

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Praise Book: The Key of Sea”

Dr. Jay Howell

Psalm 148

July 17, 2022

Before we get to our main text for this morning, let me share a word of gratitude not just to be back with you—I was back last Sunday after all too—but to be back in the pulpit. I consider it a blessing after a few weeks out of the pulpit to be kind of chomping at the bit. I’m grateful as well to Buddy Sexton, who as you’ll remember preached for the two Sundays I was out of town, and for Troy Forrester, who joined us from our neighbors at First United Methodist, who was in the pulpit last Sunday.

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And this week, we pick up where we left off in the next psalm, asking what does it mean to praise God, joining in all the voices of creation. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD from the heavens;

praise him in the heights!

Praise him, all his angels;

praise him, all his host!

Praise him, sun and moon;

praise him, all you shining stars!

Praise him, you highest heavens

and you waters above the heavens!

Let them praise the name of the LORD,

for he commanded and they were created.

He established them forever and ever;

he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

Praise the LORD from the earth,

you sea monsters and all deeps,

fire and hail, snow and frost,

stormy wind fulfilling his command!

Mountains and all hills,

fruit trees and all cedars!

Wild animals and all cattle,

creeping things and flying birds!

*Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!
Young men and women alike,
old and young together!*

*Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.
He has raised up a horn for his people,
praise for all his faithful,
for the people of Israel who are close to him.
Praise the LORD! Psalm 148*

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

On Christmas Day last year, a rocket went up to space carrying some remarkable cargo. That cargo ended up continuing a journey even after the rockets that propelled it into space were jettisoned. It continued on away from the earth until it was about a million miles away, that's over four times farther away than the moon. And there, this cargo began its intended purpose, the fruit of which we, the public, have just been blessed to see.

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The images are amazing. Close-ups of stars, galaxies, and nebulae that had never been seen in such detail—or even seen at all. One image that was released featured what looked like hundreds, maybe thousands, of stars and galaxies (galaxies, of course, being millions and billions of stars in and of themselves), and you see it and think, wow what a powerful image of the night sky. Look at all those stars.

That is, until you learn that it wasn't an image of the night sky at all. You see the caption, and you learn that this amazing image of all these hundreds and thousands of stars and galaxies, representing millions and billions of stars were all captured not in an image of the entire night sky, but rather an image covering only a portion of the sky that would be covered up if you took a single grain of sand and held it up at arm's length.

Then you start to think about it and you realize that every grain of sand-sized image that one could hold up to the night sky would potentially represent another grouping of hundreds and thousands more galaxies and millions and billions more stars, and you put all those grains of sand together, and the incomprehensible scale of it all starts to bear down on you at just how vast a place the universe is.

And then you hear the words of the psalm today, "Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars," and you wonder, "How could that be so? How could the sum of all those heavenly bodies be called to proclaim the glory of God?"

Psalm 148 is a psalm of praise, make no mistake. It begins and ends in the same way that all of these final five psalms begin and end: with the words "Praise the Lord!" literally "Hallelujah!" But instead of songs and

instruments, it writes a different kind of symphony, calling the whole of creation itself to offer praise unto its maker.

It starts in heaven itself, with the angels summoned to praise the Lord. Then the Psalm's gaze turns to the celestial bodies, the very stars in the sky praising God. Next the Psalm literally comes down to earth, and some of the primordial forces of sea and wind, fire and hail, mountains and hills, all beckoned to bring praise. Then, living creatures, animals and birds, and finally human beings all are called to praise the name of the Lord!

It's a breathtaking thought, with more than a few echoes of the very first chapter of Scripture, in the Book of Genesis, of the call to praise roughly following a similar order as the seven days of creation. It's breathtaking to think of all of creation joining together in song, in worship to its maker.

The other day, Frances played a song in the car while we were driving around. It's a song that the boys are starting to learn, and it's called "Sing" by the Christian artist Ellie Holcomb. It begins by asking the question, "Who sang the first song? Who hummed the first tune? Was it the wind blowing past the moon? Were the stars making noise as they sparkled at night? Did the sun sing a song as it colored the sky?" And the song goes on through all these different aspects of the natural world: waves and wind, lions and whales, flowers and birds, asking whether they sang the first song.

In this series, we're asking how the Psalms guide us in one of those core practices of the Christian faith, the act of praise, of worship. And the Psalm, starting in the heavens to the farthest corners of the cosmos, all the way to "old and young together," seems to be saying, "You know, it's not just you singing songs in your little pocket of the world; it's everything."

Have you ever thought of the natural world in that way? No doubt at some point in your life you've been taken aback by the beauty of something in nature: a sunset, a mountain, a bird, whatever it might have been. I feel like we've all gotten some of those "Ahhh!" moments, but whatever it was, whenever it happened, did you find yourself thinking, "*That* is singing praise to God. *That* is testifying to something about the Lord"? Well, honestly, maybe so for some, maybe not as readily for others. But clearly part of the message of this psalm is that creation is singing somehow, singing this great big, cosmic symphony. And we're a part of it.

That may be something that's important for us to glean from this psalm: that the act of worship is not a strictly human thing to do. It's not limited or defined by how we on our own might express it. It's not limited or defined by how we might do it as a church. It is a natural thing to do. It is in the very bedrock of creation. It is bigger than us. It's something we take part in. It's something we might be inspired by.

There's in fact an entire branch of theology dedicated to this very topic: it's called "natural theology." And the question it explores is, "What and how can we learn about God through the natural world? What does nature say about God?" Because the answer is clearly not "Nothing." The testimony of this psalm and even just universal human experience affirm that the natural world is saying something.

For example, looking back at the stars and the James Webb Space Telescope, one thing we might glean is the astronomical improbability of life emerging, of the formation of planets out of interstellar chaos and the void, of the formation of water and the right balance of gases in the atmosphere, of just the right levels of gravity, light, and temperature. You could say it's a big, giant cosmic fluke—lucky us, I guess—or that there was some hand in it. That's an example of natural theology.

But then there are trickier questions, like "How much can we learn about God through nature, independent of Scripture or the church?"

If that's getting a bit too theoretical, here's another way to put it: "I feel closer to God out in nature than I do in a church worship service. Is that okay?" Now that's a tough question, and there are legitimate points to be made about it.

Short sidenote here though. The most common context in which I hear that sort of question isn't necessarily a heartfelt desire to commune with the Lord in the glory of his creation. It's someone trying to justify playing golf on Sunday morning instead of coming to church. And I realize that I am speaking to those who today have made the choice to gather for worship, so this isn't entirely meant for those of you here. But on the chance that on occasion, some of us feel that draw toward the links or that we have spouses or relatives who regularly answer that call, an honest question to consider: what does it say about the state of our faith when we would prefer a game of leisure over gathering to declare the name of Jesus with others who share that faith? Because it says something. I don't know for sure what it's saying, but it's saying something. And if this is stinging you a bit, I would love to talk with you more, because I don't want this to sound like, "You should feel bad because you like golf and because you're not in church." But it is an invitation to consider some tough questions what it says about your faith. Because obviously this psalm is saying that worship is something that's not confined to a church. It would be bordering on hubris—and contradicting the words of this psalm—to say that worship *has* to happen in a church, can't happen anywhere else.

But then the other extreme starts to fall a bit short too: does it mean the act of worship can just be a free for all? Just go out into nature and worship in a manner that suits you? Well, next week's psalm will push against that: that there's a need for the assembly of the faithful in the act of worship. So what is this psalm teaching us? What can we take from this?

