

“The garden city”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Psalm 104

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

I remember this thicket of densely packed trees and shrubs in my backyard. This overgrown wall of green, peppered with red berries and honeysuckle. I suppose a lot of folks would have cut it down and replaced it with something more orderly. But my parents left it, a kind of sanctuary, with secret doors and crevices only a child could find and enter.

Inside was this shaded cavern, this squat chapel, a ceiling arched with tree branches, some places so low you had to crawl. In the largest and most open area, my friends and I set up logs in a circle, where we sat and held council. There we were kings and queens, explorers in a distant land, or pirates in our hidden cove. We named the bumblebees that nested nearby, waited till dark for the fireflies that burned the night. We learned the feeling of bark on our skin, as we climbed trees—and learned the feeling of the ground when we fell out of them.

Nearby we established our own cemetery for the dead animals we found in the neighborhood—mostly squirrels and rabbits, the occasional bird, or one of our pet guinea pigs. I suppose it was a strange sight—this weird cult of children, standing in a circle, holding hands and swaying, as we prayed over the creatures we buried.

There were tree houses, and tall grasses for pretending we were tigers, and a creek nearby perfect for ghost stories we made up to scare the younger ones.

What’s amazing is that I didn’t grow up in the country or the suburbs; I grew up in a city of 2 million people. I grew up with forest, and farmers markets, and rivers, as well as art museums, skyscrapers, and roaring buses. My world was city *and* garden. That wasn’t true, however, for everyone who lived in Cincinnati. Many of my classmates lived in worlds stripped of green, concrete worlds of broken tire swings and barbed wire, food deserts with asbestos still in the walls.

For them, nature was something *out there*, apart. And maybe not just for them, but for many of us as well. We think of nature as some place we go to hike or swim. Nature is a place we visit, a place we protect or tame or consume; it is an excursion. It is separate. It is *other*.

We are become like Adam and Eve who—conscious and ashamed of their bodies, their physicality, their nature—seek to clothe and separate themselves. They leave the garden and through their progeny create the first separate human city. They become a people of walls and towers, jealously and violently taking whatever they want.

But today we hear the psalmist sing a song that rips away the veil of separation and reveals a world, a vast universe, of seas and skies, trees and roots, mountains and worms, in which all are connected. A world not unlike the one I discovered in my own little backyard.

We, humanity, are there, in the litany of creation, but we are listed as but one among all of nature. We are not the first to be named, nor the last; we are but a part of the whole. And in this whole, each part gives life to the other. Springs of water give drink to animals. Vegetation provides food for cattle and humans. Trees serve as homes for birds, mountains for goats. Elizabeth Webb writes that in this psalm, “Everything that God has made exists for another creature’s survival, and even enjoyment; birds ‘sing among the branches’ of trees that grow alongside streams of water. Interdependence is the order that God has given to the world, so that each created thing sounds a note in an ongoing harmony.”

It is the song that begins on that very first page of the Bible, as God fashions humanity from the wet soil of the earth and creates them as part of the garden. And it is the song that closes the Bible, as God offers the prophet a new vision that combines garden and city. In this vision, the tree of life is planted smack dab in the center of human life. A river—of living water—runs through the city, feeding that tree of life, which heals the nations.

The vision is not a return to nature, an escape to a cave or forest somewhere, abandoning all that makes us unique; rather, it is a celebration and unification of nature and humanity, of garden and city. And it’s our calling to take up this song and sing it day and night, winter and summer, in youth and old age, till that river flows and that tree grows again.

The time could not be more critical, more urgent. We are facing ecological disaster of an order that will eliminate all life as we know it.

But it’s not enough to name that terror. The environmental movement has done a superb job of raising awareness about the threats to our world. Such awareness has changed little. What we need are experiences that make people fall in love again with this creation, to hear it reverberate with praise and joy. What we need is a rediscovery of the song—the song that bursts from the lips of the psalmist today, the song that beat in my heart as I played in the woods, a song that perhaps beat in yours as well. For only love can connect what seems separate, and only love can turn the tide.

Fear is not enough. Knowledge is not enough. Sacrifice is not enough. We must invite people into a passionate and joyful alternative vision of life.

That vision is before us today, in Psalm 104, in which God rejoices, delights, in creation. It describes a world born of joy, for the purpose of joy. A world built not just on practical needs, but on birdsong and wine that gladdens the heart and oil that makes the face shine and great creatures that elicit awe and wonder.

The garden city is a place of joyful interaction, where children play in woods and streets. A place of garden rooftops, and reclaimed railroad tracks, and walkable neighborhoods, and urban farms.

A place of forest preschools, like the one in Ithaca, where children play and learn outside, all four seasons, where children go home tired, muddy, and happy.

We are here in one of the first waves of that garden city. We stand on holy ground, in this holy Permaculture project, which seeks to allow food and nature to thrive right here in the city, interconnected and sustainable. Here is a gathering place for relationships and spirituality, for learning and civic participation, for food enough for all, for harmony with the natural processes of creation.

Here we sing a song of garden and city reunited. Here we sing a song of a changing environmental movement—one that is less about warding off disaster or awareness raising, and more about getting dirty, and having fun, and falling in love—more about a vision of local, sustainable communities gathering around farmers' markets, contemplative hikes and canoeing, urban re-design, relationships, spirituality. This movement isn't concerned with saving the environment as much as it is dreaming of *being* the environment, of creating a different kind of society in which garden and city, humanity and nature, are one, united in their shared sacredness, their shared beauty and delight.

No longer shall we go to nature. Today, we *are* nature. **Amen.**