

## ***Introduction***

So today we're continuing our walk through nine psalms that act for us as examples of the dozens we see in the Book of Psalms. Today we're talking about Psalm 104, a psalm that, like many other Psalms, emphasizes God's character as creator of everything.

Let me pray for us.

## ***Prayer:***

### ***Today: Psalm 104:***

Psalm 104 is a song and a story about God, and it emphasizes God as the creator and sustainer of everything. It's a prayer that God would continue to take joy in what God's created, and continue to sustain and provide for His creation. It's a prayer that the glory of God--that special quality God has--would continue to be seen in the creation we are a part of.

This psalm reminds us that God is a God of "common graces," of "public graces," of giving to all his creation quite a bit of great stuff--food to eat, water to drink, shelter and work and community. These are common to creation--and held in common, from the hand of God.

We're not talking about "the commons" today, or "common graces" in general--although we should and will sometime. Instead we're talking about what it means to be human, and how God fits into that--or, rather, how we fit into what God has been up to.

And we're starting with Psalm 104 because what it does

more than anything is remind us, demand that we remember as we read it ourselves or read it together, that God is the creator of everything and its *main* caretaker. God is the creator and sustainer of life. We can't talk about people and our place in this world, without first talking about God, in whose image we were first made.

And we will talk about Jesus, because to talk about what people are--or should be--is to talk about Jesus. We'll talk about "the image of God" and what that little phrase means, and we'll return again and again to the way our place in the world interacts with and follows from God's role as creator and sustainer and redeemer of everything we are a part of.

Just a few things, right? If different messages are for different things, today's is meant to get us to perceive our relationship with the world and God, a little differently than we typically do. We'll see how that goes!

### **Stuff:**

And there is stuff that we won't be stepping down into this morning. We aren't going to debate creation and evolution, for example--that's a different message, really, and it's mostly one on the nature of Scripture and what the Bible is and is for. It's a worthwhile conversation, it's just not for today.

### **Beginnings:**

Psalm 104, if it does anything, it reminds us of the beginning of everything we know, of Genesis 1 and 2.

In Genesis 1 and 2 we read about God creating people. I'm not going to go through the entire story. Let me read a bit of

it. God's just made light and night and day and water and earth and sky and living creatures, and

***Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."***

***So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.***

***God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."***

***Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so.***

***God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.***

***Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.***

***By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested***

***from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.***

We could say all sorts of things. Let's say this, though: Humans are part of the created order. We are, right? But we have a special place in it. We're it's pinnacle.

As a theologian named Jürgen Moltmann--someone who I've depended a lot on for today's message and who probably would have been picked on for his name at my elementary school--puts it "There is a fellowship of creation, and a human being is a member of it."

We're part of created stuff. We depended on what came before us in creation; if God hadn't made dirt, it would have been tricky to make humans from it. And we have a lot in common with the rest of the creatures that we remember in Psalm 104. We are all "living beings," which in hebrew could be translated "breath dependent." We breath like other creatures, and we share the same "living space," the earth, and we're blessed with food and with fertility. We share a lot with other creatures.

But from the get go, people are different from the rest of the creation, too. We're given the command to "subdue the earth," which is often taken to mean no more or less than that: control dirt. Farm. Pursue husbandry. Grow things to eat. We name the rest of the animals, a thing we've heard before, but is a crazy big responsibility. With that charge comes borrowed authority over what we name.

And Genesis reminds us that we need, in a unique way, help

and community. We're social in a way that is noticeably different from the rest of those breathing creatures.

### ***"In the Image of God"***

And all these things inform us about that big thing that separates us from other creatures, which is the fact that we are made "in the image of God." We're the only created things out of all created things--seen and unseen, all beings, angels or trees or nuts or anything--given this title.

And theologians have spent piles of cash on coffee and ink and paper trying to say what this "image of God" means. Is it an inclination to create as God creates--because that's all we know of God up to that point? Does this mean that God is just like a really, really big, giant dude? Apparently invisible, though?

Moltmann, that theologian I quoted before, says that this "...designation [as being made in the image of God]...affects the whole human being, both in his [or her] community with other created things and in his [or her] difference from them. As God's image, human beings are God's proxy in his creation, and represent him. As God's image, human beings are for God himself a counterpart, in whom he desires to see himself as if in a mirror. As God's image, finally, human beings are created for the sabbath, to reflect and praise the glory of God which enters into creation, and takes up its dwelling there."

The image of God in us means that we are both part of the created order, as created things in need of God's sustenance, and at the same time, we are given God-like responsibilities to the world: it's care, it's "subduing," its

naming, and being a familiar face that God can see in creation's crowd. As ol' Jurgen puts it, we're God's "proxy" and "represent" God.

