

SERMON: “To Whom *Does It All Belong?*”

August 9, 2009

Prayer for Illumination: Almighty God, from whom all things come and to whom all things belong, grant us grace to receive your word with eager hearts, that through the reading and preaching of your word, we may worship you rightly, with our lips and our lives; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 24

New Testament Lesson: Matthew 5:1-12

“The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” With that vast, sweeping affirmation the psalmist sets before us the dominion of the Lord God over all the world, in all the earth. Psalm 24 serves as a call to worship. It is an invitation to order our lives in accord with the way things will be when the “Lord of hosts, the King of glory” comes to be with and for his people forever.

In our worship Psalm 24 is used most often during the season of Advent. That’s why we chose as our opening hymn this morning an Advent hymn, “Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates.” But Psalm 24 is not just appropriate during Advent. It has a vital word to speak to the People of God in every season.

The psalm begins with a sweeping affirmation of faith that resounds throughout scripture, **“The earth is the Lord’s!” THE EARTH!** Not just *some parts* of it-- not just *some people* in it, however few or many, but the whole **“earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it.”**

That basic conviction of biblical faith has huge implications for how we live, how we worship, and for what we hope. Those three things are always tightly woven together. **How we live** is shaped profoundly by **who or what we worship,**

and who or what we **worship** in large measure determines the **hope** that guides and inspires our lives. With all of biblical faith, the psalmist insists that life is shaped most profoundly by the One whom we worship and by the hope that guides and inspires our lives.

But hope is in rather short supply these days. It is hard to be hopeful when we are getting hammered every day by a relentless barrage of bad news and by a long litany of things to be concerned about.

But “bad news” is nothing new to the People of God. As we have seen this summer, the psalmists do not sugar-coat reality. They face head-on the most threatening challenges to faith in a living, personal God, “whose ways are not our ways and whose thoughts are not our thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:9b)

It is worth remembering that even though the various psalms were written over a long period of time, in many different situations, by a number of different authors, the collection of the 150 psalms in our Bible was largely put together during the time of Israel’s exile in Babylon—a time in which Israel faced the most hopeless situation in its national life.

I find it helpful to remember that the psalms we read today were used in worship not just by comfortable, essentially well-off people like us, but by people whose whole lives and whose hopes had been dashed by the burning of the First Temple and their deportation into exile in Babylon. That is the “back-story” behind the psalms. Each time you read a psalm, think for a moment of those who have read and prayed it before you—as they were bringing the Ark of the

Covenant into the city of Jerusalem, or weeping beside the streams in Babylon, or on the way to the gas chambers of Auschwitz. Heard in their wider historical context the psalms have tremendous power to reflect the full range of human experience and to address full depths of reality, however painful it may be.

Across the centuries the psalms have been a source of profound hope and comfort to the People of God in every situation of life. They have been prayed in times of deep despair, when God seems far off and silent and heedless of our prayers. **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Psalm 22.** And in times of serene joy, when the Lord leads us **“beside still waters,”** and it seems that **“goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives.” Psalm 23.** And always, in good times and bad, the People of God have been called to remember that **“the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” Psalm 24.**

“The earth is the Lord’s,” not merely because he *claims* it as his own, but because he *created* it. The earth is the Lord’s,” says the psalmist, **“for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.”** The world and all that is in it exist because the Lord God almighty chose to give reality to something outside his own triune life. By his word of power in overflowing love God called into being a world soon to be filled with “all creatures great and small”—a world into which in the fullness of time the Creator of the heavens and the earth would freely come to share our life in person. **“The earth is the Lord’s.”**

As we said, that simple affirmation has huge implications. It affirms that all that is comes *from* God and belongs ultimately *to* God. The whole concept of

Christian stewardship is rooted in that basic conviction. If all things come from God and belong to God, then how we use all things--how we preserve and protect God's creation, how we use and invest the time and talents and treasure God has entrusted to us--is far more than just a matter of politics or economics. It is essentially a matter of faith! It reveals perhaps more clearly than anything else who or what we truly worship, which is why the simple affirmation that **“the earth is the Lord’s”** can be so disturbing. If we really believed it, and if we acted upon it, we wouldn't have to encourage people to tithe. We might have to insist that they keep enough for themselves.

The insistence that **“the earth is the Lord’s,”** not only plays a positive role as an affirmation of God's dominion over all the world and “all people that on earth do dwell,” as we Presbyterians like to sing. It also declares a resounding NO! to other things that seek to lay claim to our ultimate allegiance, our worship.

If “the earth is the **LORD’S**” then it is not yours or mine. It is not America's--or Exxon's--or Wall Street's--it is not humanity-in-general's... If “the earth is the **LORD’S**,” then no nation or group of nations can claim for themselves alone the resources of the Lord's earth. The rich bounty of God's creation, **“which he has founded on the seas, and established on the rivers,”** (interesting ecological statement) is not for the sake of some. It is for the well-being of all--**“the world, and those who live in it.”**

That is easy enough to say from behind this pulpit. But we have never come anywhere close to dealing with the full implications of the deceptively simple affirmation that **“the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it.”** Under the

conditions of our sinful humanity, this side of the Kingdom of God, perhaps we never will—at least not without a change of heart every bit as miraculous as a resurrection from the dead.

