

# *The Earth is the Lord's*

by  
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## Psalm 24

<sup>1</sup>The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it;

<sup>2</sup>for God has founded it on the seas,  
and established it on the rivers.

<sup>3</sup>Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?  
And who shall stand in his holy place?

<sup>4</sup>Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,  
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,  
and do not swear deceitfully.

<sup>5</sup>They will receive blessing from the LORD,  
and vindication from the God of their salvation.

<sup>6</sup>Such is the company of those who seek the Lord,  
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.

<sup>7</sup>Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.

<sup>8</sup>Who is the King of glory?  
The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle.

<sup>9</sup>Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.

<sup>10</sup>Who is this King of glory?  
The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory.

My friend and preaching colleague, Kim Clayton, pointed me to a wonderful book that describes “the hidden life of trees.” The author, Peter Wohlleben, is a forest ranger in Europe. He describes stopping one day to take a closer look at some stones near a stand of old beech trees. He carefully lifted the moss that covered them and when he did, he discovered to his surprise, not stones, but rather – tree bark. Still he tried to lift one, and he could not because it was attached to the ground in some way. He noticed their pattern was a circle with a diameter of about five feet, clearly the outline of a long ago tree.

He wrote: “What I had stumbled upon were the gnarled remains of an enormous tree stump. All that was left were vestiges of the outermost edge” with evidence that the tree had been felled four or five hundred years earlier. Now, without a trunk, branches or leaves, “it was getting assistance from the roots of neighboring trees. “The surrounding beeches were pumping sugar to the stump to keep it alive.” Then he probes this observation from nature as a lesson for human beings, that in the forest, trees go so far as to nourish their competitors.

He writes, “A tree is not a forest. On its own a tree cannot establish a consistent local climate. It is at the mercy of wind and weather. But together, many trees create an ecosystem that moderates extremes... and live to be very old. Their root system is connected so that strong or weak, thick or thin, all are connected to share light and nutrients... so that each tree can grow into the best tree it can be... for a tree can only be as strong as the forest that surrounds it.”<sup>1</sup>

In *The Atlantic* this month, Rebecca Gibbs recalls Wohlleben’s research into the hidden life of trees and further extends the analogy to the human condition today, writing, “No wonder that this account of a forest has struck us as beguiling. The portrayal of resource-sharing in the woods sounds so benevolent so wise, in a world where inequality continues to increase.

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<sup>1</sup> Kim Clayton, “A Tree is not a Forest,” Brick Presbyterian, NYC, 2/17/19.

While strife and delusion travel with terrifying speed in our networked, online existence, the spectacle of the intricate, protective cooperation of trees beckons... And, “The discovery of a covert unity and nurturance among separate trees acquires special resonance against the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic. What looks lone and immobile is, in fact, linked and supportive.”<sup>2</sup>

The Psalmist put it simply, *The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.*

Throughout the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, we are directed to study the natural world around us in order to understand more fully both God’s providential care for us, and how to live in interdependence with God and with one another. If “what looks lone and immobile is, in fact, linked and supportive,” is true of trees, how much more is that supposed to be true for the human family? We are created as human beings to share these qualities we observe within the whole creation – as in the hidden life of trees – to stay connected for mutual nurturance and support, and to share our resources with others so that each individual can grow and thrive. And yet, this natural interdependence of mutual support and connection seems terribly broken down, doesn’t it?

We are finally emerging from the pandemic only to discover that now even more people are dying from gun violence than from the coronavirus in cities across the country including our own. Nearly sixty percent of American adults know someone personally who has been affected by gun violence. It’s on the front page of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* today. More than ten thousand people have been shot here since 2015. Ten thousand. In Philadelphia – already this year – more than 150 children under the age of eighteen have been shot. The trauma this violence is taking on youth is enormous, causing all manner of mental health challenges evident in deep despair.

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<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Gibbs, “The Trees Are Talking,” *The Atlantic*, July-August, 2021, p. 89.

Add to this violence the terrible rise in overt signs of racism, having come so close to home as last weekend's white supremacist mob Marching through Center City. Flying in from Texas that group proudly espouses racism, anti-Semitism and intolerance under the guise of preserving ethnic and cultural origins of their European ancestors – as if their European forebears first occupied this land, which of course they did not.