### ***Two-Faced in the Best Way!***

We are two-faced, you know? In the best way: Interacting with creation on God's behalf, and interacting with God on Creation's behalf. We are unlike God but bear his image, and we are unlike creation but part of it.

We're unique, and this is great and terrible. It means that how we interact with creation can't be divorced from God and what we know of God. It means that how we interact with God can't ignore the fact that God created us with bodies and breath and need and desire.

God continues to sustain us, continues to do all the Psalm 104 things God has been doing. And yet we live with a power in the universe to do things that no other creature could ever do.

### ***Two Faces: On Our Power:***

For example, we can impact this shared living space with other creatures in a way that none of them can. This is beyond Spiderman-y, "with great power comes great responsibility," even beyond issues of "creation care." We have to ask ourselves: what does it mean to interact with creation as God would? What does it mean to interact with creation as God would?

The things we buy, the life-style choices we make, the corporations we support, the parties we promote: What motivates us to be this way in the world? In the way we live,

are we acting toward the rest of creation as God would?

I have the tiniest bit of advice when it comes to thinking about this: We can't start by railing against the big huge broken systems and evil powers that be. We start with our own behaviors, attitudes, choices, and concessions when it comes to how we live in our shared living space with other people and other creatures.

And do start with people as you think about these things: What do you think should happen to the very, very young, the very very old, prisoners and lawbreakers and political enemies, the sick and the poor? Or your neighbor who is driving you nuts.

And do shoot for consistency: Is murder always murder? How do we hold anti-abortion and pro-death penalty in the same hand?

And the only way to ever come to behavior-changing conclusions about this stuff is to draw close to the Holy Spirit, around scripture, together, and begin to talk; sometimes for a really long time.

Do we care about creation the way God cares about creation, or don't we? This isn't rhetorical: Do you care about creation the way God, who made it, cares about it? What would our next door neighbor say? Or our moms?

Our answers are revealed in real-life, daily, habits and behaviors, not in how we feel or our theories about what "ought" to happen. God could think really positively about sustaining creation for us, but if he didn't act on it, then our

atoms would blow apart.

### ***Two Faces: On our Dependency:***

So we need to keep this in mind. We are dependent. God is, in a psalm 104 way, showering common graces on all humanity, all the time. All things are being held together, when they could spin apart just as easily if God allowed Himself to be distracted.

This is why we can say to anyone inclined to be so impressed by the wonders God has made that they confuse creation with God that, while we aren't into dogma either, we don't believe creation has its own personality.

The world, the universe, it has the mark of its maker and sustainer, and if you want to connect with animals or trees or the whisper of wind in autumn leaves, the best you can do is get close to the one who thought it all up in the first place and still, engaged and committed, keeps it going.

### ***Fall & Failure & Marring God's Image***

So we can say that humans are made "in the image of God" and that this means that we're both unlike God and but also really can have God-like impact in the world around us. Our impact is borrowed and incomplete, but it's real.

We're "both-and" in little ways. We're unique out of all things. Made in the image of God. This is what people are; it's part of our power.

But power is a strange thing. It goes unused. It gets abused. It is misused. What could be good becomes not-so-great, or downright evil. The thing is, the human story doesn't stop at



creation--if that were the case, God's sustaining care wouldn't be that big a deal. Things kept moving, and "the Fall" happened, and sin entered the world, and--oh, it splintered creation's boards, or, say, snagged threads on creation's sweater. Sin messed everything up. People who were supposed to "subdue the earth," control dirt, ended up having to deal with ground covered in thorns and weeds and little rocks that get in the way. We ended up in the dirt, covered by it.

That "image of God," that double-looking, double-life role and responsibility, it was broken. And all our efforts became partial and mess. Adam's transgression took over, and the world broke.

Part of what it means to be human is to be caught in a web of sin. Our best efforts are stymied. Our best intentions never come to fruition. Pragmatism gnaws at our ideals. Self-protective and self-interested craftiness is rewarded, while a life of virtue ends in anonymity and dismissal. We kill and are killed, fail and fail others, and we ourselves make messes, contribute to the whole, splinter the frame.

This is humanity. This is what it means to carry the image of God, still, but have that image marred and broken by sin. We aren't people God can look at in order to see a reflection of himself; instead, we make up false gods from the things we see around us.

We don't "act as God's proxy" to creation, as Jurgy said we should--or, if we do, it is in the worst ways. We act with power, but compassionless power, power without personal investment. We go beyond the purpose God made us for,

and claim creation as our own to do with as we please-- person, place or thing become nouns to turn into cash or power.

