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Series: Summer in the Psalms, *Hymns*

Planted: hymns rising from God's good earth

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Have you experienced the healing power of God's good creation?

There's a provoking book I remember reading in my teens called *The Hiding Place*, an autobiography by a simple Dutch watch-maker who joined the Dutch resistance and hid Jews from Nazis in occupied Holland. After being betrayed by a Dutch informant, almost the entire Ten Boom family died in concentration camps. The writer of *The Hiding Place*, Corrie, recalls her sister Betsie's posture towards her persecutors at Ravensbruck Concentration Camp. Betsie had a deep compassion for her persecutors, and especially her fellow Dutch people who collaborated with the Nazi's and betrayed her and her family. Betsie would die of malnutrition a mere two weeks before Corrie was released from the camp. Betsie's dying wish for Corrie was to build rehabilitation homes for concentration camp survivors *as well* as for people who had helped the Nazis. Betsie's vision of this rehabilitation home was very specific—she told Corrie to paint the homes green and to have a garden and plenty of window boxes. Betsie, in her own sacrificial death knew that healing comes in creation.

Betsie is not alone in this. At the end of God's Great Story, in the book of Revelation, the writer John describes the vision he has seen of the new heavens and the new earth. In the city John sees a great river with a massive tree, encompassing both sides of the river. Can you image a tree that big? John recognizes the tree as The Tree of Life, and on it John says there are leaves, which are for the healing of the nations.

The great mountaineer, John Muir speaks of a similar healing experience in creation. He says, "I am well again, I came to life in the cool winds and crystal waters of the mountains..."

Similarly, marine biologist Rachel Carson confesses, "Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts."

And American naturalist John Burroughs proclaims, "I go to nature to be soothed and healed, and to have my senses put in tune once more."

What are these humans, deeply planted in the goodness of creation, getting at? Are they not hushed in wonder that comes, not from some disembodied experience, but from being deeply rooted in the goodness of creation that cannot help but reflect the Creator? Perhaps American singer-songwriter Woody Guthrie captures this sentiment best when he writes, “I played around our yard some and talked to the fence posts, sung songs and made the weeds sing.”

Jesus echoes another tone of this great song of creation, saying that even if we keep silent, creation itself cannot help but cry out in praise to its creator. When Jesus rides into Jerusalem before his crucifixion, the people cry out “Hosanna!” and the Pharisees chided Jesus to silence their clamour. And what is Jesus’ answer? He says, “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.” (Luke 19:39-40) Creation declares the majesty of God.

Nature is never spent, as Hopkins tell us. Creation itself is a hymn of praise to the God who is near to his creation and heals humanity with his handiwork.

And haven’t you noticed—the hymns of our life that endure are always inseparably tied to story and to creation? Hymns are living stories, much like folklore or the legends of Indigenous people. And these stories have a deep rootedness in creation.

I remember the first time I read Tolkien’s trilogy as a young teen to my little brothers. Some people criticize Tolkien for taking an entire page to describe merely a rock, but there is something here that Tolkien is doing. For him, the creation of Middle Earth and the formation of this realm in our own imaginations is inseparably tied to the land. Close your eyes, and let this little description sweep you away in his wonderful passage on nature:

They were on the island in a sea of trees, and the horizon was veiled. On the southeastern side the ground fell very steeply, as if the slopes of the hill were continued far down under the trees, like island shores that really are the sides of a mountain rising out of deep waters. . . . In the midst of it there wound lazily a dark river of brown water, bordered with ancient willows, arched over with willows, blocked with fallen willows, and flecked with thousands of faded willow leaves. The air was thick with them, fluttering yellow from the branches; for there was a warm and gentle breeze blowing softly in the valley, and the reeds were rustling, and the willow boughs were creating.

Page after page of Tolkien's books go on like this, using more words in English to describe the place than most of us use in a lifetime. Tolkien is showing us that creation heals, creation imprints our memory, and creation plants us in the story of God as it woos us to be lost in wonder, awe and amazement at the Creator. So, I guess you could say that to be "spiritual" is to be constantly amazed. To quote the words of Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel, he said, "our goal should be to live life in radical amazement." Heschel would encourage his students to get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.

