

“Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow”
Based on Psalm 104
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In many churches, the singing of the Doxology is a weekly occurrence, usually following the collection of the offering. The words to the Doxology, “Praise God from whom all blessings flow; Praise Him all creatures here below; praise him above ye heavenly host; Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost,” have nothing to do with cash, but given its placement in the service, unless one is theologically careful, this practice can be misconstrued as thanking God for the operating capital supplied by the congregation, rather than as an overall expression of gratitude for the provision of life and all that is necessary to sustain it. It would be better if the Doxology were sung both at the beginning of the service and at its end, in a way similar to the great doxological Psalm 104 which begins and ends with a glorifying “Bless the Lord, O my soul.”

The word doxology comes from the Greek *doxa*, meaning glory, and although the word glory does not appear until the 31st verse of Psalm 104, it is evident that the glory of God is the subject matter of the whole of the Psalm. Rather than simply saying that God is glorious and leaving it at that, the Psalm responds to God’s glory by describing what makes God so glorious: God’s place and role in the heavens, where “you make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers,” God’s creative capacity, when “You set the earth on its

foundations, so that it shall never be shaken,” and God’s provision for all that wonderful creation, “the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work,” and “all creation looks to you to give them their food in due season...when you open your hands, they are filled with good things.” The Psalmist is keenly aware that life is fragile even with God’s provision, and so his thankfulness overflows in this song of praise which culminates with, “May the glory of the Lord endure forever; may the Lord rejoice in his works...I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being.”

Psalm 104 is a long psalm, as you have heard, and to parse every line would keep us up well after our bedtimes. So tonight I want to focus on two interrelated parts, namely the conclusion I just read, but also the 12 verses which give such marvelous praise to God for the wonderful gift of water. In gratitude for life, the Psalmist is right to extol God’s gift of water. In a sequence of lovely poetry and images, the Psalmist recalls the great deep, first the waters of creation and then the waters of the great flood recorded in Genesis chapter 7. These waters move at God’s command, and are controlled at God’s command: Beginning in verse 6, “You cover the earth with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains. At your rebuke they flee; at the sound of thunder they take to flight. They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys to the place where you appointed for them. You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth.” At the end of the flood which Noah’s faithfulness made

famous, order is restored from chaos, land returns to balance with water, and limits are imposed to make good God's promise to never destroy the earth in a flood. We see in these verses not only God's power, but the amazing power of water itself to shape, threaten, and destroy. It is only the greater power of God that can harness this impressive force of nature.

Once under God's control, water is useful for sustaining and nourishing God's creation, something the Psalmist takes note of beginning in verse 10: "You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animal. By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation, the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work, you cause the grass to grow for the cattle," and, in some of the most beautiful poetry in the Bible, "plants for people to use to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart." Isn't that lovely? All of life, and indeed the joy of life, is made possible because of God's gift of water. Without it, the grass withers and the flower fades. Without it, the animals and birds have no homes. Without it, human beings suffer and die, there is want, there is no shalom. It is no accident that the Garden of Eden was the source of the waters of four rivers, so important is water to all the God has made.

Scientifically and technologically, we know almost all there is to know about water, how much the human body needs, how much of our planet's water is drinkable (1% by the way), how to divert it for uses like irrigation and

hydroelectric generation, how to bottle it and sell it, even how to grow vegetables in it without the need for soil. We know how to pump it, pipe it, pollute it, clean it, regulate it, and charge for it. The Psalmist knew none of that, only that without fresh, clean water, without the regular seasons of rain, he, his family, his livestock, his community would die, or at least be forced to move everything in search of it. Where there is no water, there is no life. It is no accident that the greatest civilizations and cities of the world were and are located where there is enough water to support them. And all because of God's great gift of water.

The church has a vested interest in water, or at least it should. From its earliest days, water has been a key symbolic element of life in Jesus Christ. That's because water is used in the sacrament of baptism, an act which expresses outwardly what God has done inwardly in the life of the person being baptised, namely that he or she has found life in a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. Various traditions do it in different ways – some sprinkle, some pour, some immerse – but they all use water. In many traditions, candidates for baptism wear white to indicate being cleansed from their sins, part of the symbolism of the sacrament. When I say the church has a vested interest in water, what I mean is that it has an interest in clean water, because given the symbolism of life, and the symbolism of purity, can you just imagine baptising a child in anything else but pure water, in water you wouldn't or couldn't drink, say, like water like this? (Pollute water in font here.)

The statistics on the connection between water quality and health standards are chilling. 40% of the world's population has no access to safe drinking water. 80% of disease in two-thirds of the world is related to poor drinking water and sanitation. More than 5 million people die each year from water related diseases and most of them are children. By the year 2050, it is estimated that 1.7 billion people will be victims of 'hydrological poverty' caused primarily by the diversion of water for agriculture and industry. It takes very, very small quantities of common contaminants to foul water enough to make it undrinkable. Just a few drops of motor oil, paint, bleach, and other common household chemicals can contaminate groundwater supplies. Industrial waste fills rivers and oceans. Costa Rica, a relatively advanced developing country is still only in the planning stages for a wastewater treatment facility and comprehensive sewer system. Especially in the rainy season when we are inundated with so much water, it is hard to imagine there is a problem with anything but flooding, but in fact we have an ecological bad dream quickly turning into an ecological nightmare, one that quite literally and seriously threatens the life of the planet in all the categories about which the Psalmist so eloquently spoke.

