



Day 6: Heal the Land...

Psalm 104:27–31

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. ³⁰ When you send forth your spirit, 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—

God, the chef

The context of today's particular text is a Psalm in which God the Creator is celebrating the joys of creation. On a closer reading of verses 27–31, we find God described as the supreme chef preparing food for all of God's creatures. All of creation is portrayed as "waiting" or "hoping" for food from God the chef. Even the lion cubs wait for their food from God (verse 21).

God, in turn, provides food "in due season." The significance of this truth is that the earth is an ecosystem, a delicately balanced pattern of forces that provide food for every species in every place on earth when needed. "In due season" is a biblical way of describing the ecosystem that God has created for all life on planet earth. Disrupting this system with pesticides or other forces may mean that food supplies are not available "in due season."

Discuss some examples of how the ecosystem is disrupted, and how this text empowers us to address this.

God's face

Verse 28 declares that God's creatures are terrified if God's face is hidden. Does this simply mean that if God, sitting on some celestial throne above, looks the other way, people panic?

What is meant by the face of God? In some contexts, this can refer to the physical face of a person. In other places it refers to the presence of God extending God's grace and peace (as in the benediction of Num 6:24–26). In this Psalm, God's face is the life-giving presence of God that fills creation. Without

If God's presence is behind all of creation, what are we doing when we pollute creation? What is the implication of destroying species or removing vast rainforests? What happens when we burn the "masks of God" with nuclear explosions or acid rain?

God's "presence" there would be no living creation. God is not located far away but in, with and under creation.

Here "face" is parallel to "glory." In verse 31, the Psalmist prays that God's glory—God's face—would never disappear. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, God's glory is the visible presence of God. This visible presence appeared as a fire cloud on top of Mount Sinai (Ex 24:15–16), filled the tabernacle in the wilderness (Ex 40:34), and later filled the temple of Solomon (1 Kings 8:11). Especially important for understanding our text is the cry of the seraphim in Isaiah 6:3: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." It is not only the temple, but planet earth that is filled with God's glory or presence.

Luther's understanding of creation is similar. He speaks of the various parts of creation being masks of God (*larvae Dei*). God's face, God's presence, is not high in heaven, but behind all creation, filling earth—if we but have the eyes of faith to see God there.

God, the healer

In this Psalm, God also celebrates new life. According to verse 29, when God removes God's breath, creatures die. If, however, God "sends forth" God's breath—like a personal messenger—creation continues here and now.

The key Hebrew term in verses 29–30 is *ruach*, a word which can be translated as wind, spirit or breath. In verses 3 and 4, this term clearly refers to the winds that blow across the land. In Genesis 6:17, the term refers to the breath or spirit of God that gives life to all creatures (*cf.* Gen 6:3). A significant feature of verse 30 is that *ruach* refers not only to the life breath that brings new life to living creatures, but to the fact that God's Spirit "renews the face of the ground." God revives more than humans!

The “face of the ground” is an expression found in the early chapters of Genesis. From the study of Genesis 2 recall that ground is *adamah*, the stuff from which all living creatures are made including humans—*adam*. When God sends the flood it blots out all life from the “face of the ground”—that is, from the entire surface of earth.

When God, in this Psalm, “makes new” the face of the ground, it means that God heals what is broken, wounded or battered anywhere on earth. This is a portrait not only of God as a personal creator breathing life into each one of us, but of God the healer, present in creation, continually restoring what has been broken. Thus, God works through creation to renew and restore—to heal—the face of earth.

God and earth

In Western thought, people have tended to view the earth, with its rocks, seas and sands, as inanimate. Humans are living subjects while earth is a lifeless object. Many ecologists have begun to challenge this view. Here, earth is a living thing, a subject that can be healed.

Reading this Psalm from an African perspective, Abotchie Ntneh writes,

Thus it is clear that although everything good comes to humans from God, it is through earth that they are made possible. Our origin, sustenance and ultimate exit depend on Mother Earth.¹

In verse 32, the Psalmist says that earth trembles before God. Earth is called upon to sing to God (Ps 96:1). Earth also celebrates with the Creator. If earth is more than mute mountains and lifeless rocks,

then when God renews the face of the ground, God is healing a living entity. Whether we call this living reality Mother Earth, as Ntneh has done, may be a matter for discussion. But, we cannot avoid the fact that many of us have become so alienated from earth that we no longer recognize the living source of our being.