It seems that our “default setting” as human beings is to treat everything we can get our hands on as mine or ours. Not long after a child learns to say “Mama” and “Dada,” the child learns that fateful word, “**MINE!**” Especially if there is another child in the family. A beloved professor at Davidson, Dean Frontis Johnston, was fond of saying that “our Scotch-Irish ancestors believed in keeping the Law of God...and everything else they could get their hands on.” So do we all. Almost from birth on we worship the unholy trinity is ME, MY, and MINE!!!

But over against our persistent, deeply-engrained self-centeredness scripture insists that “**the earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it.**” My claim to have and to hold what I think is mine runs head on into the biblical insistence that all that I have and hold is a gift from God, entrusted to me, to be used responsibly for the well-being of “**the world and those who live in it,**” for “**the earth is the Lord’s.**”

Building on that basic affirmation, the psalmist quickly moves to what it means in terms of the **right worship** of the Creator and Lord of all. In the light of God’s sovereign Lordship over all things and all people, the psalmist asks, “**Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who can stand in his holy place?**” Who has any right to enter the Temple of the Lord, “the holy habitation of the Most High?”

I suspect that's a question some of us have never asked. You may not come to worship on a given Sunday morning because you have had a bad week and are tired, or because you have a tee time at 10:00 at the club, or because your kids have a soccer match or a swim meet or a tennis tournament out of town. There are lots of reasons why you may not come to church on a Sunday morning. But how often have you stayed away from worship because you felt unworthy to stand in the presence of the Lord God Almighty? I know a few people who feel that way, but I know far more who have never thought to ask, **“Who can stand in God’s holy place?”** unless they assume the answer refers to someone else who has no right to be here.

“Who shall stand in God’s holy place?” asks the psalmist. **“Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully.”** There is always a moral dimension to right worship. Worship that is divorced from God’s concern for justice for the poor and right relationships with neighbor and nature, is rejected by God. The prophet Amos thunders in the name of the Lord, **“I hate, I despise your feasts and I take not delight in your solemn assemblies (for worship!)...but let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream!”** (Amos 5:21-24) And Jesus declares, **“Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall inherit the kingdom of God, but those who *do* the will of my Father in heaven.”** (Matt. 7:21)

I am not saying at all that only those who are morally blameless may come before God in worship. If that were the case, it would empty our sanctuaries quicker than a flu pandemic. Jesus laid that excuse to rest once and for all when he

said, **“I have not come to call the righteous but sinners.”** None of us has completely clean hands and pure hearts. We have all “lifted up our souls” to what is false. We have “pledged our allegiance” to political and economic idols that do not embody the compassion of the Kingdom of Christ. We have used our religion to make ourselves look good instead of reflecting the glory of God alone. In terms of our own righteousness, none of us has the right to stand before the Lord God.

But thank God, in the most literal sense, THANK GOD! that, as we sang this morning:

There’s a wideness in God’s mercy, like the wideness of the sea.

There’s a kindness in God’s justice which is more than liberty.

There is no place where earth’s sorrows are more felt than up in heaven;

There is no place where earth’s failings have such kindly judgment given.¹

Those who stand in God’s presence are not those who are convinced of their own superior righteousness, but those who truly and sincerely seek to live under God’s rule of grace. Who are they? And how are they to be recognized in the world? You heard the answer in our Gospel reading this morning. In words that contain echoes of Psalm 24, in his “Sermon on the Mount,” Jesus says,

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,

for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

¹ *Presbyterian Hymnal* No. 298, “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy,” Frederick Faber, 1854

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you
and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven,
for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Those who have “clean hands and pure hearts” are not those who trust in their own righteousness, but those who reach out sin-stained hands and empty hearts to receive the grace of Christ that has mercy to forgive our sin and power to cleanse and redeem our lives.

“They will receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from the God of their salvation. Such is the company of those who seek him, those who seek the face of the God of Jacob.”

So **“Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the king of glory may come in.”** Throw open the doors of our sanctuaries-- open wide your hearts and hands--to welcome the reign of God that has come near in Jesus Christ and that is coming in all its fullness when he reigns as “King of glory” in all the earth.

What all this comes down to is a decision—a decision that is not made once and for all, but one that is made every day, every moment. It is a decision as to whom you belong in body and soul, and to whom you are responsible in life and

death. Who “rules the world with truth and grace and makes the nations prove, the glories of his righteousness and wonders of his love?”

In his name, I call you to live your life under God’s rule of grace and truth. Because **“the earth is the Lord’s and ALL that is in it,”** then every aspect of our lives matters. Every relationship is significant. Every act of kindness and compassion is an expression of worship. The word of the psalmist and the gospel of Jesus call us to repent, to turn around, to reorient our lives, beginning here and now, so as to live more fully in accord with the gracious reign of **“the Lord of hosts, the King of glory,”** to whom be all glory and majesty, all dominion and power, now and forever more. Amen.