

DEEP CALLS TO DEEP: SUMMER IN THE PSALMS

The Prayers of Wild Things

Psalm 104

July 19, 2026

"We were not the first ones to sing. In fact, we were not even close. If the deep sea had a hymnal of its own, we would not even earn a footnote. Long before the first human struggled to shape breathless awe into prayerful words, the whales were singing across open water in a language we're still trying to learn. Long before we built temples to contain our liturgy, the cedars were standing in sanctuaries of silent praise. And deep down in the trenches, in the cold and the dark, Leviathan found freedom in play. This week our son Samuel suggested that their preferred sport was synchronized swimming.

You see, we showed up late to a song already ancient. *In the beginning, God created.* No help from us.

All summer long, we've been living inside the Psalms, and if you've been paying attention, you've probably noticed where we fit in their story. We are not the main character.

If you heard Madison's wonderful sermon last Sunday, you were reminded to lift your eyes up to the hills, up to the one who created you and all this world. We are not the main character.

Our culture offers a radically different script. We are relentlessly reminded that we are the stars of our own story, the subject of every sentence, the reason the feed is arranged the way it is. We live in a Ready Player One culture. Optimize yourself. Depend on nobody. Need nothing. It seems to me we've built an entire way of life that treats dependence as failure or as proof that you have not yet made it. Some of us have become so convincing in our portrayal of self-sufficiency that people have stopped offering to help us. We answer, "I'm fine," before the question is even out of our neighbors' mouths. Some of us have become so skilled at carrying it all alone that it feels like the only choice.

The Psalms were never going to cooperate. A hymn, by its very nature, points beyond the one singing it. *Bless the Lord, O My Soul. You are very great, clothed in honor and majesty. You laid the foundations of the earth. You filled the seas with water. Bless the Lord.*

I love how Psalm 104 opens. The poet takes out the widest lens imaginable: God clothed in light. God riding upon the winds. The psalmist takes it all in, paying

attention to every corner of creation as it passes by. Springs gush into valleys. Wild donkeys quench their thirst. Birds nest in the cedars. Storks make their homes in the fir trees. In the 104th Psalm, every creature is given a place and a voice. Every creature belongs.

Then we come to that strangest line in the psalm. You heard it: *There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in the sea.* The sea monster, the creature of chaos that haunted the ancient imagination. Every ancient culture imagined their gods locked in battle with the sea monster. The Psalmist imagines God laughing instead. What is this terror of the deep doing? Playing.

The Hebrew text allows another possibility: that God formed Leviathan to play with. Not a monster tolerated, but a creature God delights in. A companion in the sea. In other words, the wildness of creation is not a problem God is trying to solve, but a joy God embraces.

Barbara Brown Taylor points out something many of us miss in the story that opens the Book of Genesis. We come to the sixth day of creation. For us, it is the apex day of creation. The spotlight, of course, on day six belongs to humanity. Except—not so much. We were not alone on the sixth day of creation. The cattle came first. Then the creeping things. Then the wild animals. And only then, late in the day, do we appear. Yes, God gives us work to do, but never says we are better than anything else God has made.

In the picture of creation, the donkey belongs. The cedar belongs. Leviathan belongs. The creeping things belong. And the mountains thunder God's praise. So do we. Not above and beyond and apart from creation, but within it. Ours are voices in a choir that began rehearsal without us.

Whenever we are tempted to believe that God loves us for our usefulness, or that God created us for efficiency, Psalm 104 insists that God simply delights in creation. The manifold works of God have absolutely nothing to prove. God simply looks on them with delight.

Somehow, I fear, we've become convinced that our value rises and falls with our usefulness. We don't rest because resting feels like irrelevance. We don't ask for help because needing it feels like proof we're not

enough by ourselves. We've assumed that God's love works the same way the market does. We must perform and produce and prove ourselves.

Some of you are exhausted this morning, not because of late nights and depleted energy, but because of this existential anxiety, these questions that will not leave you alone. Questions like: Am I doing enough? Am I working hard enough? Am I earning enough? Am I producing enough?

Let Psalm 104 be a word of grace for you today. It is not an ode to productivity. It is simply a hymn of delight.

Consider the fact that before you have done anything measurable, you are already the object of divine delight. Why? Because you exist. Like Walter, whose baptism we just celebrated, it is your existence itself that brings a smile to God's face. Stop trying out for a team you've already been invited to join. Stop auditioning and pretending, and another way becomes possible. You can finally admit this hard truth. You are dependent.

This is another grace note in Psalm 104—the reminder that no part of creation is self-sufficient. If you trace the words of the psalm, you will see the connections between its verses. How the springs feed the donkeys. The trees shelter the birds. The mountains are for the goats. The rocks protect the hyrax (look that one up). Actually, I already did for you. It's in Verse 18. A hyrax is described as a well-furred, rotund mammal with a small tail. And while the hyrax may look like a rabbit or a badger, thus earning the name rock rabbit or rock badger, it actually is much closer to the manatee and the elephant.