What is our human responsibility toward the very creation in which God is present and through which God breathes?

For discussion

Does Psalm 104 support the idea that we should have liturgies in which we participate in healing earth?

One side may argue that Lutheran worship is ultimately about expressing our personal relationship of faith in Christ and receiving the blessings that flow from God’s gifts of Word and sacrament. We should give thanks for the gifts of creation, but we are not responsible for healing creation. Heaven is our home, so why worry about earth?

The other side would argue, based on Psalm 104, that we should join with God, the Creator, in celebrating with creation (*cf.* Ps 148). We participate with God in helping to heal creation. Celebrating with creation is part of the healing process. Confessing our crimes against creation is necessary if we are to have peace with God. If we are to work with the Spirit in healing our personal lives, surely we ought to be working with that same Spirit in healing the earth from which we were born. We are children of the earth who have been given new life.

Norman Habel

Do you agree with Ntneh? Is the ground or earth like a mother with whom God works to bring forth life? If so, is earth alive?

References

Miller, Patrick D. Jr.
(2000), "The Poetry of
Creation: Psalm 104," in
William Brown and Dean
Mc Bride (eds.), *God
Who Creates: Essays in
Honor of W. Sibley
Towner* (Grand Rapids,
MI: William B.
Eerdmans), pp. 87–103.

Ntrel, Abotchie (2001),
"The Survival of Earth: An
African Reading of Psalm
104," in Norman Habel
(ed.), *The Earth Story in
the Psalms and Prophets.
Earth Bible Volume 4*
(Sheffield: Sheffield
Academic Press), pp.
98–108.

Walker-Jones Arthur
(2001), "Psalm 104: The
Celebration of the
Vanua," in Norman Habel
(ed.), *The Earth Story in
the Psalms and Prophets.
Earth Bible Volume 4*
(Sheffield: Sheffield
Academic Press), pp.
84–97.

Notes

¹ Abotchie Ntrel, "The Survival of Earth: An African Reading of Psalm 104," in Norman Habel (ed.), *The Earth Story in the Psalms and Prophets. Earth Bible Volume 4* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), p. 107.



Romans 8:18–25

¹⁸I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 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.

If you were to fly to Winnipeg, what would the landscape look like? Would you be struck by the beauty of the earth, its blue oceans, its green forests, its mighty glaciers, rivers and fertile plains? Or would you also see wounds on the land—uncontrolled burning or logging, clear-cutting of huge swaths of forest, flooding, development and urban sprawl, or other evidence of human-caused destruction of nature? Would you notice signs that the land needs healing?

This passage from Romans 8 proclaims cosmic hope and healing. We sometimes tend to individualize salvation in reading Paul's letters. But Romans 8 serves as a striking corrective to such anthropomorphism, linking the salvation of humans to the healing of the land and the redemption of the entire created world.

A *kairos* moment for creation?

The word *kairos* (“time”) in verse 18 provides an important key to this passage. We live at a turning of the ages, Paul says. The sufferings of this present time or *kairos* are nothing compared to the amazing future glory that is about to be revealed. Romans 8 is rich in eschatological language, proclaiming a deep longing for our future. Three times Paul uses the word “wait” (*apekdechomai*, in verses 19, 23, 25); three times he speaks of the “groans” experienced in awaiting our new future (in verses 22, 23, 26).

The language of Romans 8 is ecological as well as eschatological. Not only humanity but the whole creation waits for its redemption, the future that has already been inaugurated in Christ. The non-human created world “waits” with the same “eager expectation” as humans (Rom 8:19); see Philippians 1:20 for Paul’s description of his own “eager expectation” (*apokaradokia*). Together with us, the rest of creation awaits its liberation from enslavement into glorious freedom.

Creation subjected to futility

In Romans 1–3, Paul argued that all people have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). Rom 8:20 explains that nature, too, is fallen. Creation itself has been “subjected to futility” or to vanity, not as the result of

its own will, but by the one who subjected it.

