

“You Are My God . . . Lead Me To Level Ground!”

Gordon Straw

This sermon was preached at the “Multicultural Gathering” of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “Lift Every Voice: In Praise, In Song, and In Dance” in Orlando, Florida, July 10, 2004. The service honored worship traditions from American Indian Lutheran communities from different places in the United States. The “audience” (about 500 people) was multicultural and multiracial from throughout the United States and the Caribbean. The purpose of the sermon was to highlight some theological themes important to most American Indian Christian communities.

Hear my prayer, O Lord; give ear to my supplication in your faithfulness; answer me in your righteousness. Do not enter into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you. For the enemy has pursued me, crushing my life to the ground, making me sit in darkness like those long dead. Therefore, my spirit faints within me; my heart within me is appalled.

I remember the days of old, I think about all your deeds, I meditate on the works of your hands. I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land. Answer me quickly, O Lord; my spirit fails. Do not hide your face from me, or I shall be like those who go down to the Pit. Let me hear of your steadfast love in the morning, for in you I put my trust. Teach me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul. Save me, O Lord, from my enemies; I have fled to you for refuge. Teach me to do your will, for you are my God. Let your good spirit lead me on a level path. (Psalm 143:1-10)

Grace and peace to you from God: Creator, Redeemer, Spirit!

My lawn is my kingdom.

My lawn is my kingdom! Well, by most standards it is not much of a kingdom. In fact, it is really only about 400 square feet, total. I call it my “postage-stamp” lawn, because it feels like I am mowing a lawn the size of a postage stamp. I grew up on a farm-place, with a lawn that covered about two and one-half acres. My brothers and I mowed it with a single, 21-inch push mower. My dad did not buy a riding lawn mower until we moved off the farm. My very first paying job was to mow the lawn of one of our farm neighbors for a summer. Their lawn was no less than five acres in size. Now, I can easily mow my lawn in about twenty minutes—with an electric cord attached! Though it is not much, even as lawns may go, at least I *act* as if my lawn is my kingdom. For Father’s Day this year, the children in our congregation’s Sunday school created a little book as a gift to all the fathers within the congregation. Each child filled out one page in the book, answering questions about their fathers. My daughter was asked to draw a picture of what her dad does on a Saturday. She drew a picture of me mowing my kingdom . . . ahem, my lawn.

Yet when I think about it, all of this “caring for my kingdom” is really kind of silly. If it does not rain enough, I run out to put sprinklers on my lawn in order to prevent the lawn from turning brown. If it does not grow fast enough or thick enough, I get out my drop spreader and put

fertilizer with weed control on my lawn. Then, I get *brownstripes* up and down my lawn. In the fall, leaves barely get the chance to fall to the ground, before I am out there to rake them up. This is all rather silly, because I complain, year in and year out, about having to mow my lawn! Why on earth, then, am I feeding and watering it? Why even mow my lawn at all, when it can grow into such a lush and beautiful, natural carpet? Garrison Keillor of “A Prairie Home Companion” fame on public radio once claimed that the lawn mower must have been invented by a Lutheran. He explained that when Lutherans first arrived on this continent, they felt so guilty about lying down in such beautiful, lush grass. One of them invented the lawnmower in order to mow the grass to a sharp point. That way, when they lay down on it, they would not feel so guilty!

The Kingdom, the World, and the Environment

How did we arrive at such a silly state of affairs? We, in the human community, have been too tempted to focus our theological energies on a couple of texts that suit *us*, and *ignore or misread or explain away* a much greater witness in Scripture. We humans seem to prefer quoting two passages in particular:

Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’”
(Genesis 1:26)

What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet.
(Psalm 8:4-6).

What we really seem to like is the idea of “*dominion!*” In its breadth, we like the idea that everything that is not human or divine, we can call “mere nature” or “environment.” In its depth, we like the idea that we are a little lower than God, such that everything else is “beneath us.” In fact, we like this idea of dominion so much that it influences nearly every aspect of our lives. It influences our notions of science and art. It influences pretty much all of our academic disciplines, including theology. It influences our ideas about society, law, and morality.

Although people within the animal rights movement are quick to agree with the idea of championing the rights of other beings, yet it also seems that “animal rights” themselves are fashioned from the notion of “human rights”—as if we cannot respect other beings unless they look like us humans. It even influences our church life. On the feast-day of Saint Francis of Assisi, many congregations have “special” worship services on behalf of all of God’s creatures. These services can border on a “quaint ceremony” that helps humans to feel good about including their pets, for one day a year, within the scope of Christ’s salvation. Whoever convinced most Christians that Christ’s redeeming power was meant only for human beings, did not read the Scriptures too closely.