And so, in our study of the Psalms we come to the theme of Hymns, poetic masterpieces of creatures who are deeply amazed. The writers of these hymns offer exuberant praise, and the psalmists calls us to join them. As we look at the book of Psalms as a whole, you will recall that Psalms of Lament are the highest quantity, but it is hymns that encompass the *tone* of the entire book. Indeed, the Hebrew title for the Psalms is "Tehillim," which is translated as praise.

What else can we notice about the Psalter as a whole before we do a deep dive into one specific hymn from the Psalter, Psalm 65? Well, a hymn of praise completes each Psalm of Lament. And also, if you notice your chart of "Summer In the Psalms," you'll see that hymns are quite infrequent as the book opens, but grow in intensity as it progresses. In fact, hymns dominate the end of the Psalter, with a grand crescendo of praise in Psalms 146-150, known as the "Great Doxology."

And what are the primary characteristics of these hymns? They tell stories and they are deeply planted in creation. They tell stories so that future generations may know and experience the amazement of the God of the universe and praise the God of the universe whose creation heals them, as it points them to Christ. Psalm 19 testifies to this with the opening words of, "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows his handiwork." Hymns rise from God's good earth, be it on the lips and actions of humanity, or the very rocks who cry out in amazement to God.

And so here's my Big Idea for today: **Hymns awe us to heaven, root us in earth, and plant us in the story of God's healing restoration. (repeat)**

Alright, let's walk through, verse by verse, Psalm 65 to see this play out, and then we will look at our response to creation-infused, story-saturated hymns.

1 Praise is due to you,

O God, in Zion;

and to you shall vows be performed,

Here, there is a recognition of God's power and our response to that power is to "perform our vows," to be people of the covenant who love God because he first loved us.

2 O you who answer prayer!

To you all flesh shall come.

Yahweh is a God of the living, and a God who draws us to himself. David is exulting in this.

David's heart is amazed at this God.

3 When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us,

you forgive our transgressions.

God himself is our atonement. Already, the God of Israel is revealing himself as totally other, totally different from the gods of the Ancient Near East, for he is a God of forgiveness. David doesn't want to forget this and he's writing it down in song for future generations to remember, too.

4 Happy are those whom you choose and bring near

to live in your courts.

We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house,

your holy temple.

Other translations say, "happy are those who dwell in your courts." This isn't a quick meeting with the king. Some people talk forever about just the chance to see in person the president of the United States, or perhaps like me, to have seen Prince William and Kate from a distance at the BC Legislature in Victoria. Not so with Yahweh. He invites us to dwell in his courts.

5 By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance,

O God of our salvation;

you are the hope of all the ends of the earth

and of the farthest seas.

David is recalling the deeds of salvation, perhaps the parting of the red sea. He is remembering history for multiple generations. And here, in verse 5, David takes a distinct shift into amazement that is found in creation as he states that Yahweh is the “hope of all the ends of the earth, of the farthest seas.”

6 By your strength you established the mountains;
you are girded with might.

*Notice how God’s creation imitates him. David is amazed at the mountains that are girded with might. Notice he doesn’t worship creation, he worships the Creator. “**You** established the mountains, **You** are girded with might.”*

7 You silence the roaring of the seas,
the roaring of their waves,
the tumult of the peoples.

Doesn’t this sound like Jesus calming the sea on that fishing boat with his disciples? Jesus was so at home with the wonders of creation that he was asleep during the storm! And this Jesus is yet able to silence the roaring of the seas. There is prophetic wonder in these verses as Jesus embodies the very words David wrote, 1000 years before Christ was born.

8 Those who live at earth’s farthest bounds are awed by your signs;
you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy.

Oh the poetry here, my friends! The effect of God’s goodness in creation is peace, and David glories in that as he recalls sunrises and sunsets.

