

Eco Faithfulness 2:
Created for Awe and Wonder

by
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Psalm 8

¹O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.

²Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark
because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.

³When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and
the stars that you have established;

⁴what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you
care for them?

⁵Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them
with glory and honor.

⁶You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have
put all things under their feet,

⁷all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,

⁸the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the
paths of the seas.

⁹O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Romans 8:22-27

²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

The theme for the most recent publication of our denominational journal, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, is entitled “Creation’s Urgent Call.” It contains a number of articles about how churches all over the country, like ours, are working toward being better stewards of the earth entrusted to our care. In one of them my preacher friend, Jenny McDevitt, describes herself “a work in progress.” She tries to grow in understanding of climate change and learn what she can do to address it. I think her honesty about what a challenge this is resonates with most of us.

She writes: “A few months ago, a friend of mine posted a picture of the dental floss she bought made of a biodegradable material, housed in a small, refillable glass vile. One in a series of her efforts to live a more sustainable lifestyle.” Candidly, Jenny comments that she barely remembers to floss her teeth, much less think about earth-friendly floss, but she is – nonetheless – trying to pay more attention to her ecological footprint, saying: “I believe that loving and honoring God means protecting and caring for the world God so loves. I also believe in science and scientists tell us that climate change is real. I believe them when they tell us the timeline to change our actions was yesterday, but since we’re already late, the adjusted timeline is now. And yet, the underutilized floss in my bathroom cabinet is encased in plastic. I try to remember my reusable grocery bags, but sometimes I forget. I strive to fill my recycling bin faster than I fill my trash bin, and I buy locally as much as practical, but I haven’t cut ties with Amazon.

Plus,” she adds with the urgency of how complex this issue is, “If I buy biodegradable, refillable floss; it’s not available locally, and it has to be shipped. Does the energy and fuel required by delivering it straight to my door negate the good of the floss in the first place? She concludes: I have fallen down an internet rabbit hole attempting to learn more about this. In this, as with so much else, I am a work in progress.”¹

¹ Jenny McDevitt, “A Work in Progress,” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, May 9, 2022.

In figuring out how we can be more ecologically faithful, all of us are a work in progress. But as we heard last Sunday, God created us out of the earth and gives us a job to care for it as God cares for us – in love. God is calling us to pay attention, as my friend Jenny is, to everything we do and what we purchase and how it impacts the environment.

The challenge for us is how to keep paying attention and to make the changes needed to heal the earth, to move toward a more sustainable way of life, working for environmental justice. Just this week, when asked about how people are responding to the critical water shortage in California and the upcoming rationing of water, I heard a *Los Angeles Times* reporter say, “I’m not sure. When I raise the question people tell me how weary they are – weary from the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the debate around the likely Supreme Court abortion ruling; people in L.A. are too stressed already to think about this water crisis.”²

It is true, the issues of climate change and environmental degradation add stress upon stress and call all feel overwhelming. There is not a day that goes by these days without some new report on a drastic issue of climate change making the news: that drought in California is the worst in twelve-hundred years; the ivory-billed woodpecker has been declared extinct;³ and not since an asteroid wiped out the dinosaurs has life in the ocean been at such high risk, with an estimated one-third of its species extinct in the next 300 years if emissions keep rising.⁴

That’s all recent news. If you pay attention to credible news sources, you know how dire the environmental crisis is. In this sermon series, I’m trying not to raise the heat with a battery of facts but to lean into our biblical and theological inspiration for change. As Episcopal theologian, Steven Charleston, has observed, “We can tell people how fast the polar ice caps are melting, how many bird species are

² Reported by *Los Angeles Times* and NBC News on May 11, 2022.

³ Philadelphia Inquirer, 4/17/22.

⁴ Philadelphia Inquirer, 4/29/22.

disappearing, and how toxic their water is becoming. In a sense we can try to heal them by telling them how sick they are. But that creates denial and guilt, not transformation. Statistics may present a valid picture of reality, but they are not very convincing emotional arguments against denial. We need another approach.”⁵

Climate journalist, Eric Holthaus, puts it bluntly: “If you’re trying to motivate people (scaring them to death) is a really bad strategy.”⁶ Rather, we need to draw people into the alternative vision of creation care in order to help us all pay attention and become better lovers of God’s good earth. We remember that “the human heart is not changed by facts alone but by engaging visions and empowering values.”⁷

So we gather our hearts and minds around the inspiration we find in scripture. Today, the Apostle Paul reminds us the world God so loves reaches to the full extent of the cosmos; we are essential living creatures in God’s beautiful web of creation. Even when we find, as Paul puts it, *the whole creation has been groaning as in labor pains until now; and not only creation, but we ourselves groan inwardly while we wait for redemption... for in hope we are saved*. The hope which saves us, according to Paul, cannot be separated from the creation out of which we were made, and for which we are called to care. By locating us in the midst of a groaning creation, Paul invites us both to see how small we are, and the big role we have to spread the gospel for the sake of the world.

