

**Christ Presbyterian Church
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Elemental: The Elements Under Attack | Romans 8:22**

Sometimes you get a small gift and you don't even realize it at the time. This summer we have had all of our different pastors talking about how God speaks to us through the elements of the world. We've called it "Elemental" and we've talked about times where God walked on the waters, times when the bush kept burning and we wanted to see what was going on, and times when God's voice whispered in the middle of hurricanes. All through the story of God, we talked about the elements. I was going to end my part of this today by talking about the time God split the water and let the people walk across the Red Sea—a great story about the elements. However, four or five weeks ago I had a different idea and changed the direction of how God speaks to us. Then this week as I prepared this sermon, I heard over and over that it's the 100th anniversary of our National Parks, and about celebrating the different ways that this country looks around and beholds beauty around it. I don't know if you knew, but just this week, the Secretary of the Interior, Dr. Jewell, was here in the Twin Cities commemorating the 100th anniversary by getting in a kayak and celebrating the incredible beauty of the Mississippi River Valley right here in our backyard. A gift.

Do you ever wonder why you were created? When its early in the morning and you can't get to sleep because school starts tomorrow, or next week, or you got to go to work, or you're tired and you don't know what to do. You ever wonder why you were created? If you had grown up in a different time, in a different church at the beginning of our country say, you would have heard the Westminster Catechism. The Westminster Confession. And that's how it starts. It starts out by asking, "What is the purpose and the chief end of man?" Why are you here? What is the chief end of man? And you would have been required to memorize the answer. The chief end of man "is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." Why are you here? To glorify God and enjoy Him forever. At the very least that means that you are to live in a way that you look around, seeing the marks of God in the world and pointing to them. That's what glorifying God is. Seeing something beautiful that God has done and pointing to it; that's glorifying God and enjoying it forever. I think that's the way the story of God starts. One time Genesis 1 was read from a spaceship orbiting the moon, and the astronaut, because it was near Christmas, opened the Bible and sent back by radio this message. While the earth was hanging there like a little ball, he said:

¹ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ² Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters . . . ³ (And then he talks about creation) and

God saw all that was created, and it was good. ²⁷ Then God created humankind in His own image; in the image of God he created them male and female he created them . . . (Another translation says), God said, “Let us make human beings, so that they are like us.” ²⁸ God blessed them and said to the humans, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground . . . And then God said, “That’s why you were created.” [Genesis 1:1-2, 10, 27-28]

Want to know why you’re here? It’s not to go back and just do wills, or make business deals, or learn math. You were created to be fruitful, to bear fruit and to be involved in the recreation of planet earth.

²⁹ Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. ³⁰ And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so. ³¹ God saw all that He had made, and it was not good. God saw all that He had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day. [Genesis 1:29-31]

That’s how the story starts. And another part of the stories of God is called the Gospels, right? There are four of them: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and they tell the story of Jesus, but they tell it like they’re at four different corners of an intersection; they see the same thing happening from different perspectives. One of the founding fathers of the Presbyterian Church was John Calvin. Calvin says, “I think there’s a fifth Gospel, a fifth way that God speaks to us, and I think the fifth Gospel is God’s word of nature.” And he looked to the Scriptures and he said, “David the shepherd boy heard God speak and he said, ‘The Heavens declare the glory of God.’ He looked up to the night sky and he saw the glories of God in the stars.” [John shows a picture called the Pillars of Creation.] The heavens declare the glory of God. The shepherd boy saw it. In the same way Jesus says, “Consider the lilies of the field and the birds of the air.” Don’t just drive past the field and say, “Ohhh, boy that smells!” Consider the lilies of the field because it’s not until you stop that you really see that God’s fingerprints are on it.

I had one of those, literally one of those, twenty-one years ago this month. I know it time-wise because our family had gone up to the north woods and we were on one of those beautiful lakes. I was teaching my nine-year-old daughter how to jet ski, which means you put her in the seat in front of you, let her hold the handle bars, and both of you pretend that she’s driving. We’re flying around the lake and I look over and I see some specks and I say, “Oh honey, let’s see this.” I jet over through the mist of the morning and all of a sudden I cut the power because I saw this . . . I see loons. I cut the power and the jets keep gliding right into the middle of them until we were right upon them. Katy couldn’t help from squealing. She said, “Daddy”, (life is worth it when they call you daddy), “Daddy, their eyes are red! How did God think of red eyes?” and I saw

loons for the first time again as the creation of God. That's the way God meant it to be. Unfortunately, it's not the end of the story that I had to teach Katy, is it? The story of Genesis goes on in chapter three and God says to Adam:

¹⁷You ate fruit from the tree I warned you about. I said, 'You must not eat its fruit.' "So I am putting a curse on the ground because of what you did. All the days of your life you will have to work hard. It will be painful for you to get food from the ground. You will eat plants from the field, even though the ground produces thorns and prickly weeds. You will have to work hard and sweat to produce the food. You were made out of the ground. You will return to it when you die. You are dust, and you will return to dust." [Genesis 3:17]