9 You visit the earth and water it,
you greatly enrich it;
the river of God is full of water;
you provide the people with grain,
for so you have prepared it.

10 You water its furrows abundantly,
settling its ridges,
softening it with showers,
and blessing its growth.

Notice the nearness of God to his creation. Theologian Karl Barth is careful to argue that Christianity is not Pantheism where nature is God, but that the God of the Bible creates out of nothing and leaves his indelible mark upon all that he has made. This is why we feel the nearness of God in creation.

When I am filled with doubt, there have been many a night that I have simply gone outside to find the moon and stars and to remind myself, to let the beauty of creation seep deep into me, and to remind myself of the nearness, greatness, and liveliness of our God.

11 You crown the year with your bounty;
your wagon tracks overflow with richness.

Just sit with your imaginations in these verses, friends. Do you see wagon tracks hemmed in with foliage? Do you see the rich compost coating the wagon wheels in deep, rich soil?

12 The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
the hills gird themselves with joy,

Again, I just can't get away from Jesus (umm, I guess that's a good thing!), and remember his words in the sermon on the mount where he says, "Consider the lilies of the field" ... in those pastures of the wilderness. Christian, find your solace in remembering the lilies of the field who are dependent on God's sustaining mercy. Consider the sparrow that does not fall without your Father's noticing—and remember, are you not of much more value than these, Jesus says.

13 the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
the valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy.

Okay, here at the end with verse 13, perhaps you've noticed a theme? Have you picked up on the theme of Joy coursing through this Psalm?

Verse 8 says the sunrise and sunset shout for joy to God. In verse 12, David tells us the hills gird themselves with joy—aww, the rocks themselves are crying out in praise to God. And in verse 13, the valleys shout and sing together for joy.

Well, what is our response to this hymn of amazement and wonder? Let's come back to the Big Idea for today's psalm: Hymns awe us to heaven, root us in earth, and plant us in the story of God's healing restoration.

Friends, I want to suggest that these hymns that are deeply rooted in story and creation are goading us to be fully alive in the place we are planted—to participate in the story and to join Christ in the restoration of all creation. This, I want to suggest, is what it means to be planted in place.

Wendell Berry writes, “There is a day when the road neither comes nor goes, and the way is not a way, but a place.” So, are we planted in our local community? Are you allowing the beauty of creation to heal your soul, even as we inch our way out of the harrowing experience of this pandemic? Are we planting ourselves in this good gift of God’s creation? I mean, so what? Does it really matter whether we’re planted in creation? Let me read another quote by Berry:

Our children no longer learn how to read the great Book of Nature from their own direct experience or how to interact creatively with the seasonal transformation of the planet. They seldom learn where their water comes from or where it goes. We no longer coordinate our human celebration with the great liturgy of the heavens.

Perhaps a shocking testament to this lament of Berry is the comment of a 4th grader who said, “I like to play indoors ‘cause that’s where all the electrical outlets are” or Berry McKibbon’s lament, “Cheap fossil fuel has made us the first people on earth with no need of our neighbors.” Are we wounding God’s creation, ignoring God’s creation, or allowing God’s good earth to do what he designed it to do: heal and restore us? The writers of these hymns are urging us to allow the latter to be true.

Let’s look at the three phrases of today’s Big Idea to tease this out a bit more.

First, hymns awe us to heaven. Sometimes when my faith is small, when doubts rush in like a tidal wave, or when the heaviness of our partisan, politicized, and fraught world hangs heavy, I return to the Great Story of redemption, expressed beautifully by what Hebrews describes as “that great cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1). Witnesses like Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose prophetic poem started our sermon today. Witnesses like George Matheson, who upon learning he was going about to go blind and being forsaken by his fiancé penned the hymn, “O love, that will not let me go, I rest my weary soul in thee.”

Hymns remind us that we are part of this Great Story, and they awe us toward the God who continues to write the history of redemption.