Well perhaps at its base, it's saying that worship is much, much bigger than how we might seek to define it. It's saying that worship is not about us. That's perhaps something we forget. We can get caught into thinking about a worship service primarily in terms of what *we* get out of it. Did I like the music? Was the sermon good? Was the temperature cool or hot enough to my liking? It's not like those sorts of questions are unimportant. Worship should edify us; worship should be uplifting; worship should be a place even of rest and sanctuary in the presence of the Lord; but all of that counterintuitively comes when we stop focusing on whether worship is serving *our* needs first.

You might've heard that old phrase: happiness is like a butterfly—it'll elude you if you chase after it, but go about other business and it'll lightly land on your shoulder. Similar sort of dynamic: the more we think about how the act of worship serves us, the less we will get out of it, but the more our worship is focused on the one who is worthy, the more it will impact us.

And maybe that's the message of this psalm: that in the grand symphony of creation, the words that we pray and sing on Sunday mornings must sound awfully small. And yet, we worship a God who's quite the close listener too.

Almost fifty years ago, an up and coming artist named Bruce Springsteen was trying to accomplish the impossible: writing and producing the perfect rock album. Who's to say whether he accomplished it, but if you aim for the moon you still land among the stars, and the album *Born to Run* was the result. Springsteen apparently was obsessive about the production in the studio, laying instrument over instrument to get that full E Street Band sound, including among other things twelve different guitar tracks on the title song.

And where most of us might just listen and think, "Hmm, that's a good song," there are those who can go and listen to that song, to that whole album and can pick out the sound of that twelfth guitar.

God's the one who can hear the twelfth guitar. He's the one with the big expensive headphones in, delighting in the subtleties that the fourth violin is adding to the symphony just as much as the pulse of the tympanies.

Friends, join the symphony. Get in on the song. In the grand scheme of creation, the instruments we play might sound very small, but the Lord hears them with joy nonetheless, and it's not about us anyway. So whether you have that twelfth guitar or that fourth violin, play it, to the glory of God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Praise him, you highest heavens

and you waters above the heavens!

Let them praise the name of the LORD,

for he commanded and they were created.

He established them forever and ever;

he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

Praise the LORD from the earth,

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fire and hail, snow and frost,

stormy wind fulfilling his command!

Mountains and all hills,

fruit trees and all cedars!

Wild animals and all cattle,

creeping things and flying birds!

*Kings of the earth and all peoples,
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Young men and women alike,
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his glory is above earth and heaven.
He has raised up a horn for his people,
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for the people of Israel who are close to him.
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and you waters above the heavens!

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fruit trees and all cedars!

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*Kings of the earth and all peoples,
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*Let them praise the name of the LORD,
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instruments, it writes a different kind of symphony, calling the whole of creation itself to offer praise unto its maker.

It starts in heaven itself, with the angels summoned to praise the Lord. Then the Psalm's gaze turns to the celestial bodies, the very stars in the sky praising God. Next the Psalm literally comes down to earth, and some of the primordial forces of sea and wind, fire and hail, mountains and hills, all beckoned to bring praise. Then, living creatures, animals and birds, and finally human beings all are called to praise the name of the Lord!

It's a breathtaking thought, with more than a few echoes of the very first chapter of Scripture, in the Book of Genesis, of the call to praise roughly following a similar order as the seven days of creation. It's breathtaking to think of all of creation joining together in song, in worship to its maker.

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In this series, we're asking how the Psalms guide us in one of those core practices of the Christian faith, the act of praise, of worship. And the Psalm, starting in the heavens to the farthest corners of the cosmos, all the way to "old and young together," seems to be saying, "You know, it's not just you singing songs in your little pocket of the world; it's everything."

Have you ever thought of the natural world in that way? No doubt at some point in your life you've been taken aback by the beauty of something in nature: a sunset, a mountain, a bird, whatever it might have been. I feel like we've all gotten some of those "Ahhh!" moments, but whatever it was, whenever it happened, did you find yourself thinking, "*That* is singing praise to God. *That* is testifying to something about the Lord"? Well, honestly, maybe so for some, maybe not as readily for others. But clearly part of the message of this psalm is that creation is singing somehow, singing this great big, cosmic symphony. And we're a part of it.

That may be something that's important for us to glean from this psalm: that the act of worship is not a strictly human thing to do. It's not limited or defined by how we on our own might express it. It's not limited or defined by how we might do it as a church. It is a natural thing to do. It is in the very bedrock of creation. It is bigger than us. It's something we take part in. It's something we might be inspired by.

There's in fact an entire branch of theology dedicated to this very topic: it's called "natural theology." And the question it explores is, "What and how can we learn about God through the natural world? What does nature say about God?" Because the answer is clearly not "Nothing." The testimony of this psalm and even just universal human experience affirm that the natural world is saying something.

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Well perhaps at its base, it's saying that worship is much, much bigger than how we might seek to define it. It's saying that worship is not about us. That's perhaps something we forget. We can get caught into thinking about a worship service primarily in terms of what *we* get out of it. Did I like the music? Was the sermon good? Was the temperature cool or hot enough to my liking? It's not like those sorts of questions are unimportant. Worship should edify us; worship should be uplifting; worship should be a place even of rest and sanctuary in the presence of the Lord; but all of that counterintuitively comes when we stop focusing on whether worship is serving *our* needs first.

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And maybe that's the message of this psalm: that in the grand symphony of creation, the words that we pray and sing on Sunday mornings must sound awfully small. And yet, we worship a God who's quite the close listener too.

Almost fifty years ago, an up and coming artist named Bruce Springsteen was trying to accomplish the impossible: writing and producing the perfect rock album. Who's to say whether he accomplished it, but if you aim for the moon you still land among the stars, and the album *Born to Run* was the result. Springsteen apparently was obsessive about the production in the studio, laying instrument over instrument to get that full E Street Band sound, including among other things twelve different guitar tracks on the title song.

And where most of us might just listen and think, "Hmm, that's a good song," there are those who can go and listen to that song, to that whole album and can pick out the sound of that twelfth guitar.

God's the one who can hear the twelfth guitar. He's the one with the big expensive headphones in, delighting in the subtleties that the fourth violin is adding to the symphony just as much as the pulse of the tympanies.

Friends, join the symphony. Get in on the song. In the grand scheme of creation, the instruments we play might sound very small, but the Lord hears them with joy nonetheless, and it's not about us anyway. So whether you have that twelfth guitar or that fourth violin, play it, to the glory of God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Praise Book: The Key of Sea”

Dr. Jay Howell

Psalm 148

July 17, 2022

Before we get to our main text for this morning, let me share a word of gratitude not just to be back with you—I was back last Sunday after all too—but to be back in the pulpit. I consider it a blessing after a few weeks out of the pulpit to be kind of chomping at the bit. I’m grateful as well to Buddy Sexton, who as you’ll remember preached for the two Sundays I was out of town, and for Troy Forrester, who joined us from our neighbors at First United Methodist, who was in the pulpit last Sunday.

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And this week, we pick up where we left off in the next psalm, asking what does it mean to praise God, joining in all the voices of creation. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD from the heavens;

praise him in the heights!

Praise him, all his angels;

praise him, all his host!

Praise him, sun and moon;

praise him, all you shining stars!

Praise him, you highest heavens

and you waters above the heavens!

Let them praise the name of the LORD,

for he commanded and they were created.

