

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

Who's Earth Is It?

Psalm 24

Earth Day Weekend

This psalm speaks of well-ordered life in a well-ordered universe, the kind of universe where God is in charge. It sings to those of us for whom life is good and safe and orderly. It invites us to see the good life as a blessing from God. Life lived in accord with God's laws is the pathway to God's blessing. In short, the psalm claims that God owns the earth and blesses people who are good.

If we were writing the psalm today, we might say it differently: God set the earth in its orbit around the sun, and spun it like a top to make 24 hours in a day. Nevertheless, the meaning is the same. God created the earth. The earth and everything in it belong to God. The very order of nature supports our claim. The laws of physics demonstrate the great wisdom of the One who made all this happen. God created order in nature and God intends order in our lives. The earth is the Lord's. The earth is orderly. People ought to be orderly. God blesses those who live orderly lives.

But suppose the earth weren't the Lord's. What then? What if the earth weren't orderly? What would life be like in a disorderly world? Suppose there were no dependability to nature, no predictability to hours, days or seasons? Imagine one week of 12-hour-days followed by a week of 36-hour-days. Consider what it would be like to sunbathe one week and build a snowman the next. Just think, today might be Wednesday instead of Sunday! How could we schedule worship without time and calendar? Picture a world where winds regularly whipped along at 100 to 150 miles per hour, and where calm days were the exception. Or worse, think about a world where friction worked sometimes, but not others. What if you planted corn and bananas grew from that seed? Silly, I know. And yet, without God's provision of order, the world could've been that way.

Of course, if the world were that way, life as we know it couldn't have evolved nor could it exist. Children might enjoy a few days of friction free existence, slip-sliding from place to place. The rest of us would be in big trouble. True, with modern air transportation we can build snowmen one day and sunbathe the next. Of course that's not a product of disorder, but a testimony to order. We can book a vacation in Alaska next summer, we can pick a start-date and an end-date precisely because of the order God has created. Order then is good. It reflects God's intent for the world and for our lives. If the world were disorderly we'd have great difficulty. But the earth is the Lord's. God established it and ordered its existence.

We dare not leave it at that. You and I all know that life doesn't follow such an orderly scheme. People who live good lives sometimes suffer terrible pain and abuse. Those who live disorderly lives sometimes seem more blessed than the rest of us. Some people treat the earth as holy. They recycle, plant trees, and seek in every way to live in accord with God's creation. But others abuse the earth, treating it as "a wholly-owned subsidiary of our economy."¹ They rip the minerals out

¹ Gary Hirshberg as quoted by Anne Underwood, 10 Fixes for the Planet, *Newsweek*, April 14, 2008, 56.

of the ground and leave giant scars where beautiful hills and mountains used to be. They cut down forests without regard for the animals they displace. They pollute the rivers and the oceans, endangering not only the fish and the aquatic plants, but all of us, our very life on earth.

Unfortunately, we are all guilty, even those who are most careful about the way they live. Indeed, our lives are so interconnected that we cannot avoid being drawn into the web of problems. You cannot drive a car without using oil and fuel. You cannot fertilize your lawn without risking polluting runoff into our lakes and rivers. You cannot buy groceries at the supermarket without being part of a global distribution network. Need I say more? None of us is innocent, which does not mean taking care of the earth is not important. Hear me out. We do need to pay attention to the impact of our lifestyle on our environment. It's just that we're all in this together.

So who is welcome in God's temple? The rich and famous? Great athletes who do marvelous things? Successful business people who make it to the top? Yes, they're welcome. But not on the basis of their success or wealth or physical prowess. They're welcome on the same basis as everybody else. Anybody who sincerely seeks to do good is welcome here. The poor who scratch out existence daily, the athlete who never made it to the winners circle, the business person who finds his or her niche and fills it. Who can come into the presence of God? Anybody who does what is right. Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who don't lift up their souls to what is false. Who can stand in God's holy place? Those who remain true to what God says is right.

Of course none of us fits that description. None of us can truthfully claim to have clean hands. Not that we haven't tried. None of us can honestly say we have pure hearts. That's the trouble with the psalm. Nobody is that good. Nobody can honestly make those claims. Neither you nor I, nor anyone of us have lived truly just and right lives. Not on our own. And if our story ended there, we'd have no hope. Therein lies the Christian gospel. Christ alone qualifies as clean and pure and righteous. Christ alone is able to stand in the holy place. Which is why we place so much emphasis on being in Christ.

Christ alone is worthy of the name, King of Glory. In Christ, we stand in a holy place. But not on our own merit. As a member of Christ's body we walk through the open doors. But not on the basis of our goodness. In Christ, we have clean hands because his hands are clean. In Christ we have a pure heart because his heart is pure. We are engrafted into Christ's body through baptism. We feed on Christ's spiritual food. We stand in the holy place not on our own merit, but as a part of Christ's body. Not on our own, but as part of him who lived and died and rose again.

Christ has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. Christ lived the life that is pure and holy and good. Christ is the blessed one. In Christ we live and move and have our being. As one with Christ, we too are blessed. Then, too, in Christ we are called to live as Christ lived, at one with God and with creation. As such we know who owns the earth. Thus we are free not "to treat the earth as ours to destroy as we choose. The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it. God has claimed us in Christ, that we might call others to a new and right relationship with Christ. What remains is the telling of that good news, that others might join us in the way of Christ, the way of clean hands and pure hearts, the way of blessing in Christ, the way of celebrating that Christ is Lord of the earth.