The world is broken. Creation is broken—it's cursed. And literally, it was maybe five months later and Katy went from being a nine-year-old to a ten-year-old, and we had always said that when our girls were between ten and fourteen, Laura or I would take them to one of the countries around the world that we visit with World Vision so they would see why daddy had to leave all the time. So, I took Katy to Guatemala and we flew into Guatemala in the late afternoon. As you enter the air space in Guatemala, you see volcanoes dotting the horizon, and you see the smoke coming off of the volcanoes. We landed in Guatemala City, went to our hotel for the night, and early in the morning the next day, when Katy was ten years and eight days old, we went off to see Guatemala. I started by showing her a World Vision project. It's a childcare center that World Vision had set up. It's very unusual—we don't do a lot of childcare centers around the world—but it had to be strategically placed because the kids were in danger where they lived. And I took Katy to Guatemala City's dump, and we climbed the three stories of this daycare center that World Vision had built and we saw that they had put the playground on the third floor roof. That was actually one of the first gifts that CPC gave to World Vision in Guatemala, we did the playground for them. Katy saw the kids, but immediately her eyes went to the dump and she saw people surrounding the dump trucks. When a dump truck would come to the gate, people would surround it. They would walk with the dump truck all the way through the dump to where it dumped its load so they would have claim on the garbage. And another group would follow the next dump truck, and sometimes there would be fights about which group got which dump truck. And as Katy looked out, she didn't just see the dump trucks, she saw where people lived. Ten thousand people live in the Guatemala City dump, inside the dump, so they can be close to the trash. And then Katy looked over into the dump and she didn't see a house, she saw a child, someone her age. And her hand went into mine—sort of unusual, she was all of ten, very independent—and she said, "Daddy, God didn't make Adam and Eve to live in a garbage dump, did He?" She's still trying to answer that question. She got home yesterday from Burma. She knows that this is not the way the world is supposed to be.

The apostle Paul says in his letter to the Church of Rome:

19 Everything God created looks forward to the future. That will be the time when his children appear in their full, final glory. 20 The created world was held back (the curse) from fulfilling its purpose. But this wasn't its choice. Creation was planned to be free by the same One who held it back. God planned 21 to set the created world free. He didn't want it to rot away. Instead, God wanted creation to have the same freedom and glory that God's children have. 22 We know that all that God created has been groaning. It is in pain as if it were giving birth to a child. The created world continues to groan even now. [Romans 8:19-22 (NIRV)]

And that morning, for the first time, Katy heard the groan of a broken world. The groan of creation.

Tim Keller is a pastor and he points out in the Old Testament that there is no word for nature, there is just the word "creation" because the word creation is a theological word. It's a Bible word that makes a statement because if there is a creation, there must be a Creator and the Creator is not us. That means we don't own it. Another important biblical word is "creature". Creatures are beings that are given the gift of life by their Creator in order to reflect and participate in something glorious; they are to catch glimpses of glory and enjoy it. There are old hymns that have this kind of language. One of them is "All creatures of our God and King, lift up your voice and with us sing, Halleluiah!" Creatures are meant to reflect, to praise, the glory of God with a creation they do not own. Creation means that the Creator has said, "I made this, you don't own it. You are the creature and you are here to do something with what I own."

Often I use the words of Abraham Kuyper, one of the other founders of the reformation. Kuyper was a theologian, and a scientist, and a politician, and Kuyper viewed the world differently. He said, "There is not one square inch in all of creation over which my King Jesus does not cry out, 'This is Mine. This is creation that is Mine. Give it back.'" That's why Presbyterians—our little room in the church—Presbyterians are not the ones who separate themselves from the world and get in our little holy huddle. Presbyterians are the ones who vote. Presbyterians are the ones who engage in public discourse, who become the very best students, and professors, and business people, and doctors. We engage in God's creation saying, "Give it back, please, it belongs to the King."

I have to tell you, I love being part of a state like Minnesota where frankly, to a degree that is extraordinary, both the left and the right are conscious of our environment. Where Republican governors and Democratic state senators have the long-term environment in mind, even when we fight about how best to do it. And I have to tell you, this is not a universal trait. So, in Minnesota I have no problem saying, "I am green", but I am green not because I'm a Democrat, not because I'm a Republican. I'm not green because I fear the apocalypse of climate change, or I'm not green because I believe that the earth is alive and even mosquitoes have value. Nuh uh! I am green because I believe that God is green, and—trying to avoid politics here, but say something—I'm not only green, I believe in climate change. I believe the climate is changing. That is, I believe that our

planet's systems continue to change. After all, it's been less than 12,000 years since the end of the last Ice Age. I do not think that God hit the 'Pause' button and the planet is frozen. I believe this planet continues to change. I also believe that human agency affects the planet, both bad and good. Sometimes it's bad. Sometimes it looks like smog in China, but sometimes it looks like the reclamation of the desert in the San Joaquin Valley. Sometimes it looks like the collapse of the ozone layer that none of us saw, but could have killed us, or its restoration. Sometimes it looks like the Great Hoover Dam—you ought to see it. It has changed the planet—and sometimes it looks like filling the oceans with garbage. [Picture shown] This is part of what's called the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. It literally floats on the currents of the Pacific Ocean. We can see bad and we can see good. Sometimes we can see how God said, "Take care of the garden", and you go to New York City and in New York City you see them building a garden. [Picture shown] This is a new garden and it's 30 feet up in the air. It's called the New York Garden. They took the railroad tracks and they built a garden. Bad and good. You pick. But the interplay of humans and a changing world is more mysterious than either end. What we do makes a difference. We're not the only ones involved. Either side of the spectrum can only see half of it. The key is not your politics; the key is how you view the creation of God.