He established them forever and ever;

he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

Praise the LORD from the earth,

you sea monsters and all deeps,

fire and hail, snow and frost,

stormy wind fulfilling his command!

Mountains and all hills,

fruit trees and all cedars!

Wild animals and all cattle,

creeping things and flying birds!

*Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!
Young men and women alike,
old and young together!*

*Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.
He has raised up a horn for his people,
praise for all his faithful,
for the people of Israel who are close to him.
Praise the LORD! Psalm 148*

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

On Christmas Day last year, a rocket went up to space carrying some remarkable cargo. That cargo ended up continuing a journey even after the rockets that propelled it into space were jettisoned. It continued on away from the earth until it was about a million miles away, that's over four times farther away than the moon. And there, this cargo began its intended purpose, the fruit of which we, the public, have just been blessed to see.

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Praise him, you highest heavens

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Praise Book: The Key of Sea”

Dr. Jay Howell

Psalm 148

July 17, 2022

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Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD from the heavens;

praise him in the heights!

Praise him, all his angels;

praise him, all his host!

Praise him, sun and moon;

praise him, all you shining stars!

Praise him, you highest heavens

and you waters above the heavens!

Let them praise the name of the LORD,

for he commanded and they were created.

He established them forever and ever;

he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

Praise the LORD from the earth,

you sea monsters and all deeps,

fire and hail, snow and frost,

stormy wind fulfilling his command!

Mountains and all hills,

fruit trees and all cedars!

Wild animals and all cattle,

creeping things and flying birds!

*Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!
Young men and women alike,
old and young together!*

*Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.
He has raised up a horn for his people,
praise for all his faithful,
for the people of Israel who are close to him.
Praise the LORD! Psalm 148*

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

On Christmas Day last year, a rocket went up to space carrying some remarkable cargo. That cargo ended up continuing a journey even after the rockets that propelled it into space were jettisoned. It continued on away from the earth until it was about a million miles away, that's over four times farther away than the moon. And there, this cargo began its intended purpose, the fruit of which we, the public, have just been blessed to see.

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Then you start to think about it and you realize that every grain of sand-sized image that one could hold up to the night sky would potentially represent another grouping of hundreds and thousands more galaxies and millions and billions more stars, and you put all those grains of sand together, and the incomprehensible scale of it all starts to bear down on you at just how vast a place the universe is.

And then you hear the words of the psalm today, "Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars," and you wonder, "How could that be so? How could the sum of all those heavenly bodies be called to proclaim the glory of God?"

Psalm 148 is a psalm of praise, make no mistake. It begins and ends in the same way that all of these final five psalms begin and end: with the words "Praise the Lord!" literally "Hallelujah!" But instead of songs and

instruments, it writes a different kind of symphony, calling the whole of creation itself to offer praise unto its maker.

It starts in heaven itself, with the angels summoned to praise the Lord. Then the Psalm's gaze turns to the celestial bodies, the very stars in the sky praising God. Next the Psalm literally comes down to earth, and some of the primordial forces of sea and wind, fire and hail, mountains and hills, all beckoned to bring praise. Then, living creatures, animals and birds, and finally human beings all are called to praise the name of the Lord!

It's a breathtaking thought, with more than a few echoes of the very first chapter of Scripture, in the Book of Genesis, of the call to praise roughly following a similar order as the seven days of creation. It's breathtaking to think of all of creation joining together in song, in worship to its maker.

The other day, Frances played a song in the car while we were driving around. It's a song that the boys are starting to learn, and it's called "Sing" by the Christian artist Ellie Holcomb. It begins by asking the question, "Who sang the first song? Who hummed the first tune? Was it the wind blowing past the moon? Were the stars making noise as they sparkled at night? Did the sun sing a song as it colored the sky?" And the song goes on through all these different aspects of the natural world: waves and wind, lions and whales, flowers and birds, asking whether they sang the first song.

In this series, we're asking how the Psalms guide us in one of those core practices of the Christian faith, the act of praise, of worship. And the Psalm, starting in the heavens to the farthest corners of the cosmos, all the way to "old and young together," seems to be saying, "You know, it's not just you singing songs in your little pocket of the world; it's everything."

Have you ever thought of the natural world in that way? No doubt at some point in your life you've been taken aback by the beauty of something in nature: a sunset, a mountain, a bird, whatever it might have been. I feel like we've all gotten some of those "Ahhh!" moments, but whatever it was, whenever it happened, did you find yourself thinking, "*That* is singing praise to God. *That* is testifying to something about the Lord"? Well, honestly, maybe so for some, maybe not as readily for others. But clearly part of the message of this psalm is that creation is singing somehow, singing this great big, cosmic symphony. And we're a part of it.

That may be something that's important for us to glean from this psalm: that the act of worship is not a strictly human thing to do. It's not limited or defined by how we on our own might express it. It's not limited or defined by how we might do it as a church. It is a natural thing to do. It is in the very bedrock of creation. It is bigger than us. It's something we take part in. It's something we might be inspired by.

There's in fact an entire branch of theology dedicated to this very topic: it's called "natural theology." And the question it explores is, "What and how can we learn about God through the natural world? What does nature say about God?" Because the answer is clearly not "Nothing." The testimony of this psalm and even just universal human experience affirm that the natural world is saying something.

For example, looking back at the stars and the James Webb Space Telescope, one thing we might glean is the astronomical improbability of life emerging, of the formation of planets out of interstellar chaos and the void, of the formation of water and the right balance of gases in the atmosphere, of just the right levels of gravity, light, and temperature. You could say it's a big, giant cosmic fluke—lucky us, I guess—or that there was some hand in it. That's an example of natural theology.

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Praise him, you highest heavens

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Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD from the heavens;

praise him in the heights!

Praise him, all his angels;

praise him, all his host!

Praise him, sun and moon;

praise him, all you shining stars!

Praise him, you highest heavens

and you waters above the heavens!

Let them praise the name of the LORD,

for he commanded and they were created.

He established them forever and ever;

he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

Praise the LORD from the earth,

you sea monsters and all deeps,

fire and hail, snow and frost,

stormy wind fulfilling his command!

Mountains and all hills,

fruit trees and all cedars!

Wild animals and all cattle,

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*Kings of the earth and all peoples,
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Young men and women alike,
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*Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.
He has raised up a horn for his people,
praise for all his faithful,
for the people of Israel who are close to him.
Praise the LORD! Psalm 148*

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

On Christmas Day last year, a rocket went up to space carrying some remarkable cargo. That cargo ended up continuing a journey even after the rockets that propelled it into space were jettisoned. It continued on away from the earth until it was about a million miles away, that's over four times farther away than the moon. And there, this cargo began its intended purpose, the fruit of which we, the public, have just been blessed to see.

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Then you start to think about it and you realize that every grain of sand-sized image that one could hold up to the night sky would potentially represent another grouping of hundreds and thousands more galaxies and millions and billions more stars, and you put all those grains of sand together, and the incomprehensible scale of it all starts to bear down on you at just how vast a place the universe is.

And then you hear the words of the psalm today, "Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars," and you wonder, "How could that be so? How could the sum of all those heavenly bodies be called to proclaim the glory of God?"

Psalm 148 is a psalm of praise, make no mistake. It begins and ends in the same way that all of these final five psalms begin and end: with the words "Praise the Lord!" literally "Hallelujah!" But instead of songs and

instruments, it writes a different kind of symphony, calling the whole of creation itself to offer praise unto its maker.