Second, hymns root us in earth . . . and as they speak of the beauties of creation, what is our reply? If hymns root us, what is our response? GET OUTSIDE! Stop gazing at your phone, and gaze at the star-speckled sky. My social media consumption has a direct correlation to a sense of unease, discontentment, and even anger. I need to fast regularly from it, and that fasting also needs to beckon me to replace social media with things like digging in the garden. Get outside! Allow creation to do the very thing it was intended: to heal and make us whole because it is directly connected to the Creator who heals and makes us whole.

Third, hymns plant us in the story of God’s healing and restoration. What does planted mean? There’s a wonderful phrase, “there’s no place like home,” but what if we flipped it to, “there’s no home like place”?

In his book *This Place on Earth* Alan Durning, a globe-trotting researcher for the World-Watch Institute, describes the seed that led him to return from the good work of trying to fix the world to put down roots in his hometown of Seattle. He was, he says, in the Philippines “interviewing members of remote hill tribes about their land and livelihood.” Durning writes. . . . a gap-toothed chief showed me the trees, streams and farm plots that his tribe had tended for centuries. It was territory, he insisted, they would defend with their lives. As the sun finally slid lower in the sky, he introduced me to a frail old woman who was revered by the others as a traditional priestess. We sat under a sacred tree near her farm and looked out over the Ma’asam River. She asked through an interpreter, “What is your homeland like?”

Durning found her question embarrassing. His base was Washington D.C., where he lived with his wife and two children. But he was mainly (as he writes) “jet-setting on behalf of future generations”, and had no roots there.

Durning continues. . .

She repeated the question, thinking I had not heard. “Tell me about your place.” Again, I could not answer. . . The truth was, I lacked any connection to my base in Washington.

. . . .

“In America,” I finally admitted, “we have careers, not places.” Looking up, I recognized pity in her eyes.

As a steward of God's good creation (which, remember, was the first commandment we were given in Genesis . . . after all living with the privilege of an earth that heals should mean we seek to heal it, too, don't you think?). But, as stewards of God's creation, may I ask all of us: **Where on the earth are you?**

Here are some probing comments and questions:

1. How many days until the moon is full?
2. Describe the soil around your home.
3. What were the primary subsistence techniques of the culture(s) that lived in your area before you?
4. Name five native edible plants in your area and their season(s) of availability.
5. From what direction do winter storms generally come in your region?
6. Where does your garbage go?
7. How long is the growing season where you live?
8. Name five resident and migratory birds in your area.¹

Friends, there is an undeniable goodness in being planted right where you are, in caring for creation right where you are, and in incarnating Christ right in your community. So go ahead. Join Christ in his renewal of all creation. Paint those houses green. Plant those gardens. Have plenty of window boxes. Join Christ in his work of reconciliation. And, receive the invitation to be like King David, the shepherd boy who was awed to the Creator and wrote hymns of praise while out tending his flock.

Before we end, I want to come to Christ and simply leave you with a profound thought upon which to meditate. In the Gospel of John, he gives the account of Christ's resurrection. Mary Magdalene is standing at the tomb weeping when two angels in white appear to her and ask her why she is weeping. Mary replies, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she turns around, she sees Jesus standing there, but she mistakes him as the gardener. Just pause and take in this scene of Mary . . . mistaking Jesus for the gardener.

¹ Adapted from Bill Duvall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology*.

Jesus, in his resurrected body—more alive than ever before—is found in the form of a gardener. There is a great coming back to the place where we first started in this Great Story, for Jesus, in his resurrected life, comes to us as a steward of creation, a caretaker, a planted, down-to-earth, fully human, fully divine, amazing God. And friends, we join Christ, the gardener, in his renewal of all things . . . fully planted right where we are, embracing the Great Story as ensouled, enchanted, and fully alive humans made in the image of God.

Prayers: check the chat

Ending Song

God Whose Giving Knows No Ending

Benediction

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you,

Wherever he may send you.

May he guide you through the wilderness,

Protect you through the storm.

May he bring you home rejoicing

At the wonders he has shown you.

May he bring you home rejoicing

Once again into our doors.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.