Now, you can get an education in water quality and supply anywhere. You don't need to come to church for that. They teach it in the schools, in public service announcements on TV, on billboards, in the news, and many other places. But despite all that education, and all the appeals to good will and to the human

instinct for self-preservation, the availability of clean water is more threatened than ever. Drinking water is quickly becoming a profitmaking commodity, rather than a basic human right, as privatization of drinking water supplies, especially in Latin America, puts this valuable, God-given resource in the hands of persons and corporations who do not approach the provision and distribution of water from God's perspective, as described by the Psalmist, but from an all-too human perspective. This is not to suggest that public water utilities have a stellar record in providing a perfect water supply, but that at least they are supposed to have the common good in mind as they do what they do, rather than the bottom line. Their starting point is at least more in line with God's, and, if managed correctly, can fulfill their charge to provide safe, clean drinking water.

And so besides having clean water in which to baptize our babies, why should the church care about water, why should we talk about water quality in worship? Let me suggest that at least one of the reasons is contained in Psalm 104, not in the collection of verses about water itself, but in the more doxological part beginning in verse 31: "May the glory of the Lord endure forever; may the Lord rejoice in his works." "May the glory of the Lord endure forever; may the Lord rejoice in his works." The Psalmist has just described in great detail the works of God, and attributed many of them to water. And now, like a sculptor or painter who has finished a great work of art, God is entitled to enjoy what God has created, to bask in the glow of a job well done, a creation described in Genesis 1,

not just as “good,” but as “very good.” The Psalmist’s doxology, his “Praise God from whom all blessings flow,” includes wanting for God what God wants for us: to be able to enjoy creation in all its fullness and fruitfulness. The Psalmist seems to know intuitively, even without an ecological consciousness, that the human tendency to destroy more quickly than it can create may threaten God’s ability to simply rejoice in what God has created. I sincerely doubt the Psalmist would recognize an interpretation of his poem as a call for eco-justice, but I am sure he would recognize a call to honor God’s great gifts by taking care of them to the best of our ability, as the stewards we are called to be when God left us with that responsibility. If we truly value what God has done for us, in creation, in Jesus Christ, must we not take seriously the responsibility of doing whatever we can to ensure God can enjoy his works forever?

Let me offer you this image, admittedly imperfect, but one I hope will be helpful. Imagine you have decided to give someone a gift, and you have labored over it with all your creative capacity. You have thought about the gift, planned for it, collected everything you need, put it together, and carefully wrapped it. You are proud of it. Then you give it to the recipient, someone you love with all your heart. They unwrap it, marvel at it for a moment, and then hurl it to the ground, smashing it into a million pieces. They have neither honored your gift, celebrated it, nor returned it to you that you may enjoy it even if they didn’t want it. They have simply taken for granted the gift freely given with no thought of gratitude. I

want to suggest to you that each time we participate in the violation of any part of God's creation, any human being, any fish of the sea, bird of the air, beast of the earth, anything that creeps on the earth, and that has the breath of life, any green plant for food and tree with seed in its fruit, we hurl to the ground God's gifts, and we make it just that much harder for God to rejoice in his works, for God's glory to endure forever. Please notice I did not say every time we use part of God's creation, but everytime we violate it. God gave us everything, and especially water, "to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart." But there is use and there is abuse, and we are called to be attentive to the difference, to examine our own practices, and those of the people we choose for elected office, and those of the corporations we choose with our wallets.

Jesus Christ was present with God at creation, and though he was begotten, he was not made, and so we do not honor Christ for being part of creation. Instead, we honor Christ because he was God's gift of life, abundant and eternal, in a way parallel to the gift of creation itself. What I want to suggest to you tonight is that simply singing the doxology, or simply offering God praises for the glory of God's gifts of Christ and creation, as important and valuable as they may be, is only part of a fuller expression of our call to be stewards of those gifts. There is an ethical and moral content to doxology, expressed in the posture of service Christ went to pains to explain to his disciples over and over again: "The Son of Man," he said in

our passage from Mark tonight, “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many.”

I mentioned earlier how the abundance of rain in this season helps us to forget about issues of quality and scarcity of water. Our own lives of relative comfort and security make us similarly prone to overlooking other issues of quality and scarcity in God’s creation, especially with respect to people who are outside our regular lines of sight. For our prayer time tonight, I want us to take a good hard look at the things of this world which dim God’s glory, that take the some of the joy out of God’s rejoicing over his works, especially the news of this week from around the world. Jesus’s giving of his life as a ransom for many meant radically immersing himself in God’s creation, and his life, death, and resurrection were the ultimate doxology. When we “Praise God from whom all blessings flow,” by praying the week’s news with our eyes wide open, may our doxology radically immerse us in God’s world that God may rejoice in his works forever. Amen.