It starts in heaven itself, with the angels summoned to praise the Lord. Then the Psalm's gaze turns to the celestial bodies, the very stars in the sky praising God. Next the Psalm literally comes down to earth, and some of the primordial forces of sea and wind, fire and hail, mountains and hills, all beckoned to bring praise. Then, living creatures, animals and birds, and finally human beings all are called to praise the name of the Lord!

It's a breathtaking thought, with more than a few echoes of the very first chapter of Scripture, in the Book of Genesis, of the call to praise roughly following a similar order as the seven days of creation. It's breathtaking to think of all of creation joining together in song, in worship to its maker.

The other day, Frances played a song in the car while we were driving around. It's a song that the boys are starting to learn, and it's called "Sing" by the Christian artist Ellie Holcomb. It begins by asking the question, "Who sang the first song? Who hummed the first tune? Was it the wind blowing past the moon? Were the stars making noise as they sparkled at night? Did the sun sing a song as it colored the sky?" And the song goes on through all these different aspects of the natural world: waves and wind, lions and whales, flowers and birds, asking whether they sang the first song.

In this series, we're asking how the Psalms guide us in one of those core practices of the Christian faith, the act of praise, of worship. And the Psalm, starting in the heavens to the farthest corners of the cosmos, all the way to "old and young together," seems to be saying, "You know, it's not just you singing songs in your little pocket of the world; it's everything."

Have you ever thought of the natural world in that way? No doubt at some point in your life you've been taken aback by the beauty of something in nature: a sunset, a mountain, a bird, whatever it might have been. I feel like we've all gotten some of those "Ahhh!" moments, but whatever it was, whenever it happened, did you find yourself thinking, "*That* is singing praise to God. *That* is testifying to something about the Lord"? Well, honestly, maybe so for some, maybe not as readily for others. But clearly part of the message of this psalm is that creation is singing somehow, singing this great big, cosmic symphony. And we're a part of it.

That may be something that's important for us to glean from this psalm: that the act of worship is not a strictly human thing to do. It's not limited or defined by how we on our own might express it. It's not limited or defined by how we might do it as a church. It is a natural thing to do. It is in the very bedrock of creation. It is bigger than us. It's something we take part in. It's something we might be inspired by.

There's in fact an entire branch of theology dedicated to this very topic: it's called "natural theology." And the question it explores is, "What and how can we learn about God through the natural world? What does nature say about God?" Because the answer is clearly not "Nothing." The testimony of this psalm and even just universal human experience affirm that the natural world is saying something.

For example, looking back at the stars and the James Webb Space Telescope, one thing we might glean is the astronomical improbability of life emerging, of the formation of planets out of interstellar chaos and the void, of the formation of water and the right balance of gases in the atmosphere, of just the right levels of gravity, light, and temperature. You could say it's a big, giant cosmic fluke—lucky us, I guess—or that there was some hand in it. That's an example of natural theology.

But then there are trickier questions, like "How much can we learn about God through nature, independent of Scripture or the church?"

If that's getting a bit too theoretical, here's another way to put it: "I feel closer to God out in nature than I do in a church worship service. Is that okay?" Now that's a tough question, and there are legitimate points to be made about it.

Short sidenote here though. The most common context in which I hear that sort of question isn't necessarily a heartfelt desire to commune with the Lord in the glory of his creation. It's someone trying to justify playing golf on Sunday morning instead of coming to church. And I realize that I am speaking to those who today have made the choice to gather for worship, so this isn't entirely meant for those of you here. But on the chance that on occasion, some of us feel that draw toward the links or that we have spouses or relatives who regularly answer that call, an honest question to consider: what does it say about the state of our faith when we would prefer a game of leisure over gathering to declare the name of Jesus with others who share that faith? Because it says something. I don't know for sure what it's saying, but it's saying something. And if this is stinging you a bit, I would love to talk with you more, because I don't want this to sound like, "You should feel bad because you like golf and because you're not in church." But it is an invitation to consider some tough questions what it says about your faith. Because obviously this psalm is saying that worship is something that's not confined to a church. It would be bordering on hubris—and contradicting the words of this psalm—to say that worship *has* to happen in a church, can't happen anywhere else.

But then the other extreme starts to fall a bit short too: does it mean the act of worship can just be a free for all? Just go out into nature and worship in a manner that suits you? Well, next week's psalm will push against that: that there's a need for the assembly of the faithful in the act of worship. So what is this psalm teaching us? What can we take from this?

Well perhaps at its base, it's saying that worship is much, much bigger than how we might seek to define it. It's saying that worship is not about us. That's perhaps something we forget. We can get caught into thinking about a worship service primarily in terms of what *we* get out of it. Did I like the music? Was the sermon good? Was the temperature cool or hot enough to my liking? It's not like those sorts of questions are unimportant. Worship should edify us; worship should be uplifting; worship should be a place even of rest and sanctuary in the presence of the Lord; but all of that counterintuitively comes when we stop focusing on whether worship is serving *our* needs first.

You might've heard that old phrase: happiness is like a butterfly—it'll elude you if you chase after it, but go about other business and it'll lightly land on your shoulder. Similar sort of dynamic: the more we think about how the act of worship serves us, the less we will get out of it, but the more our worship is focused on the one who is worthy, the more it will impact us.

And maybe that's the message of this psalm: that in the grand symphony of creation, the words that we pray and sing on Sunday mornings must sound awfully small. And yet, we worship a God who's quite the close listener too.

Almost fifty years ago, an up and coming artist named Bruce Springsteen was trying to accomplish the impossible: writing and producing the perfect rock album. Who's to say whether he accomplished it, but if you aim for the moon you still land among the stars, and the album *Born to Run* was the result. Springsteen apparently was obsessive about the production in the studio, laying instrument over instrument to get that full E Street Band sound, including among other things twelve different guitar tracks on the title song.

And where most of us might just listen and think, "Hmm, that's a good song," there are those who can go and listen to that song, to that whole album and can pick out the sound of that twelfth guitar.

God's the one who can hear the twelfth guitar. He's the one with the big expensive headphones in, delighting in the subtleties that the fourth violin is adding to the symphony just as much as the pulse of the tympanies.

Friends, join the symphony. Get in on the song. In the grand scheme of creation, the instruments we play might sound very small, but the Lord hears them with joy nonetheless, and it's not about us anyway. So whether you have that twelfth guitar or that fourth violin, play it, to the glory of God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Praise Book: The Key of Sea”

Dr. Jay Howell

Psalm 148

July 17, 2022

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and you waters above the heavens!

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The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

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It starts in heaven itself, with the angels summoned to praise the Lord. Then the Psalm's gaze turns to the celestial bodies, the very stars in the sky praising God. Next the Psalm literally comes down to earth, and some of the primordial forces of sea and wind, fire and hail, mountains and hills, all beckoned to bring praise. Then, living creatures, animals and birds, and finally human beings all are called to praise the name of the Lord!

It's a breathtaking thought, with more than a few echoes of the very first chapter of Scripture, in the Book of Genesis, of the call to praise roughly following a similar order as the seven days of creation. It's breathtaking to think of all of creation joining together in song, in worship to its maker.

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In this series, we're asking how the Psalms guide us in one of those core practices of the Christian faith, the act of praise, of worship. And the Psalm, starting in the heavens to the farthest corners of the cosmos, all the way to "old and young together," seems to be saying, "You know, it's not just you singing songs in your little pocket of the world; it's everything."