### ***Thank God!***

And so, thank God for the commons, for common grace, for joys and pleasures and happiness, for rare moments when humans have enough but not too much, and all of our safety and community and material and immaterial needs go met.

The thing is, life should be a lot worse for people than it is. This is the miracle of Psalm 104. This is the miracle of a public park, and babies that aren't hungry, and nights without violence, and autumn leaves to kick or rake. The miracle is that against our intentional and accidental efforts to mess the world up even worse than it is, God keeps sustaining things, and occasionally we find joy, rest, the ability to "subdue the earth," to control the dirt so that good things come of it without destroying it.

This is a grace. We take it for granted as people.

### ***Christian Humans:***

But some of what I am saying isn't true for us in this room. Because we are in Christ, we are Christians.

We share in the same common graces that our sustaining God continues to give the world. And of course, we share in the same context, right? We're alive in the world: We are still trapped in a web of sin, stuck right in the middle of ways of organizing the world that have nothing to do with God and everything to do with competition and the self-interested for-profit, strategic death and use of people, places, and things.

But our power has been renewed in one major, major way: we are able, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to make less mess. To sin less. And this is all because of Jesus. And not just this: but we're given a team to do Spirit-inspired, "greater things than these" things, and we're given Scripture to guide us in our pursuits.

*This is a big deal!*

### **Jesus & Folks:**

Jesus is, in some real ways, the way humans were always meant to be. Remember, we're two faced people, we have a foot in both camps--both part of creation but different from it--special with in it. We're both empowered to be like God, given naming rights and all the rest, but enormously limited in that, too.

And all this is muddled up by the fall, by the world's mess and the mess we make in it. Jesus, though, Jesus is sort of human as we've never been able to be since the fall, since sin entered the world, and also, fully God, fully "the image of God." He is, as Paul puts it: "The image of the invisible God."

Paul says that "If anyone is in Christ--New Creation!" He almost blurts it out. Our Bibles read, stoically "If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation." Okay. That masks some of the impact the Greek has, especially for the ladies, which is much more along the lines of grasping at a concept so big you can barely communicate it: If you're in the Messiah--well, New Creation! It's here! It's happening!

This is what Paul's saying. If anyone is in Christ, New

Creation!

And in fact, what we know about Jesus is that he is the “original of the species,” right? He’s God and Man, fully divine and fully human. He is new creation in the flesh, a new type of person, “a new way to be human”--as a band put it once.

### ***A New Way to be Human:***

And because of Jesus--his life, his death, his work, his resurrection: the whole thing--we through faith are gathered into him. Paul talks in Romans--and all sorts of other places--about the way our baptisms symbolize how we have been “united” to Christ. Jesus says to his disciples that on this side of the Holy Spirit we’ll realize that “you are in me and I am in you.”

This is part of what we celebrated and remembered in communion last week--that we’ve been joined with Jesus together. And by the Spirit alive in us, we’re able to become that “new way to be human” that Jesus was.

Paul talks about what happens to us. Because we’re in Christ, because of trusting Jesus and keeping faith with him, we’ve been given the Holy Spirit. Now and then Paul talks about the Holy Spirit as a “deposit on our account.” The Spirit is God’s make-good, earnest money to prove that our New Creation hopes--resurrection and New Heavens and New Earth--that they’ll come true.

And the Spirit works even now in our lives, sustaining us, and doing one amazing work in particular, which is the work of transforming us into people like Jesus:

The Holy Spirit enables us to upgrade from the “image of God” that all people have, broken as it is by sin, into the likeness of Jesus. “And we all, who with unveiled faces reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” Moltmann suggests that part of what it means for people to be created in the “image of God” is for God to be able to see Himself in us; and what Paul is telling us is that because of the Spirit alive in us, because of what Jesus has done, God can.

### ***Being Changed:***

We are being changed. That image of God in us, which was no small thing and is still in every person born, but has been messed up, scarred a little by sin, it’s been--not necessarily replaced--but definitely upgraded. Jesus was “the image of the invisible God” fully realized, the promise of what people could be, and we, by the Holy Spirit, are being transformed into his likeness. We’re able to live in the world, in this “fellowship with all creation,” still as creatures depending on the common graces of God, but also as people who can be like Christ, the “image of the invisible God” and live like him.

### ***Creation & New Creation:***

Remember the first case of creation?

God made the heavens and the earth, then people “in the image of God,” then rested. This gets flipped around when it comes to New Creation. In this case, “new human being” is at the start: Jesus’ life and ministry and death and resurrection, it’s the start of New Creation. And “new heavens and new earth,” they come at the end.

Sabbath--rejuvenating rest--becomes permanent, instead of the little glimpses we get now and then, or the little ways we try to mimic God's rest.

