



## EARTH DAY

### LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

**Monday, April 22, 2013**

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**Lection – Psalm 24:1-2** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it;  
(v. 2) for he has founded it on the seas,  
and established it on the rivers.

#### **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

Each year, modern environmentalists all over the world set aside “Earth Day”—April 22—to increase awareness and appreciation for the earth’s natural environment as well as our role in creating a sustainable environment for the future.<sup>1</sup> While this sociocultural event has held growing significance for global consciousness since its inception in 1970, it can still be argued that Christians need to concern themselves with this day in a more

forthcoming manner. According to Psalm 24:1-2, this day should reaffirm for us our role as stewards blessed with God's dominion. This should make us more seriously concerned about pollution of air, soil, or water, and of our over-exploitation of the world's resources. Earth Day should serve as a clarion call to those who are willing to lead us above the assumption of being lords of this land, and instead lead us to a holy life and faith in God as blessed inhabitants of God's dominion of the earth; blessed inhabitants who are here as stewards of God's manifold grace.

While in recent times segments of the African American church have lagged in the observance and participation of the Earth Day Movement, historically speaking the African American church has always maintained the theological view that the earth belongs to the Lord. This particular eco-theological view is what has compelled many of our greatest African American pulpитеers to address the plethora of environmental injustices, life-threatening pollutants, and other toxic hazards that have compromised the well-being of all Americans and especially Americans of African descent throughout the diaspora.

Earth day should remind us that the ecological problems we face in this world are local, statewide, regional, national, and international. Psalm 24 reminds us to include the observance of Earth Day in our liturgical calendar to reclaim an old prophetic tradition. It is a day to humbly reexamine the interrelationship between faith, God, and nature. Its inclusion on our calendars also prompts us to construct practical solutions that lead to ecological justice and restoration in the earth.

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Psalm 24:1-2**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**



*Architectural rendering of the forthcoming First Baptist Church of Hillside, NJ*

The First Baptist Church of Hillside, NJ (FBC-Hillside) congregation has embarked upon a wonderful construction project. In 2013, FBC-Hillside will break ground on what will become the first African American solar-powered church edifice in the Central New Jersey region. This construction project will not just consist of the erecting of walls and doors followed by the covering of a roof with solar panels. The FBC-Hillside project will be unique and dynamic in that the entire edifice will be shaped and designed to maximize the power of the sun. Its materials will be eco-friendly. The dimensions of the building will be eco-friendly. In fact, the entire administrative philosophy of the church will shift with the construction of this new edifice towards a paperless, high-technology-driven, low-cost, eco-friendly paradigm for doing ministry.

FBC-Hillside has decided to take a risk. We know that many of the industrial jobs of the mid-1960s, '70s, and '80s have left the Central and Northern New Jersey regions, never to return. We also understand that a large segment of the urban population will need to be retooled and develop new skill-sets to remain employable in the future. FBC-Hillside has decided to lead the charge in transforming itself into becoming a truly "Green" worship and learning center for future generations for multiple reasons. Not only does FBC-Hillside desire to disciple those whom the Lord Jesus Christ will send its way, but FBC-Hillside also wants to prepare Central and Northern New Jersey's newly emergent urban workforce for jobs in the alternative energy sector that are rapidly growing in this region. Learning how to install and maintain solar panels; starting, maintaining, and expanding organic gardens in the urban landscape; developing expertise in the alternative fuel industry; and mastering the science of building homes with eco-friendly materials all speak to the long-term goals and employment coalition-building efforts of FBC-Hillside.

All of these goals are inspired by FBC-Hillside's emerging eco-theology and commitment to empowering the next generation to care for the earth and for each other. FBC-Hillside is committed to glorifying God in its every endeavor, including bridging the gap between faith, nature, technology, and the marketplace for generations to come.

**Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

It is nearly impossible to do a proper biblical interpretation of Psalm 24:1-2 without first considering the broader theological claim that Psalm 24 desires to make upon the reader. First, the entire psalm invites the reader to explore ways in which the reader can understand God as the source of the entire created order. Second, the psalm offers the reader a vision of humanity as co-participants with God in maintaining this created order. Finally, the psalm reaches a climax where God is envisioned as the architect of the eschaton (end-time) in which both the earth and humanity work towards a very specific end: welcoming back to earth together, in unison, the majestic God who created them.

Each of these insights implicitly, and at times explicitly, raises questions about our fundamental understanding of the relationship between God, creation, and humanity. In times of climate change and increasing national and global environmental injustice,

Psalm 24 encourages us to reconsider our role in maintaining God's created order as God's co-agents in the earth.

There can be no doubt verse 1 identifies "the LORD" as being both the primary agent behind, and the owner of, all creation. The use and structure of the poetic language being used in verse 1 serves to emphasize the point that the earth and the world are "the LORD's" carefully ordered creation.

Contrary to the ancient Near East's commonly held beliefs about the dangerous unpredictability of the seas and their perceived threat to human beings, the author suggests that all of creation is being ordered by one omnipotent and cosmic warrior: "the LORD." The story of Jesus calming the storm in Mark 4:35-40 affirms this notion. For the psalmist, the LORD stands true as a contrast or even a polemic directed towards existing ancient world beliefs, clearly emphasizing the thought that the LORD, Israel's God, is both the agent behind and owner of all creation.