You see, everything God made depends on something else God made. Dependence is not a flaw. It's built into the design of creation.

And so, what if it is true for you as well? What would it look like for you to receive a gift without apologizing for welcoming it? What would it look like for you to let someone else share a burden you've been carrying all by yourself? What would it look like to welcome a love that comes with absolutely no strings attached? What if we released our main character energy and allowed ourselves to simply be part of the landscape?

Last summer, at the beginning of my sabbatical, I spent two weeks near Glacier National Park. For my final morning in that beautiful place, I had planned a seven-mile hike to Apgar Lookout. My goal was a dramatic sunrise at the peak. So, I started well before six in the morning. But the first thing I discovered was that I had misread the map, and I accidentally parked two miles from the trailhead. Okay, a nine-mile hike to the peak.

Then, for the first time in the two weeks that I had been there, the morning was overcast. No sunrise. I set out instead beneath a ceiling of clouds, feeling a little grumpy, a little sorry for myself.

But then near the summit, the clouds finally lifted. No one else was there. Only mountains. Peak beyond peak beyond peak. Farther than my eyes could follow. All the way to the horizon. The mountains stretched out before me.

Something inside me gave way. Broke loose. I stood on the trail, and I wept. And I realized I was weeping not because I felt suddenly insignificant, but because I had finally stopped trying not to be.

In that space, I was not the center of creation. I was standing inside of it. One creature among countless others, held in the same gracious hands that hold the cedar, the eagle, the hyrax, and the Leviathan. Friends, that is not humiliation. It is homecoming.

Have you ever felt that? Have you ever felt your smallness not as diminishment, but freedom? Have you been released from the need to star in the show?

The universe does not depend on you, and perhaps something else is true. You depend on it. This, my friends, is the psalm's final gift. The Hebrew word is *ruach*. Breath. Spirit. Wind.

The breath that moved over the waters in Genesis. The breath that filled Adam's lungs. The breath that is filling your lungs right now. Every breath you take is borrowed. Every breath received. I wonder why this is so hard for us. For me.

Some of you are struggling right now, and you've begun to believe that's the whole story of who you are. Some of you are trying to hold together a marriage, a child, an identity, a purpose, and you haven't told a soul the toll it's taking on you. Some of you have stopped asking for help and have forgotten how. Some of you are afraid that if you slow down, take a break, apologize, acknowledge your limits, name your needs, you will somehow be less than you imagine you are.

I know this because I've done the same. There are seasons of my life when I try to hold it all together and admit no weakness. Try to show no cracks in the armor. But life has a way of reminding us that we are creatures and not the creator. Psalm 104 can do that.

You are not the reason the sun comes up in the morning. There is freedom in that truth. Freedom in believing that the world belongs to God. First to God. Freedom in acknowledging that creation is a gift before it is a possession. Which means dominion must never mean domination, but stewardship. Caring for what was never

ours. Treating one another, and every living thing, as fellow creatures that share the same borrowed breath.

Oh yes, we have gone astray. We manage our relationships instead of belonging to one another. We treat creation as a commodity rather than a gift. We treat our bodies like machines to optimize instead of blessings to honor. We've been running tryouts for a team that already picked us.

And these ancient hymns keep trying to put us back in our place. They keep trying to remind us where we fit best. I think it's getting harder for us to hear their truth. I worry that we live in abstraction these days, that our days happen in notifications and opinions and screens. I worry that we consume sunsets through someone else's filtered image. That we argue about creation rather than standing inside it. I think that's why we keep telling each other to "touch grass." I love that command. Touch grass.

It's funny because it's true. We don't touch enough grass. Psalm 104 was telling us to touch grass three thousand years ago. The psalmist knew our need for this deep breath, our need to go outside and pay attention and remember that you are a creature. Let the real world tell you the truth again.

I wrote these final words in Montreat, North Carolina, a place I've been coming since I was carried there on my father's shoulders. Now I watch our two boys. They are knee-deep in the creek. They are utterly soaked and filthy and fully alive.

They are not performing for anyone.
They have nothing to prove.
They simply belong to the world.

The wild things will never argue us into awe.
But wait a while and you'll be convinced.

Stay beside a creek long enough.
Walk below the trees long enough.
Sit on a mountain long enough.

Eventually the narration inside your head begins to quiet.
And you will hear what was already there.

Oh yes, we were late.
Wonderfully late.
But the song did not wait for us.

The whales were singing.
The cedars were praising God.
The mountains were bearing bold witness.
The breath of God, the Spirit of God, was already moving through the whole creation.

And somehow...there was room for one more voice.

No, you are not the center of creation.
You are something far more precious, far more wonderful.
You are a creature in it.

Like them, you have been given breath.
And a place.
And a voice.

So add your verse to a chorus that began long before your arrival.

Bless the Lord oh my soul. I will sing praise to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being. Amen.