Have you ever thought of the natural world in that way? No doubt at some point in your life you've been taken aback by the beauty of something in nature: a sunset, a mountain, a bird, whatever it might have been. I feel like we've all gotten some of those "Ahhh!" moments, but whatever it was, whenever it happened, did you find yourself thinking, "*That* is singing praise to God. *That* is testifying to something about the Lord"? Well, honestly, maybe so for some, maybe not as readily for others. But clearly part of the message of this psalm is that creation is singing somehow, singing this great big, cosmic symphony. And we're a part of it.

That may be something that's important for us to glean from this psalm: that the act of worship is not a strictly human thing to do. It's not limited or defined by how we on our own might express it. It's not limited or defined by how we might do it as a church. It is a natural thing to do. It is in the very bedrock of creation. It is bigger than us. It's something we take part in. It's something we might be inspired by.

There's in fact an entire branch of theology dedicated to this very topic: it's called "natural theology." And the question it explores is, "What and how can we learn about God through the natural world? What does nature say about God?" Because the answer is clearly not "Nothing." The testimony of this psalm and even just universal human experience affirm that the natural world is saying something.

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Well perhaps at its base, it's saying that worship is much, much bigger than how we might seek to define it. It's saying that worship is not about us. That's perhaps something we forget. We can get caught into thinking about a worship service primarily in terms of what *we* get out of it. Did I like the music? Was the sermon good? Was the temperature cool or hot enough to my liking? It's not like those sorts of questions are unimportant. Worship should edify us; worship should be uplifting; worship should be a place even of rest and sanctuary in the presence of the Lord; but all of that counterintuitively comes when we stop focusing on whether worship is serving *our* needs first.

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And maybe that's the message of this psalm: that in the grand symphony of creation, the words that we pray and sing on Sunday mornings must sound awfully small. And yet, we worship a God who's quite the close listener too.

Almost fifty years ago, an up and coming artist named Bruce Springsteen was trying to accomplish the impossible: writing and producing the perfect rock album. Who's to say whether he accomplished it, but if you aim for the moon you still land among the stars, and the album *Born to Run* was the result. Springsteen apparently was obsessive about the production in the studio, laying instrument over instrument to get that full E Street Band sound, including among other things twelve different guitar tracks on the title song.

And where most of us might just listen and think, "Hmm, that's a good song," there are those who can go and listen to that song, to that whole album and can pick out the sound of that twelfth guitar.

God's the one who can hear the twelfth guitar. He's the one with the big expensive headphones in, delighting in the subtleties that the fourth violin is adding to the symphony just as much as the pulse of the tympanies.

Friends, join the symphony. Get in on the song. In the grand scheme of creation, the instruments we play might sound very small, but the Lord hears them with joy nonetheless, and it's not about us anyway. So whether you have that twelfth guitar or that fourth violin, play it, to the glory of God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS
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“Praise Book: The Key of Sea”

Dr. Jay Howell

Psalm 148

July 17, 2022

Before we get to our main text for this morning, let me share a word of gratitude not just to be back with you—I was back last Sunday after all too—but to be back in the pulpit. I consider it a blessing after a few weeks out of the pulpit to be kind of chomping at the bit. I’m grateful as well to Buddy Sexton, who as you’ll remember preached for the two Sundays I was out of town, and for Troy Forrester, who joined us from our neighbors at First United Methodist, who was in the pulpit last Sunday.

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And this week, we pick up where we left off in the next psalm, asking what does it mean to praise God, joining in all the voices of creation. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD from the heavens;

praise him in the heights!

Praise him, all his angels;

praise him, all his host!

Praise him, sun and moon;

praise him, all you shining stars!

Praise him, you highest heavens

and you waters above the heavens!

Let them praise the name of the LORD,

for he commanded and they were created.

He established them forever and ever;

he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

Praise the LORD from the earth,

you sea monsters and all deeps,

fire and hail, snow and frost,

stormy wind fulfilling his command!

Mountains and all hills,

fruit trees and all cedars!

Wild animals and all cattle,

creeping things and flying birds!

*Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!
Young men and women alike,
old and young together!*

*Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.
He has raised up a horn for his people,
praise for all his faithful,
for the people of Israel who are close to him.
Praise the LORD! Psalm 148*

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

On Christmas Day last year, a rocket went up to space carrying some remarkable cargo. That cargo ended up continuing a journey even after the rockets that propelled it into space were jettisoned. It continued on away from the earth until it was about a million miles away, that's over four times farther away than the moon. And there, this cargo began its intended purpose, the fruit of which we, the public, have just been blessed to see.

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That is, until you learn that it wasn't an image of the night sky at all. You see the caption, and you learn that this amazing image of all these hundreds and thousands of stars and galaxies, representing millions and billions of stars were all captured not in an image of the entire night sky, but rather an image covering only a portion of the sky that would be covered up if you took a single grain of sand and held it up at arm's length.

Then you start to think about it and you realize that every grain of sand-sized image that one could hold up to the night sky would potentially represent another grouping of hundreds and thousands more galaxies and millions and billions more stars, and you put all those grains of sand together, and the incomprehensible scale of it all starts to bear down on you at just how vast a place the universe is.

And then you hear the words of the psalm today, "Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars," and you wonder, "How could that be so? How could the sum of all those heavenly bodies be called to proclaim the glory of God?"

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and you waters above the heavens!

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Praise Book: The Key of Sea”

Dr. Jay Howell

Psalm 148

July 17, 2022

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Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD from the heavens;

praise him in the heights!

Praise him, all his angels;

praise him, all his host!

Praise him, sun and moon;

praise him, all you shining stars!

Praise him, you highest heavens

and you waters above the heavens!

Let them praise the name of the LORD,

for he commanded and they were created.

He established them forever and ever;

he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

Praise the LORD from the earth,

you sea monsters and all deeps,

fire and hail, snow and frost,

stormy wind fulfilling his command!

Mountains and all hills,

fruit trees and all cedars!

Wild animals and all cattle,

creeping things and flying birds!

*Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!
Young men and women alike,
old and young together!*

*Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.
He has raised up a horn for his people,
praise for all his faithful,
for the people of Israel who are close to him.
Praise the LORD! Psalm 148*

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

On Christmas Day last year, a rocket went up to space carrying some remarkable cargo. That cargo ended up continuing a journey even after the rockets that propelled it into space were jettisoned. It continued on away from the earth until it was about a million miles away, that's over four times farther away than the moon. And there, this cargo began its intended purpose, the fruit of which we, the public, have just been blessed to see.

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Then you start to think about it and you realize that every grain of sand-sized image that one could hold up to the night sky would potentially represent another grouping of hundreds and thousands more galaxies and millions and billions more stars, and you put all those grains of sand together, and the incomprehensible scale of it all starts to bear down on you at just how vast a place the universe is.

And then you hear the words of the psalm today, "Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars," and you wonder, "How could that be so? How could the sum of all those heavenly bodies be called to proclaim the glory of God?"

Psalm 148 is a psalm of praise, make no mistake. It begins and ends in the same way that all of these final five psalms begin and end: with the words "Praise the Lord!" literally "Hallelujah!" But instead of songs and

instruments, it writes a different kind of symphony, calling the whole of creation itself to offer praise unto its maker.

It starts in heaven itself, with the angels summoned to praise the Lord. Then the Psalm's gaze turns to the celestial bodies, the very stars in the sky praising God. Next the Psalm literally comes down to earth, and some of the primordial forces of sea and wind, fire and hail, mountains and hills, all beckoned to bring praise. Then, living creatures, animals and birds, and finally human beings all are called to praise the name of the Lord!