The hope we have in Christ, through whom God loves the world, propels us to heal the earth. Christians must undertake this work together. So what inspires this hopeful work? Both Paul and the Psalmist

⁵ Steven Charleston, “The Isaiah Factor,” in *Earth and Word*, ed. By David Rhoads, p.85-86.

⁶ My paraphrase of Holthaus to clean up his language, as quoted in Jennifer Ayers, *Inhabitation: Ecological Religious Education*.

⁷ Patricia Tull, *Inhabiting Eden: Christians, the Bible, and the Ecological Crisis*.

point to the stars. The Psalmist looks to the stars, the evidence of God's creative hand, and calls us to awe and wonder:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them. Yet you have made them a little lower than God.

Tiny little specks we are, according to the Apostle Paul and the Psalmist, and yet God has raised us up in the splendor of creation to do our good work with awe and wonder. Rather than scaring people with dismal facts about climate change, both scientists and religious educators agree what is needed is this kind of reverence.

Writes theologian Jennifer Ayers: "What is needed is a reminder of the goodness of God's world. The mystery of the world and all the life found in it has an alluring quality. To love God's world is to be seduced by it, to be compelled by God's creative, loving, redemptive, and transformative activity in the world... Even while confronted by serious ecological threats, this wondrous, mysterious, persuasive, and indeed, seductive world is also the ecological context for religious education..." "The plain fact is that the planet doesn't need more successful people," she says. "The planet desperately needs more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers, and lovers of every kind. It needs people who live well in their places. It needs people of moral courage willing to join the fight to make the world habitable and humane."⁸ They are best motivated by wonder.

So let's imagine how we might increase our capacity for awe and wonder to nurture the courage we need to become better stewards of God's good earth.

⁸ Jennifer Ayers, *Inhabitation: Ecological Religious Education*, p. 49.

In the summer of 2020, during the pandemic lockdown, a group of psychologists concerned for the mental health toll the isolation was taking, launched a study to examine coping practices. They interviewed people, from their 60's to 80's, after they had taken a walk, and asked them what they had paid attention to during their walk. One of the things they found was that people have to be prompted to pay attention to the world around them. Most headed out the door to exercise their bodies and clear their heads but stayed absorbed in their thoughts and emotions. So over the course of the study, they gave one set of walkers cameras and asked them to pay attention to the natural world around them.

Then they began to see the flowering trees, the bird carrying another twig to its nest, the bright green fern pushing up from the earth beside the path slowly unfurling. The walkers who were encouraged to pay attention to awe and wonder took selfies with their cameras, making sure they were small in the shot and the natural world took up most of the room in the pictures. And, over time, those who consciously watched for small wonders in the world around them were shown to have less emotional stress and lower levels of body-wide inflammation.⁹

It just takes practice to be absorbed in awe and wonder, and the result is some small healing of creation. Helen Keller, who lost her sight and hearing at nineteen months old, wrote that she had a friend who had noticed nothing exceptional during a walk in the woods. "I wondered how it was possible," Helen said, "to walk for an hour through the woods and see nothing of note. I who cannot see find hundreds of things: The delicate symmetry of a leaf, the smooth skin of a silver birch, the rough, shaggy bark of a pine. I who am blind can give one hint to those who see: use your eyes as if tomorrow you will have been stricken blind. Hear the music of voices, the song of a bird, the mighty strains of an orchestra as if you would be stricken deaf tomorrow. Smell the perfume of flowers, taste with relish each morsel, as if tomorrow you could never taste or smell again. Make the most of every

⁹ Gretchen Reynolds, "An Awe Walk Might Do Wonders for your Well-Being." *The New York Times*, 10/1/20.

sense. Glory in all the facets and pleasures and beauty which the world reveals to you.”¹⁰

That, my friends, is what it means to be encouraged to care for creation by awe and wonder. In the cosmos, we may groan with creation, but never without hope. Because made a little lower than God, we live in awe and wonder which inspires our own good care for God’s good earth. AMEN.

¹⁰ Helen Keller, New York Times, 4/12/92, quoted in *The Living Pulpit: Earth*, vol 2, no. 2.