

Lent Devotional April 3, 2020

Scriptures

Psalm 148

1 Praise the Lord!

*Praise the Lord from the heavens;
praise him in the heights!*

*2 Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his host!*

*3 Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars!*

*4 Praise him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens!*

*5 Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for he commanded and they were created.*

*6 He established them forever and ever;
he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.*

*7 Praise the Lord from the earth,
you sea monsters and all deeps,
8 fire and hail, snow and frost,
stormy wind fulfilling his command!*

*9 Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars!*

*10 Wild animals and all cattle,
creeping things and flying birds!*

*11 Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!*

*12 Young men and women alike,
old and young together!*

*13 Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.*

*14 He has raised up a horn for his people,
praise for all his faithful,
for the people of Israel who are close to him.
Praise the Lord!*

Exodus 9:13-35

13 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Rise up early in the morning and present yourself before Pharaoh, and say to him, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews: Let my people go, so that they may worship me. 14 For this time I will send all my plagues upon you yourself, and upon your officials, and upon your people, so that you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth. 15 For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. 16 But this is why I have let you live: to show you my power, and to make my name resound through all the earth. 17 You are still exalting yourself against my people, and will not let them go. 18 Tomorrow at this time I will cause the heaviest hail to fall that has ever fallen in Egypt from the day it was founded until now. 19 Send, therefore, and have your livestock and everything that you have in the open field brought to a secure place; every human or animal that is in the open field and is not brought under shelter will die when the hail comes down upon them.'" 20 Those officials of Pharaoh who

feared the word of the LORD hurried their slaves and livestock off to a secure place. 21 Those who did not regard the word of the LORD left their slaves and livestock in the open field. 22 The LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward heaven so that hail may fall on the whole land of Egypt, on humans and animals and all the plants of the field in the land of Egypt." 23 Then Moses stretched out his staff toward heaven, and the LORD sent thunder and hail, and fire came down on the earth. And the LORD rained hail on the land of Egypt; 24 there was hail with fire flashing continually in the midst of it, such heavy hail as had never fallen in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation. 25 The hail struck down everything that was in the open field throughout all the land of Egypt, both human and animal; the hail also struck down all the plants of the field, and shattered every tree in the field. 26 Only in the land of Goshen, where the Israelites were, there was no hail. 27 Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron, and said to them, "This time I have sinned; the LORD is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. 28 Pray to the LORD! Enough of God's thunder and hail! I will let you go; you need stay no longer." 29 Moses said to him, "As soon as I have gone out of the city, I will stretch out my hands to the LORD; the thunder will cease, and there will be no more hail, so that you may know that the earth is the Lord's. 30 But as for you and your officials, I know that you do not yet fear the LORD God." 31 (Now the flax and the barley were ruined, for the barley was in the ear and the flax was in bud. 32 But the wheat and the spelt were not ruined, for they are late in coming up.) 33 So Moses left Pharaoh, went out of the city, and stretched out his hands to the LORD; then the thunder and the hail ceased, and the rain no longer poured down on the earth. 34 But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned once more and hardened his heart, he and his officials. 35 So the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he would not let the Israelites go, just as the LORD had spoken through Moses.

Devotional

The Rev. Dr. Jonathan D. W. Lawrence '97, Academia (2016)

Psalm 148 and Exodus 9:13-35 present contrasting views of humanity's experience with creation. In Psalm 148 all parts of creation praise God in harmony, but in Exodus thunder, hail, and fire punish Pharaoh for the disharmony he has caused by treating the Israelites unjustly. As the story continues, we find that thunder and hail are not sufficient to change Pharaoh's mind, and further destruction results. These "natural" disasters end the injustice and help to restore order, a theme seen earlier in the story of Noah. This use of divine violence continues throughout the Bible as faithful heroes are protected by God but the unrighteous are destroyed.

Such stories have led some people to argue that even now natural disasters are God's punishment on us for various sins. These explanations ignore the widespread suffering among many people who have no responsibility for those sins and the environmental destruction that has contributed to recent storms, floods, and mudslides. I grew up near Niagara Falls and have now returned to teach and preach in the area. Niagara Falls is a site of great natural beauty. It is also a reminder of environmental destruction that occurred when factory owners thought it was okay to dump their waste products into the river and bury them in nearby fields, some of which may never again be safe for human use. This kind of damage has happened worldwide, and in many cases the poor and vulnerable suffer the most due to environmental destruction.

As we approach the celebration of new life at Easter and the observance of Earth Day, these texts can challenge us to consider our attitude toward the environment. Will we view storms and other natural disasters as part of God's will, even if they result from human damage to the environment? Perhaps instead we can seek to restore the harmony described in Psalm 148, where humans add their voices to the praises coming from all other parts of Creation—we can seek to reduce our damage to God's creation, though storms and destruction will continue to come.

Prayer

Loving Creator, all creation sings your praises, but sometimes we have allowed our greed to threaten the balance of your creation. Help us to restore the harmony in our natural world, and help all nations when they face natural disasters. Amen.