It's a breathtaking thought, with more than a few echoes of the very first chapter of Scripture, in the Book of Genesis, of the call to praise roughly following a similar order as the seven days of creation. It's breathtaking to think of all of creation joining together in song, in worship to its maker.

The other day, Frances played a song in the car while we were driving around. It's a song that the boys are starting to learn, and it's called "Sing" by the Christian artist Ellie Holcomb. It begins by asking the question, "Who sang the first song? Who hummed the first tune? Was it the wind blowing past the moon? Were the stars making noise as they sparkled at night? Did the sun sing a song as it colored the sky?" And the song goes on through all these different aspects of the natural world: waves and wind, lions and whales, flowers and birds, asking whether they sang the first song.

In this series, we're asking how the Psalms guide us in one of those core practices of the Christian faith, the act of praise, of worship. And the Psalm, starting in the heavens to the farthest corners of the cosmos, all the way to "old and young together," seems to be saying, "You know, it's not just you singing songs in your little pocket of the world; it's everything."

Have you ever thought of the natural world in that way? No doubt at some point in your life you've been taken aback by the beauty of something in nature: a sunset, a mountain, a bird, whatever it might have been. I feel like we've all gotten some of those "Ahhh!" moments, but whatever it was, whenever it happened, did you find yourself thinking, "*That* is singing praise to God. *That* is testifying to something about the Lord"? Well, honestly, maybe so for some, maybe not as readily for others. But clearly part of the message of this psalm is that creation is singing somehow, singing this great big, cosmic symphony. And we're a part of it.

That may be something that's important for us to glean from this psalm: that the act of worship is not a strictly human thing to do. It's not limited or defined by how we on our own might express it. It's not limited or defined by how we might do it as a church. It is a natural thing to do. It is in the very bedrock of creation. It is bigger than us. It's something we take part in. It's something we might be inspired by.

There's in fact an entire branch of theology dedicated to this very topic: it's called "natural theology." And the question it explores is, "What and how can we learn about God through the natural world? What does nature say about God?" Because the answer is clearly not "Nothing." The testimony of this psalm and even just universal human experience affirm that the natural world is saying something.

For example, looking back at the stars and the James Webb Space Telescope, one thing we might glean is the astronomical improbability of life emerging, of the formation of planets out of interstellar chaos and the void, of the formation of water and the right balance of gases in the atmosphere, of just the right levels of gravity, light, and temperature. You could say it's a big, giant cosmic fluke—lucky us, I guess—or that there was some hand in it. That's an example of natural theology.

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Praise him, sun and moon;

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and you waters above the heavens!

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He established them forever and ever;

he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

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fruit trees and all cedars!

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Young men and women alike,
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his glory is above earth and heaven.
He has raised up a horn for his people,
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The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

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Praise him, sun and moon;

praise him, all you shining stars!

Praise him, you highest heavens

and you waters above the heavens!

Let them praise the name of the LORD,

for he commanded and they were created.

He established them forever and ever;

he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

Praise the LORD from the earth,

you sea monsters and all deeps,

fire and hail, snow and frost,

stormy wind fulfilling his command!

Mountains and all hills,

fruit trees and all cedars!

Wild animals and all cattle,

creeping things and flying birds!

*Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!
Young men and women alike,
old and young together!*

*Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.
He has raised up a horn for his people,
praise for all his faithful,
for the people of Israel who are close to him.
Praise the LORD! Psalm 148*

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

On Christmas Day last year, a rocket went up to space carrying some remarkable cargo. That cargo ended up continuing a journey even after the rockets that propelled it into space were jettisoned. It continued on away from the earth until it was about a million miles away, that's over four times farther away than the moon. And there, this cargo began its intended purpose, the fruit of which we, the public, have just been blessed to see.

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Then you start to think about it and you realize that every grain of sand-sized image that one could hold up to the night sky would potentially represent another grouping of hundreds and thousands more galaxies and millions and billions more stars, and you put all those grains of sand together, and the incomprehensible scale of it all starts to bear down on you at just how vast a place the universe is.

And then you hear the words of the psalm today, "Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars," and you wonder, "How could that be so? How could the sum of all those heavenly bodies be called to proclaim the glory of God?"

Psalm 148 is a psalm of praise, make no mistake. It begins and ends in the same way that all of these final five psalms begin and end: with the words "Praise the Lord!" literally "Hallelujah!" But instead of songs and

instruments, it writes a different kind of symphony, calling the whole of creation itself to offer praise unto its maker.

It starts in heaven itself, with the angels summoned to praise the Lord. Then the Psalm's gaze turns to the celestial bodies, the very stars in the sky praising God. Next the Psalm literally comes down to earth, and some of the primordial forces of sea and wind, fire and hail, mountains and hills, all beckoned to bring praise. Then, living creatures, animals and birds, and finally human beings all are called to praise the name of the Lord!

It's a breathtaking thought, with more than a few echoes of the very first chapter of Scripture, in the Book of Genesis, of the call to praise roughly following a similar order as the seven days of creation. It's breathtaking to think of all of creation joining together in song, in worship to its maker.

The other day, Frances played a song in the car while we were driving around. It's a song that the boys are starting to learn, and it's called "Sing" by the Christian artist Ellie Holcomb. It begins by asking the question, "Who sang the first song? Who hummed the first tune? Was it the wind blowing past the moon? Were the stars making noise as they sparkled at night? Did the sun sing a song as it colored the sky?" And the song goes on through all these different aspects of the natural world: waves and wind, lions and whales, flowers and birds, asking whether they sang the first song.

In this series, we're asking how the Psalms guide us in one of those core practices of the Christian faith, the act of praise, of worship. And the Psalm, starting in the heavens to the farthest corners of the cosmos, all the way to "old and young together," seems to be saying, "You know, it's not just you singing songs in your little pocket of the world; it's everything."

Have you ever thought of the natural world in that way? No doubt at some point in your life you've been taken aback by the beauty of something in nature: a sunset, a mountain, a bird, whatever it might have been. I feel like we've all gotten some of those "Ahhh!" moments, but whatever it was, whenever it happened, did you find yourself thinking, "*That* is singing praise to God. *That* is testifying to something about the Lord"? Well, honestly, maybe so for some, maybe not as readily for others. But clearly part of the message of this psalm is that creation is singing somehow, singing this great big, cosmic symphony. And we're a part of it.

That may be something that's important for us to glean from this psalm: that the act of worship is not a strictly human thing to do. It's not limited or defined by how we on our own might express it. It's not limited or defined by how we might do it as a church. It is a natural thing to do. It is in the very bedrock of creation. It is bigger than us. It's something we take part in. It's something we might be inspired by.

There's in fact an entire branch of theology dedicated to this very topic: it's called "natural theology." And the question it explores is, "What and how can we learn about God through the natural world? What does nature say about God?" Because the answer is clearly not "Nothing." The testimony of this psalm and even just universal human experience affirm that the natural world is saying something.

For example, looking back at the stars and the James Webb Space Telescope, one thing we might glean is the astronomical improbability of life emerging, of the formation of planets out of interstellar chaos and the void, of the formation of water and the right balance of gases in the atmosphere, of just the right levels of gravity, light, and temperature. You could say it's a big, giant cosmic fluke—lucky us, I guess—or that there was some hand in it. That's an example of natural theology.

But then there are trickier questions, like "How much can we learn about God through nature, independent of Scripture or the church?"

