they may conclude with the rereading of Psalm 104 as a prayer. Bible study participants may wish to do this as a responsive reading, communal reading, silently, or as a song.

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1 James Luther Mays. 1994. *Psalms.* Louisville: John Knox Press. This is a part of the *Interpretation Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, which provides a scholarly commentary for congregational settings.

2 Hillary Marlow and Mark Harris. 2022. *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible and Ecology* New York: Oxford University Press, p. 166–83.

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