Who has subjected creation, and why? Verse 20 is somewhat ambiguous. Clearly the subjection of nature in Romans 8:20 alludes to Genesis 1–3, the story of the creation and the fall. But is Satan the one who subjected nature? Or was it God? Or is Romans 8:20 referring to Adam and all sinful humans who have abused “dominion” over nature (Gen 1:28) and exploited the created world? Why does Paul say that creation has been subjected “in hope”? To which portion of Genesis 1–3 is Paul referring?

“The one who subjected” creation probably refers first of all to God, because only God could be said to have subjected creation “in hope” (a difficult passage to translate).¹ The reference then is Genesis 3:15–17, God’s curse against the ground as part of the curse against Adam and Eve.

But Paul may also be arguing in Romans 8:20 that creation is subject to the effects of humanity’s sin. Human-caused exploitation, of great concern to us today, was also critiqued by some in the ancient world. The first-century historian Tacitus, for example, decried Rome’s subjection of conquered territories as exploitive of both land and people:

Our lands and harvests [are taken] in requisition of grain; life and limb themselves are used up in leveling marsh and forest ... Britain pays a daily price for her own enslavement, and feeds the slavers.²

Such a critique of Roman imperial exploitation might be part of what Paul means in Romans 8:21 by creation’s bondage to “futility” or “vanity.”³

Creation’s solidarity: groaning, waiting, hoping

Creation is “groaning together” with us. Paul uses the same words (*syn-stenazo*,

What are the sufferings of our *kairos* today? What does Paul’s sense of *kairos* mean for churches today? In South Africa in the 1980s, for example, Christians wrote a “*Kairos* Document” underscoring the urgency of ending apartheid. Is there a need for such a *kairos* response to global ecological suffering today? How is the healing of the land a theological problem? (see the Village Group chapter on “Healing Creation”)

stenazo) for creation's groaning in verse 22 as for humans' inward groaning in verse 23. Our groans and creation's echo one another, as together we await what is to be revealed.

The repeated use of the prefix "with" (*syn*) throughout Romans 8 develops a strong sense of solidarity, expanding Christ's suffering (Rom 8:17) to include not only human suffering but the suffering of the whole cosmos. All of us—animals, birds, ozone—are "suffering with" Christ (*syn-pascho*, from which the word "sympathize" comes). All creation "travails together" in cosmic childbirth. The image of the travail of childbirth reflects traditional Jewish imagery of the eschaton or end-times, here developed in a creation-oriented direction.

What we await are the adoption and redemption of our bodies (verse 23, echoing verse 15). Creation, too, longs for the birth of those who will participate with God in its restoration, overcoming the legacy of corruption in the curse of the ground (Gen 3).

God's Spirit

God's Spirit undergirds this entire chapter. Creation's longings and our longings for redemption are set within the larger context of Paul's discussion of life in the Spirit, the theme of Romans 8:1–11.⁴ Poised between the "already" and "not yet" of redemption, we have already received a "spirit" of

How is creation's bondage or subjection manifested today in your own land and political situation? Are there connections between the suffering of creation described in Romans 8 and what is occurring in your land?

adoption (Rom 8:15, 23) and the first fruits of the Spirit (Rom 8:23).

Strikingly, the intercession of God's Spirit on our behalf is described in Romans 8:26 using the same word that was used for creation's and our groaning (Rom 8:22,23). Interceding for us with "groans" (*stenagmois*) too deep for words, God's Spirit echoes and takes up our own groaning and the groaning of the whole world. Through the work of God's Spirit, we hope for healing for the whole creation.

Cosmic hope

Paul concludes the passage with a wonderful proclamation of "hope" (Rom 8:24–25), a word repeated five times. Hope and eager expectation for the cosmos go together. We cannot yet see the results of our hope. But, if we hope for what we do not see we await it with bold "endurance" (*hypomone*, sometimes translated as "patience").

Barbara Rossing

What are your deepest hopes for the healing of the land? How does the hope raised up in this passage sustain you for the long haul?

Notes

¹ See discussion in Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1993), p. 508.

² Tacitus *Agricola* 30; quoted by Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 52.

³ So Robert Jewett, *Romans* (Hermeneia Commentary; Fortress Press, forthcoming); personal communication.

⁴ As Ernst Käsemann notes about the prominence of the spirit in Romans 8:26–27, “the boldness of the train of thought in Romans 8 is constantly surprising.” See Ernst Käseman, “The Cry for Liberty in the Worship of the Church,” in *Perspectives on Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), p. 122.