Even Paul Tillich, an otherwise brilliant and grace-filled theologian, succumbs to this sort of human theological arrogance in his treatment of Creation. In his seminal work, *Systematic Theology*, Paul Tillich distinguishes between the concepts of “world” and “environment” in a discussion of the “dimensions of life.”¹ He argues that when a new dimension is added to the life of beings, the beings who participate in this new dimension are superior to all the beings who do not participate within the new dimension. The animal world is “higher” than the world of vegetation, because animals participate in the dimension of “self-awareness.” Humans are “higher” than animals, because humans have entered into the divine dimension of “spirit.” It is simply arrogant (on a Creation-wide scale) to say that only humans participate in the dimension of spirit. The *very first* witness of Scripture is that the Spirit—or, the breath—of God moves over the waters and enlivens *all* that exists, *from the beginning!* (Genesis 1:1-2). The Spirit does not show up on the sixth day of Creation and make a cameo appearance, as Paul Tillich and many other Christians seem to argue.

Paul Tillich further argues that since humans and the divine are the only participants in the dimension of spirit, they have surpassed “mere environment” and have reached “world.”² The world is meant here not as the ‘earth’ or the ‘universe;’ rather, it refers to an abstract construction of thought. Tillich writes, “In contrast to all other beings, humans do not have only ‘environment,’ humans have ‘world,’ the structured unity of all possible content. This and its implications make him [sic] the highest being.”³ In other words, only God and humans can be spiritual; all else is biology and psychology.

A wonderful example of the implications of Tillich’s argument is “the weed.” I never really thought much about it until I had to pull dozens of dandelions from my lawn—by hand! “Why am I doing this, anyway?” I wonder to myself. “I can just *leave them here*. That’s it! “Anyway, they’re kinda cute! They *are* fellow creatures—God’s creation. Who am I to place such a judgment on a plant to call it—a ‘weed?’” A weed, by definition, is a *plant* that humans have decided they do not like.⁴ And we attach the adjective, “noxious” to it, just to be clear that there is no mistaking it for a “friendly” weed or a “nice” weed. There are plants that give us wine and salads (dandelions), honey (clover), condiments (mustard), even examples of great faith (mustard, again)—but we call them *weeds*. However, have you ever tried controlling *mint* in your garden? The leaves of the *rhubarb* are about as noxious as they come. And I could personally do without those annoying sprigs of *parsley* on my plate, when I am trying to enjoy my dinner in a restaurant. In this so-called “world” that we humans have fashioned, we have called some perfectly good plants “weeds” and thereby subordinated them to other plants that we have decided are *not* weeds.

Nothing could be further from the Psalmist’s reality.

The psalmist offers a perspective in our sermon text that is worthy of our attention. I want to convey this perspective through some brief Hebrew word studies. First of all, there are two words used in our text to describe the reality of life: *khay* and *nephesh*. *Khay* are used to describe life in general terms, that is, all of life or the whole Creation. In verse 2, we have the example: “...no one *living* is righteous before you.”⁵ The concept of *khay* embraces anything that is alive: anything green or flowing, anything fresh or active, anything that has a reviving quality, any

relative, any animal, the notion of community, and the abstract notion of “life” itself. There is no distinction between environment and world here.

The concept of *nephesh*, unfortunately, is most often translated as “soul” in English. “Soul” has a long history of baggage in the church’s theology, much of it borrowed from the Greek notion of “soul,” as distinguished from anything earthly or created. This baggage obscures the richness of meaning that this Hebrew concept has to offer. The examples found in our text are: “crushing my *life* to the ground” (v. 3), “my *soul* thirsts for you” (v. 6), “I lift up my *soul*” (v. 8).⁶ This richness of meaning can hardly be contained, it means: “self,” “life,” “creature,” “person,” “appetite,” “mind,” “being,” “desire,” “emotion,” “passion,” “that which breathes”—the breath of being alive! *Nephesh* means not merely soul, but the whole person! And not just human persons, but all persons in Creation!

Nephesh has such richness, because our life, as beings, is born out of “spirit”—*ruah*.⁷ We are born out of the very breath of God, the life-giving wind of God: the same creating wind that moved over the waters at the beginning of Creation, the same breath that enlivened the dust of the ground to make human beings, the same wind that brought dry bones to life before Ezekiel’s eyes, the same wind that gave new life to this new community we call the church—*ruah*! It is this same “spirit” that we find in our text: “My *spirit* faints within me” (v. 4), “Answer me . . . my *spirit* fails” (v. 7), and “let your good *spirit* lead me” (v. 10). The text says, in no uncertain terms, that it is *the* Spirit who brings life, animation, morality, and prophecy to *our* spirits. It is the one we call God, who comes in our darkest hours.