And all the ways sin disabled us from living up to our "image of God" powers are finished and death is ended and the hope of creation, that--as Paul puts it--"it would be set free from its bondage to decay"--this hope is finally realized. And food and light and medicine and wealth: it becomes part of the commons, access is given to any New Creation person who needs it.

### ***God's Never Stopped Creating:***

The fact is that God never gave up creating; never stopped. This maybe is what we mean when we say that God is love; God has always been engaged and positioning us and the rest of creation for as little impact from sin as we can get. The most amazing thing about God's sustaining work in creation is that God worked out a way to bring about, for people, something even better than "the image of God" that we had originally been given.

Jesus came into the world and made new the image of God in every person who trusts him. And beyond this, the sabbath rest that crowned creation in the first place, the full realization of which we are still waiting for--we're able to experience a little bit of it right now.

Until New Heaven and New Earth break out all over and Sabbath rest becomes normal, we can still find in our dependance on the Spirit inside us what Eugene Peterson translated as "unforced rhythms of grace," and what Jesus

simply called “an easy yoke and light burden.”

### ***A Worry***

Sometimes I worry that every message I preach ends up being “be like Jesus, be like Jesus,” and maybe that at some point someone is going to say to me, where’s the pay-off, here, Rich? We need “spiritually fed,” you know? We need meat. Bible meat. And I just want to shrug my shoulders and say what more is there than this?

The image of God that you were born with, that all people are born with, which is so good, but also has been so broken by sin: Because of your faith it has been upgraded into something better than you could ever imagine. The Holy Spirit allows you to become like Jesus, the archetypal person, the person who people were always meant to be. New Creation has begun in him, and you’re a part of it. It will be fully realized, but never finalized, because when New Heavens and New Earth come about, and resurrection is all over the place, we who have lived faithfully in Christ will live forever in a sabbath rest that we can only barely imagine.

This is what it means to be a person, now. I mean, really, to be a Christian is to be a new sort of person, who has more power to live for God--God’s own power alive in us--than any person before Jesus ever could have had, even on their best days. So, in some real ways, I just wonder what else there is to urge a person to do, except to urge us to depend on the Spirit, be informed by Scripture, and together to become like Jesus.

That is of course broad. But today we’re talking about humanity, and what it means to be human, and what it

means to be human is to turn from the trap of Adam and live in the freedom of Christ, freedom to take up our real role as "the image of God" in the world. This only comes as we become more like Christ, and seek to live a life that leads us to say with Paul "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me."

### ***Conclusion: Application***

I do want to give us some sort of application, you know. Some concrete thing, so we feel like we've earned something for our time. Eat your greens. Mow your neighbor's lawn. I feel a little bad for just tossing out a "theology of humanity" or something.

I want to say, "Because the image of God has been renewed in you by your faith--and not just renewed, but upgraded to something better, God's own Spirit alive you--don't yell at your three dogs when they freak out over a squirrel in the backyard."

I'm talking to myself again; But that's part of the point! We can talk to ourselves with the mind of Christ and heart of God instead of in all the ways we typically do--with self-interest, and vengeance, and worry, and the control of others at the forefront of our wills. We can remind ourselves of the truth of who we are and what God has called us to do and be in the world, in the places we find ourselves.

We have the Spirit alive in us, and stand in two worlds.

We can start so simply: What is the trouble you can't get out of your mind? Is it some conflict you are in? Is it some worry you have? What are you dealing with? Think about it for a



moment, this thing:

## ***moment***

Okay. How can God help you in this thing? Because God wants to help you in this thing so that you might become more like Jesus than you are right now. And becoming like Jesus is good for us, you know? It's meant to be good, it's meant to feel nice. We're meant to be happy when that image of God in us has been made into something even better--Christ's own likeness in us. So what do you need from God and how can one of these other "new way to be human" people you're worshipping God with help?

For those of us who are ready for it, we could go beyond this. We could ask broader questions: ***How is God calling you to help creatures around you? How is God calling you to subdue the earth--to work in this world for the good of its creatures, especially other people? And when Christ looks at you, how clear is his reflection?***

The problem with the application of today's message is that it's everything and nothing. What are you discovering as you draw close to Scripture, other Christians, and God through prayer? Because what you discover when you do these things as Christians, with the Spirit alive in you, is, really, what it means to be most human. And we could each talk about our lives, so full of their human stuff, until they end.

But each of us knows where in our own lives we need to begin talking, exploring, claiming the power and role that is ours by grace. Start where God leads you, and when we see our reflections this week, let's remember that we're more

than we think we are, with great power, great promise, called to great things. We are a new way to be human, in a creation that is becoming new, too.

God has given us to the world He is sustaining and remaking. How will we care for it? What needs to change?