*The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it; the world and all those who live in it.*

This little affirmation of scripture may seem a weak defense against the chaos of our world these days. How can this humble, worshipful call to stewardship stand up to the violence, the extremism, the intolerance, the lack of truth-telling, and the environmental degradation that are so prevalent all around us? How can a humble, worshipful call to stewardship stand up to the headlines of climate change, and road rage, of Haiti's assassination and the global pandemic death toll surpassing four million?

*The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it; the world and all those who live in it.*

The Psalm calls us to a renewed sense of reverence by asserting an often forgotten fact about reality. God alone owns the world. Our very existence is the work of God. If we learn better to look through that lens of faith, our actions will change. How we treat the world, how we steward the environment, how we nurture and support one another in an ecosystem in which God intends mutuality and interdependence should.

According to Biblical scholars, the intention of Psalm 24 is didactic. It functions not only as a summons to worship but also as instruction for the community of faith. To declare that God alone owns the world and all that is in it, is to deny the reality of any other owner,

human or another presumed deity. It acknowledges competitive claims for our loyalty and attention, and it raises questions about our very human tendency to claim ownership over that which does not really belong to us.<sup>3</sup>

If we really take to heart – that the air and the water belong to God, wouldn't we be a little more concerned with how we pollute them? If we remember that the forests out West, and the farmlands in the Midwest and the life in our own back yards actually belong to God, would we not be more careful about how our daily choices are causing some of the hottest temperatures, the longest seasons of drought, and the quickest rate of extinctions ever recorded? If we really thought of the families in the most violent sections of Philadelphia as our neighbors, Indeed, as our brothers and sisters, because they too are children of God, would we not more stridently be advocating to get the guns off the streets?

Not every problem we face these days is a political problem. More often than not these broad issues of stewardship are – at their heart – a theological problem. And every single one of us can act out this core affirmation of faith: *The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it; and become* better stewards of God's created order and God's human family.

Humanities Professor at the University of Texas, Paul Woodruff argues that in our current climate of division and degradation, the thing we have lost hold of is the virtue of reverence. Woodruff calls it our forgotten virtue: reverence. He writes “Reverence is the virtue that keeps human beings from trying to act like gods. An irreverent soul is arrogant and shameless, unable to feel awe in the face of things higher than itself. As a result, an irreverent soul is unable to feel respect or people it sees as lower than itself – ordinary people,” different sorts of people. “But in our time, we hear more praise of irreverence than we do of reverence,”

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<sup>3</sup> James L. Mays, *Interpretation Commentary: Psalms*, p. 120 ff.

wherever we go. However, reverence, he argues, “gives us the power to make changes toward each other, changes in attitude and ceremony to allow us to be at home with newness and change and changing people.”<sup>4</sup>

It’s reverence that leads to fairness and justice and equity in the created order. So we would do well not to curse and despair over the tragic realities we see all around us; but to counter them with increasing reverence for the ultimate owner of the world, and all that is in it; with a reverence that manifests itself in better care for creation and for the human family which inhabits it.

Neil DeGrasse Tyson, that wonderful astrophysicist at the helm of the Hayden Planetarium in New York tells of an encounter with a visiting professor who brought a class of students to see the show *Passport to the Universe*. In dramatic fashion the planetarium show takes viewers on a virtual tour through the Milky Way and soaring past untold galaxies and billions of stars to the unknown outer regions of the universe. After the professor got home to his Ivy League college, he wrote to Tyson admitting he had the most visceral feeling of smallness and insignificance after the viewing. Tyson, one of the show’s producers, was dumbfounded by this reaction, saying that studying the vastness of the universe makes him feel instead, “alive and spirited and connected.” Tyson writes, “I also feel large knowing that the goings-on within the three-pound human brain are what enabled us to figure out our place in the universe.” That’s reverence in action!

Friends, when the Psalmist proclaims to people of faith: *The earth is the Lord’s*, that summons to awe and reverence is also a challenge to action. For we are endowed by our Creator to have agency within the created order for good. To be a forest of mutual support and not a lonely tree. *The earth is the Lord’s* is the summons of worship to welcome in the King of Glory. And is it also a call to us to be God-like

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*, p. 4, 208

in our benevolent stewardship of the earth and all that is in it, he world  
and all who live in it.

AMEN.