You might even say, then, that our creaturely life is “spirit-filled” *earth*—*eretz*!⁸ In the beginning, God created the heavens and the *earth*! God did not separate humans from Creation, but the heavens from the earth, *eretz*! God took some of that spirit-filled earth and breathed life into it, fashioning humans. But, not before God already let all kinds of life come forth from this same earth. Examples of *eretz* in the text are: “crushing my life to the *ground*” (v. 3), “my soul thirsts for you like parched land (*ground*)” (v. 6), and, “lead me on a level path (*ground*)” (v. 10). So, the meaning in our text has a more specific meaning. It refers to the ground *upon which* we are being crushed, *upon which* we are parched. *Eretz* is where we are placed, along with the rest of Creation, even when our own spirit fails within us. It also refers to the land upon which we live. In the case of our text, it is the land of the Hebrew people, a land given by God as a gift.

You are my God. Lead me to level ground . . .

We come full circle now to see that the Psalmist’s lament concerns not merely humanity’s relationship to God, but humanity’s relationship to the whole *world* (*eretz*)! The Psalmist laments and cries out to God, the Creator of all life, for salvation from *himself* and his own destructive thinking: thinking that humans are somehow superior to the rest of Creation, thinking that an abstract, conceptual “world” can replace the life-giving substance of the earth and all its creatures.

The Psalmist cries out in verses four and six: “my spirit faints within me!” “I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched (dusty and thirsty) land.” We cry out, “I have become arrogant to think that *my* hands had *anything* to do with God’s creation.” Constructing abstract worlds brings no life; only the breath of God brings life and brings it abundantly! Claiming superiority over weeds, brings no life . . . over other creatures, from bugs to bears, brings no life . . . over people unlike me, brings no life . . . over other Christians, brings no life . . . over lay people, brings no life . . . over those in need, brings no life . . . only the breath of God brings life and brings it abundantly! My own arrogance has drained my life dry—as dry as bones in the desert.

The Psalmist recognizes that it is God alone who truly brings to life all that has life: “I remember the days of old, I think about all *your* deeds, I meditate on the works of *your* hands” (v. 5). The Psalmist cries out for the only reality that makes for life: “lead me on a level path, O God!” “Level” not only in the sense of “without bumps and holes,” but, especially in the sense of “having equity,” “having equality.” We cry out, “Save me from my selfish desire to make my own world. Help me to see *all* my relatives on this earth.” “Place me face to face with all the life you have created—my sisters and brothers in the faith, those I love, those I hate, and those who can bring me transformation.” “Lead me to the cross of Christ,” we pray, because at the foot of the cross the ground *is* level. Christ redeems not only humanity but all of Creation. Christ’s death on the cross brings healing to *all* creatures, not only human creatures. Christ has come for the sake of *heaven and earth*, not simply for abstract worlds of thought.

Finally, the Psalmist cries out, “Answer me quickly, O Lord; my spirit fails!” (143: 7). In literal fashion, the Psalmist calls out for a *song*—*anah*. *Anah* not only carries the meaning of “to answer,” but also “to sing” and “to dwell” as well. So we cry out with the Psalmist, “Sing to me quickly, Lord”—not of abstract answers to our real-life thirsts, but so that I may have joy! “Sing to me quickly, Lord”—not of programs or structures or designs, but of your grace that surrounds me! We cry out, “Dwell in me,” Spirit of God, that I may have *life* and that I may have it *abundantly*!

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1 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, V. III, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963, pp. 36-39.

2 “Man [sic] lives in an environment, but he has a world...., i.e. a structured whole of infinite potentialities and actualities. In his encounter with his environment . . . he experiences both environment and world; or more exactly, in and through his encounter with the things of his environment he encounters a world. He transcends their merely environmental quality.” Tillich, p. 38.

3 Tillich, p. 36.

4 After the worship service, an ecologist thanked me for the sermon, and then she corrected me, saying that an ecological definition for “weed” is a plant that is out of place. I find this very intriguing and not far from where I was going.

5 Strong # 2416, “Strong’s Hebrew and Greek Complete Reference” as found in the software program, *The Bible Collection*, Valusoft, 2004. Any further references to this resource will contain the Strong number only.

6 Strong #5315

7 Strong #7307

8 Strong #776