If that's getting a bit too theoretical, here's another way to put it: "I feel closer to God out in nature than I do in a church worship service. Is that okay?" Now that's a tough question, and there are legitimate points to be made about it.

Short sidenote here though. The most common context in which I hear that sort of question isn't necessarily a heartfelt desire to commune with the Lord in the glory of his creation. It's someone trying to justify playing golf on Sunday morning instead of coming to church. And I realize that I am speaking to those who today have made the choice to gather for worship, so this isn't entirely meant for those of you here. But on the chance that on occasion, some of us feel that draw toward the links or that we have spouses or relatives who regularly answer that call, an honest question to consider: what does it say about the state of our faith when we would prefer a game of leisure over gathering to declare the name of Jesus with others who share that faith? Because it says something. I don't know for sure what it's saying, but it's saying something. And if this is stinging you a bit, I would love to talk with you more, because I don't want this to sound like, "You should feel bad because you like golf and because you're not in church." But it is an invitation to consider some tough questions what it says about your faith. Because obviously this psalm is saying that worship is something that's not confined to a church. It would be bordering on hubris—and contradicting the words of this psalm—to say that worship *has* to happen in a church, can't happen anywhere else.

But then the other extreme starts to fall a bit short too: does it mean the act of worship can just be a free for all? Just go out into nature and worship in a manner that suits you? Well, next week's psalm will push against that: that there's a need for the assembly of the faithful in the act of worship. So what is this psalm teaching us? What can we take from this?

Well perhaps at its base, it's saying that worship is much, much bigger than how we might seek to define it. It's saying that worship is not about us. That's perhaps something we forget. We can get caught into thinking about a worship service primarily in terms of what *we* get out of it. Did I like the music? Was the sermon good? Was the temperature cool or hot enough to my liking? It's not like those sorts of questions are unimportant. Worship should edify us; worship should be uplifting; worship should be a place even of rest and sanctuary in the presence of the Lord; but all of that counterintuitively comes when we stop focusing on whether worship is serving *our* needs first.

You might've heard that old phrase: happiness is like a butterfly—it'll elude you if you chase after it, but go about other business and it'll lightly land on your shoulder. Similar sort of dynamic: the more we think about how the act of worship serves us, the less we will get out of it, but the more our worship is focused on the one who is worthy, the more it will impact us.

And maybe that's the message of this psalm: that in the grand symphony of creation, the words that we pray and sing on Sunday mornings must sound awfully small. And yet, we worship a God who's quite the close listener too.

Almost fifty years ago, an up and coming artist named Bruce Springsteen was trying to accomplish the impossible: writing and producing the perfect rock album. Who's to say whether he accomplished it, but if you aim for the moon you still land among the stars, and the album *Born to Run* was the result. Springsteen apparently was obsessive about the production in the studio, laying instrument over instrument to get that full E Street Band sound, including among other things twelve different guitar tracks on the title song.

And where most of us might just listen and think, "Hmm, that's a good song," there are those who can go and listen to that song, to that whole album and can pick out the sound of that twelfth guitar.

God's the one who can hear the twelfth guitar. He's the one with the big expensive headphones in, delighting in the subtleties that the fourth violin is adding to the symphony just as much as the pulse of the tympanies.

Friends, join the symphony. Get in on the song. In the grand scheme of creation, the instruments we play might sound very small, but the Lord hears them with joy nonetheless, and it's not about us anyway. So whether you have that twelfth guitar or that fourth violin, play it, to the glory of God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Praise Book: The Key of Sea”

Dr. Jay Howell

Psalm 148

July 17, 2022

Before we get to our main text for this morning, let me share a word of gratitude not just to be back with you—I was back last Sunday after all too—but to be back in the pulpit. I consider it a blessing after a few weeks out of the pulpit to be kind of chomping at the bit. I’m grateful as well to Buddy Sexton, who as you’ll remember preached for the two Sundays I was out of town, and for Troy Forrester, who joined us from our neighbors at First United Methodist, who was in the pulpit last Sunday.

And both of them offered words in this current series we’re in called “Praise Book.” We’ve been in the Book of Psalms this whole summer, asking first how the Psalms teach us to *pray*—that’s what we looked at back in June—and now asking how the Psalms teach us to *praise*, looking in particular at the final five psalms in the entire book, with each psalm offering a different angle on this core practice of the Christian faith: worshiping God, the very thing we are gathered to do right now at this very moment. Buddy kicked it off two weeks ago in Psalm 146, exploring why it is we are called to praise the Lord in the first place. Then Troy shared on Psalm 147 last week, noting the steadfast, unfailing love of God as what unites the church in praise.

And this week, we pick up where we left off in the next psalm, asking what does it mean to praise God, joining in all the voices of creation. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD from the heavens;

praise him in the heights!

Praise him, all his angels;

praise him, all his host!

Praise him, sun and moon;

praise him, all you shining stars!

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and you waters above the heavens!

Let them praise the name of the LORD,

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you sea monsters and all deeps,

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Young men and women alike,
old and young together!*

*Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.
He has raised up a horn for his people,
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Have you ever thought of the natural world in that way? No doubt at some point in your life you've been taken aback by the beauty of something in nature: a sunset, a mountain, a bird, whatever it might have been. I feel like we've all gotten some of those "Ahhh!" moments, but whatever it was, whenever it happened, did you find yourself thinking, "*That* is singing praise to God. *That* is testifying to something about the Lord"? Well, honestly, maybe so for some, maybe not as readily for others. But clearly part of the message of this psalm is that creation is singing somehow, singing this great big, cosmic symphony. And we're a part of it.

That may be something that's important for us to glean from this psalm: that the act of worship is not a strictly human thing to do. It's not limited or defined by how we on our own might express it. It's not limited or defined by how we might do it as a church. It is a natural thing to do. It is in the very bedrock of creation. It is bigger than us. It's something we take part in. It's something we might be inspired by.

There's in fact an entire branch of theology dedicated to this very topic: it's called "natural theology." And the question it explores is, "What and how can we learn about God through the natural world? What does nature say about God?" Because the answer is clearly not "Nothing." The testimony of this psalm and even just universal human experience affirm that the natural world is saying something.

For example, looking back at the stars and the James Webb Space Telescope, one thing we might glean is the astronomical improbability of life emerging, of the formation of planets out of interstellar chaos and the void, of the formation of water and the right balance of gases in the atmosphere, of just the right levels of gravity, light, and temperature. You could say it's a big, giant cosmic fluke—lucky us, I guess—or that there was some hand in it. That's an example of natural theology.

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If that's getting a bit too theoretical, here's another way to put it: "I feel closer to God out in nature than I do in a church worship service. Is that okay?" Now that's a tough question, and there are legitimate points to be made about it.

Short sidenote here though. The most common context in which I hear that sort of question isn't necessarily a heartfelt desire to commune with the Lord in the glory of his creation. It's someone trying to justify playing golf on Sunday morning instead of coming to church. And I realize that I am speaking to those who today have made the choice to gather for worship, so this isn't entirely meant for those of you here. But on the chance that on occasion, some of us feel that draw toward the links or that we have spouses or relatives who regularly answer that call, an honest question to consider: what does it say about the state of our faith when we would prefer a game of leisure over gathering to declare the name of Jesus with others who share that faith? Because it says something. I don't know for sure what it's saying, but it's saying something. And if this is stinging you a bit, I would love to talk with you more, because I don't want this to sound like, "You should feel bad because you like golf and because you're not in church." But it is an invitation to consider some tough questions what it says about your faith. Because obviously this psalm is saying that worship is something that's not confined to a church. It would be bordering on hubris—and contradicting the words of this psalm—to say that worship *has* to happen in a church, can't happen anywhere else.