We should not read Psalm 24:1 haphazardly. Embedded within the psalmist's affirmation, declaring the LORD as creator and owner, is the presence of a very important nuance. The psalmist is very intentional when beginning with the preposition in verse 1 and stating, "The earth . . . and all that is in it, the world, and all who live in it." This is to convey the notion that while it is the case that the LORD is the agent of creation, it is also the case that creation is relationally connected to the LORD. With this nuance being properly understood the reader then gains further insight on the two concepts being expressed by the psalmist in verse 1. First, that creation should be viewed primarily as being "for the LORD," and not the LORD being viewed primarily as "for creation." Second, accepting the principle that creation exists "for the LORD" implies that the LORD has an ongoing interest and engagement with what he created. When these two principles are taken into consideration and placed in proper context, our view of creation should undergo a radical transformation. Any claims by us to outright ownership of any part of the created order are proven to be a falsehood. As companies fight to drill, frack, burrow through diamond mines in Africa, and globally assault other natural resources, one wonders how can this claim of "no ownership of resources by humans" be made clear around the world. It is the LORD who owns all of creation and has a vested interest in all of creation being sustained.

In light of this relationship being defined between the LORD and creation in Psalm 24:1-2, one can also conclude that creation doesn't just exist for God, but it also speaks to us on God's behalf. This is both a joyous and troubling thought. Yes, God can speak to us through a morning sunrise in Haleakala National Park in Maui, Hawaii. God can and does speak to us through the raging winds of a Hurricane Sandy. To date, Hurricane Sandy is estimated to have caused 125 deaths and over \$70 billion in damages to the Northeast corridor of America. However, conversations in the media are still focused more on the opportunity to create new retail markets and building projects on the backside of the storm and far less on society's duplicitous actions in intensifying current global warming trends that ultimately provoke the formation of cataclysmic storms such as Hurricane Sandy.

Yes, churches in the Northeast are buzzing with varying relief efforts to meet the needs of the displaced. Pastors, elders, and deacon boards are valiantly coordinating volunteer efforts to make a difference in the lives of so many who have lost everything. However, the question remains whether or not churches will develop an eco-theology that adequately locates the voice of God in the midst of the chaos and identifies our role in it. The psalmist would understand Hurricane Sandy to be both an unfortunate natural phenomenon and an agent to provoke change in the hearts of humanity—that it was a storm and a tool designed to conjure within us deep lamentation, reflection, and action, and not just a random act of chaos devoid of any spiritual meaning or clues for our future behavior.

If creation is to be viewed as being created “for the LORD,” as suggested by the opening verse of Psalm 24, and the LORD is relationally connected with creation, even communicating through it, then humanity is left with an important question to answer. Are we listening to what creation is saying about God, humanity, and our relationship with God? Or have we distanced ourselves irreparably from a true understanding of God as “the LORD” of the created order?

### **Celebration**

The good news in the text is that God is the master and creator of the earth and everything in it. If God isn't famous for anything else, verse 2 reminds us that God is most certainly famous for establishing a new and glorious work on the backs of the chaotic seas and raging rivers that we often face spiritually and sometimes physically in this life. Psalm 24:1-2 offers the Christian church an opportunity to help society properly interpret society's role in the created order. Creation no longer needs to be viewed as something that should be dominated or possessed. Creation is a gift from which life can be sustained and nurtured, where a relationship with God can be found and nurtured.

### **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details of this passage include:

**Sights:** Forests; seas; beaches; cities; clouds; blue skies; thunder; wind; rain; hills; dunes; children; teens; adults; elderly; fish; land animals; flowers; mountains; fire; and hail;

**Sounds:** Rushing wind; thunder; roaring seas; laughing; singing; silence; birds chirping; children laughing; airplanes soaring; urban city nightlife; wheat blowing in the wind; water approaching the beach;

**Smells:** The smell of sea water; salt; burning wood; smoke; flowers; grass; and

**Colors:** Blue water; yellow sand; green grass; and brown, black, and red dirt.

### **III. Resources That Preachers, Teachers, and Congregations Can Use for Earth Day**

- Berry, Thomas; edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim. The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books Ecology and Justice Series, 2009.
- Cobb, John. “Sustainability: Economics, Ecology, and Justice.” Religion Online. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1992.
- For Earth Day ideas for grade schools, go to [www.classroomearth.org](http://www.classroomearth.org).
- The website [www.earthday.gov](http://www.earthday.gov) lists Earth Day events in your state and events being hosted or coordinated by various government agencies, and it also provides links to the other U.S. Government Earth Day websites. In addition, it provides activities to do at home, in a classroom, and at work on Earth Day.
- For additional resources, see Earth Day in the African American Lectionary for 2008–2012. Particularly see the cultural resources and the lectionary commentaries.

#### **Note**

1. Online location: [www.earthday.org/earth-day-history-movement](http://www.earthday.org/earth-day-history-movement).