

Rev. Heike Werder
Psalm 8, Psalm 24:1

"It all belongs to God"

For as long as I can remember, I have loved working in the garden. I think my spouse would tell you that she finds me the happiest and most content when my hands are in the dirt preparing the soil for planting, or cleaning the fountain so the bees from next door have fresh water, or going around trimming bushes, deadheading flowers, or harvesting the fruits of my labor. As a child I watched my grandparents and parents work their gardens, and when I was old enough, I certainly was encouraged to help.

Now it was not always fun. What do you think a 12 year old rather do: play with her friends, or pick buckets of currants for 6 hours? But the result of that work carried us through the winter. I grew up on homemade jam and juice, and most of the vegetables we ate, came from our garden. This might be the reason why I have not met a vegetable that I don't like.

As an adult I have carried on with the tradition of having a garden. The first thing I did when we bought our first home was to install a vegetable garden. Forget about unpacking boxes. I just could not help myself.

At home in East Germany, my aunt was the head gardener. She'll get it all started, and we, my mom, sister and I would do any of the assigned tasks throughout the growing season.

When my aunt took on a teaching assignment in the United States for one year in 1986, she had to leave by mid-August. It was the day before she left that we walked the garden together and she told me, "While I am away, this is yours to take care of!" While I was quite stunned by this announcement, we continued walking the garden and she told what to do with all of the different crops. My aunt left the next day, and there I was in charge of a huge vegetable garden, a temperamental lawn, 30 chickens, six cats and a dog.

At first, it seemed like the most impossible of all tasks. How in the world could I even conceive of taking care of something this big and complicated?

Actually, in hindsight, it was not that crazy to think that. There is an absolutely amazing biblical truth in today's reading from Psalm 8. The Lord God Almighty of this universe created the heavens and the earth and then put the whole of creation into your hands and mine! In other words, God said, "This is all ours to take care of now!"

The words of Psalm 8 are a part of a hymn about the glory of God in creation and the place of honor that has been given to humankind. "...you have made them a little lower than God... you have given them dominion over the works of their hands; you have put all things under their feet..." Do you see what this means? We are actually partners with God in the management and protection of the creation we inhabit.

As we look carefully into the heart of Psalm 8, it becomes clear that the whole issue of whether the air is fit to breathe or water is fit to drink is not primarily a social or a political concern - it is a spiritual concern. Indeed the Psalm goes to the core of the real meaning of stewardship. Stewardship is not a special Sunday in the year when we receive our annual pledges to support the budget, it is not even contained in the well-known appeal to share our time, talent and treasure with the Body of Christ.

Stewardship means that every person of faith is a partner with God in the management of creation.

This does take me back to the day my aunt looked over her garden and said, "This is all yours to take care of while I am away." It would be my responsibility to make sure the garden would not be overrun by weeds. But more than that - the fact that my aunt turned the care of the garden over to me spoke volumes about three fundamental issues: what a great aunt and teacher she really was (see along the way she did teach me how to take care of the garden), it placed an incredible value on me as her niece, and it spoke of the amazing way she considered me to be capable of things I thought only she could do.

It is no accident that these three themes are very much a part of the central meaning of Psalm 8. It is a song about, [1] The Greatness of God, [2] The value God has Placed on Humankind, and [3] The Amazing Work God has Given Us To Do.

First: The Greatness of God

Psalm 8 begins and ends with an affirmation about the greatness of God in creation. O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

In the biblical drama, God is over and above creation. The glory of God is above the heavens. God is not a part of creation and creation is not God. God is the Holy One who gave birth to all of creation. The moon and the stars are the work of God's hands. But it is in the highlight of God's creation - in human beings that the glory of God is most reflected.

The Psalmist points us to the Greatness of God as the foundation for living. As the words, O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! stand at the beginning and the end of Psalm 8, so they give us strength if we will let them stand at the beginning and ending of each day.

Second: The Value God has placed on humankind

The creation points to the greatness and glory of God. "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands." [Psalm 19:1] But there is something else in creation that points to the glory of God. Amazingly - it is us!

Listen again, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them... yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor." A sunset is beautiful, the mountains are majestic and a brilliant starlit night can take your breath away. But it is the work of God in creating us that comes closest to reflecting the glory of God in creation.

That's a hard thought sometimes isn't it? You look around the world and it is hard to see the glory of God in humanity.

Nevertheless, an incredible value has been placed on us by the God who made us. We are, "...crowned with glory and honor," and though that glory has been marred and the honor has frequently fallen - Psalm 8 calls every person of faith to look to the heart of God for our true worth.

And Third: The Amazing work God has given us to do

The greatness of God in all of creation and the worth that has been placed on us by God leads very naturally to the conclusion. "You have given them dominion over the works of your hands, you have put all things under their feet..."

We are partners with God in the greatest work in the universe. We are stewards of a marvelous blue island in an ever expanding awesome universe. We are called to work toward establishing the true worth of every man, woman and child on the face of the earth. We are called to bring the peace of God to every troubled corner of our world.

The task is phenomenal and the trust God has placed on us is nothing short of astonishing. It will take reflection, prayer and commitment to live into the true meaning of this Psalm of praise.

And, I think, it will take action. Today is Earth Day! In fact, it is the 42nd Earth Day. Some might think of this day as a political rallying day for better legislation that benefit the environment, or a day to remind ourselves how to be green or be more green. All that is correct. But there is more to it. There is a deeply spiritual component to this day and our actions.

In Psalm 24 we read: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world and those who dwell in it." Our faith is inclusive of all things, all things living and non-living; and all that is still belongs to God, for God is the source of all life. Nothing we do, nothing we feel, nothing we believe, falls outside of God's interest, including the way the Creator's creatures use and misuse creation.

God has given the earth to us for our use and enjoyment, but nevertheless, the earth still belongs to God. Traditionally stated, we are stewards of God's creation; managers of the assets given to us by God to take care of. Maybe a more updated image is that we are creative partners with a creative God.

Understanding ourselves as God's creative partners reminds us that we are created in the image of God. The environment is impacted by our presence. As God created the world out of nothing, we create culture and our social world out of the world God shares with us. And being in partnership with God and one another makes us responsible and accountable for what we do with this world given to us.

I could give you the list of all that is going wrong with planet earth do to our shortcoming and failures. I am not going to do that. I want to leave you with a different list that is positively proactive when it comes to care for the earth. These are some things to do that might reenergize our love for God's beautiful gift of the earth to us:

#1) Get out into the world. It is far easier to maintain our energy for the work of caring for the planet when it is an experiential reality rather than a mental abstraction. Take a walk at Hale Reservation. Dig in your garden. Immerse yourself in a beautiful sunset. Let the earth nourish your soul.

#2) Remember that the whole world is "holy ground." It is easier to care for the planet when it serves as a source of sacred connection for us. We are not alone. God is here with us. Spend time praying for the earth. Spend time praying while you are actually out enjoying the earth.

#3) Be gentle with yourself. It is easy to become overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problems. And it is easy to beat up on ourselves for not doing "enough." Instead we let us acknowledge that we haven't yet discovered how best to express the fullness of who we really are and in the meantime we are always doing the best we know how. Gentleness is a far more effective starting place for healing the earth than strident, judgmental self-incriminations.

#4) Make your own list of how to best celebrate, play, heal and take care of the earth in your setting and circumstance. Creativity will take us far.

And most of all, listen to your heart and see where God is leading you.

Amen.