But then the other extreme starts to fall a bit short too: does it mean the act of worship can just be a free for all? Just go out into nature and worship in a manner that suits you? Well, next week's psalm will push against that: that there's a need for the assembly of the faithful in the act of worship. So what is this psalm teaching us? What can we take from this?

Well perhaps at its base, it's saying that worship is much, much bigger than how we might seek to define it. It's saying that worship is not about us. That's perhaps something we forget. We can get caught into thinking about a worship service primarily in terms of what *we* get out of it. Did I like the music? Was the sermon good? Was the temperature cool or hot enough to my liking? It's not like those sorts of questions are unimportant. Worship should edify us; worship should be uplifting; worship should be a place even of rest and sanctuary in the presence of the Lord; but all of that counterintuitively comes when we stop focusing on whether worship is serving *our* needs first.

You might've heard that old phrase: happiness is like a butterfly—it'll elude you if you chase after it, but go about other business and it'll lightly land on your shoulder. Similar sort of dynamic: the more we think about how the act of worship serves us, the less we will get out of it, but the more our worship is focused on the one who is worthy, the more it will impact us.

And maybe that's the message of this psalm: that in the grand symphony of creation, the words that we pray and sing on Sunday mornings must sound awfully small. And yet, we worship a God who's quite the close listener too.

Almost fifty years ago, an up and coming artist named Bruce Springsteen was trying to accomplish the impossible: writing and producing the perfect rock album. Who's to say whether he accomplished it, but if you aim for the moon you still land among the stars, and the album *Born to Run* was the result. Springsteen apparently was obsessive about the production in the studio, laying instrument over instrument to get that full E Street Band sound, including among other things twelve different guitar tracks on the title song.

And where most of us might just listen and think, "Hmm, that's a good song," there are those who can go and listen to that song, to that whole album and can pick out the sound of that twelfth guitar.

God's the one who can hear the twelfth guitar. He's the one with the big expensive headphones in, delighting in the subtleties that the fourth violin is adding to the symphony just as much as the pulse of the tympanies.

Friends, join the symphony. Get in on the song. In the grand scheme of creation, the instruments we play might sound very small, but the Lord hears them with joy nonetheless, and it's not about us anyway. So whether you have that twelfth guitar or that fourth violin, play it, to the glory of God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Praise Book: The Key of Sea”

Dr. Jay Howell

Psalm 148

July 17, 2022

Before we get to our main text for this morning, let me share a word of gratitude not just to be back with you—I was back last Sunday after all too—but to be back in the pulpit. I consider it a blessing after a few weeks out of the pulpit to be kind of chomping at the bit. I’m grateful as well to Buddy Sexton, who as you’ll remember preached for the two Sundays I was out of town, and for Troy Forrester, who joined us from our neighbors at First United Methodist, who was in the pulpit last Sunday.

And both of them offered words in this current series we’re in called “Praise Book.” We’ve been in the Book of Psalms this whole summer, asking first how the Psalms teach us to *pray*—that’s what we looked at back in June—and now asking how the Psalms teach us to *praise*, looking in particular at the final five psalms in the entire book, with each psalm offering a different angle on this core practice of the Christian faith: worshiping God, the very thing we are gathered to do right now at this very moment. Buddy kicked it off two weeks ago in Psalm 146, exploring why it is we are called to praise the Lord in the first place. Then Troy shared on Psalm 147 last week, noting the steadfast, unfailing love of God as what unites the church in praise.

And this week, we pick up where we left off in the next psalm, asking what does it mean to praise God, joining in all the voices of creation. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD from the heavens;

praise him in the heights!

Praise him, all his angels;

praise him, all his host!

Praise him, sun and moon;

praise him, all you shining stars!

Praise him, you highest heavens

and you waters above the heavens!

Let them praise the name of the LORD,

for he commanded and they were created.

He established them forever and ever;

he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

Praise the LORD from the earth,

you sea monsters and all deeps,

fire and hail, snow and frost,

stormy wind fulfilling his command!

Mountains and all hills,

fruit trees and all cedars!

Wild animals and all cattle,

creeping things and flying birds!

*Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!
Young men and women alike,
old and young together!*

*Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.
He has raised up a horn for his people,
praise for all his faithful,
for the people of Israel who are close to him.
Praise the LORD! Psalm 148*

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

On Christmas Day last year, a rocket went up to space carrying some remarkable cargo. That cargo ended up continuing a journey even after the rockets that propelled it into space were jettisoned. It continued on away from the earth until it was about a million miles away, that's over four times farther away than the moon. And there, this cargo began its intended purpose, the fruit of which we, the public, have just been blessed to see.

I'm referring to the James Webb Space Telescope, operating in distant orbit, peering into deep space, 100 times more powerful than its predecessor the Hubble Space Telescope, and it was just this past week, as some of you may have seen in the news, that the first images from this telescope have been released.

Using infrared spectroscopy—and I'm sure I'm butchering some of the terminology—it's able to peer farther into space than ever before. And when it comes to telescopes, the farther into space you can look, it's also the equivalent of longer ago, since the light of stars farther away may have traveled for billions of years before our seeing them now, meaning it's like we're looking into a time machine, seeing how some of the earliest stars and galaxies may have formed.

The images are amazing. Close-ups of stars, galaxies, and nebulae that had never been seen in such detail—or even seen at all. One image that was released featured what looked like hundreds, maybe thousands, of stars and galaxies (galaxies, of course, being millions and billions of stars in and of themselves), and you see it and think, wow what a powerful image of the night sky. Look at all those stars.

That is, until you learn that it wasn't an image of the night sky at all. You see the caption, and you learn that this amazing image of all these hundreds and thousands of stars and galaxies, representing millions and billions of stars were all captured not in an image of the entire night sky, but rather an image covering only a portion of the sky that would be covered up if you took a single grain of sand and held it up at arm's length.

Then you start to think about it and you realize that every grain of sand-sized image that one could hold up to the night sky would potentially represent another grouping of hundreds and thousands more galaxies and millions and billions more stars, and you put all those grains of sand together, and the incomprehensible scale of it all starts to bear down on you at just how vast a place the universe is.

And then you hear the words of the psalm today, "Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars," and you wonder, "How could that be so? How could the sum of all those heavenly bodies be called to proclaim the glory of God?"

Psalm 148 is a psalm of praise, make no mistake. It begins and ends in the same way that all of these final five psalms begin and end: with the words "Praise the Lord!" literally "Hallelujah!" But instead of songs and

instruments, it writes a different kind of symphony, calling the whole of creation itself to offer praise unto its maker.

It starts in heaven itself, with the angels summoned to praise the Lord. Then the Psalm's gaze turns to the celestial bodies, the very stars in the sky praising God. Next the Psalm literally comes down to earth, and some of the primordial forces of sea and wind, fire and hail, mountains and hills, all beckoned to bring praise. Then, living creatures, animals and birds, and finally human beings all are called to praise the name of the Lord!

It's a breathtaking thought, with more than a few echoes of the very first chapter of Scripture, in the Book of Genesis, of the call to praise roughly following a similar order as the seven days of creation. It's breathtaking to think of all of creation joining together in song, in worship to its maker.

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