The president of Princeton is a friend of mine and he spoke at a funeral that I was at the other day. He said of another friend, "This pastor reminded me that pastors need the soul of a poet, not a politician." Pastors need to be poets, not politicians. And then Craig said, "Poets don't win arguments, they reveal mysteries." That was a great line for me. My job is not to win the argument, my job is to reveal the mysteries of what you cannot see, or measure, or weigh, but is more important than anything else. The mysteries. So I'd like to just talk about two mysteries in the elements.

The first is that statement that David the shepherd boy made . . . "The heavens declare the glory of God." I believe that. The heavens *do* declare the glory of God. The problem is, a lot of times you people are blind. The heavens do declare the glory of God . . . a lot of times I'm deaf and I don't hear it. When is the last time you were stuck in traffic and look over and think, *oh, I wonder what's over there?* When's the last time you were out walking the dog thinking, *oh, I can't believe mom's making me walking the dog* and saw a grasshopper and stopped instead of yanking the dog? When's the last time you watched a sunset and didn't say, *ohhhh, pollution?* You said, *thank you, God.* The heavens declare the glory of God. Are you listening? Poets don't win arguments, they reveal mysteries.

Elizabeth Barret Browning, remember?

"Earth's crammed with heaven,
and every common bush afire with God;
but only he who sees takes off his shoes,

the rest sit round the bush and pluck blackberries,
and wipe their faces unaware.

Earth is crammed with heaven and you and I have goggles on that don't see. The heavens declare the glory of God. For God's sake, see what God is doing so that you can give glory to God. How does that happen? I think sometimes the kids can teach us.

John Ortberg talks about what's really precious. He says, "Anybody who has ever been around children knows what parents put on their refrigerators." What do parents put on refrigerators if you have little kids? They put their paintings on, right? Every day a parent will come home and there will be a new crayon masterpiece that is scratched out to them and they say, "Do you like it? Do you like it?" "Oh, this is the best one, yet!" And it goes right up. Now objectively speaking, is it great art? No. Would I sell it for a thousand dollars? You bet I would, she's going to make another one tomorrow. No, that's not what I'm supposed to say! I loved it because it's an expression of her. That's the way it works. If you love the artist, you love the art. If you love the artist, if you love God, you'll love the art. But it works both ways. Imagine that this little crayon turns into this painting [Picture shown] and instead of on a refrigerator, it's on a ceiling and your kid grows up to be Rembrandt, or Van Gogh, or Michelangelo. Then you start to love the art for its own sake. Maybe you start by loving the art, and that actually leads you to the artist. Listen to that. You love the art and you start to love the artist. What kind of being would create a mountain like this or a waterfall? And you start to get a little echo of what is going on in Genesis 1: *He made it and it was good* or in Psalm 19: *the heavens declare*. And when we look at other people appreciating creation, it reminds us that God creates and it is good; it is not an accident. It is good because it is an expression of God and God is good all the way to the ground. Therefore . . . and this is what Ortberg says, this is the therefore . . . therefore for you and me, allow creation to point you to the Creator. This is a command from God. This week, this day, allow creation to point you to the Creator by connecting the dots, and let that creation lead you to wonder, and gratitude, and joy, and thanksgiving. It's a mystery.

Here's the second mystery. The second mystery is that one person can make a difference. One person can make a difference in the world. Chapter 2 of Genesis actually says this:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden to work it and take care of it. [Genesis 2:15]

That word "work" can also be translated "to serve." God took humans and put them in the garden to serve it. That little phrase "take care of" actually means to keep it. It's translated in the great blessing we use all the time in Numbers: "The Lord bless you and keep you." That's what we're supposed to do. Take care of it and keep it. What God is doing for us by blessing us, we're supposed to do for creation. And I have to tell you, I don't think it's natural. This is where you're going to get in some trouble with your

friends who are just mechanical—out for a buck, out for a great time. I know this because that's me. I was a little pagan—high school, college—I was one of those kids that Jody had to pick up after throwing the beer cans out. And then I came to Christ in a fairly striking way and I started to hang around with Christian people. I didn't know they were big people or little people. I didn't know he was the president of Youth for Christ; I didn't know what that meant, he was just Sam. And Sam comes to pick me up and take me to do some errands and he said, "Sorry I'm late" and I said, "Oh, what are you late for?" And he goes, "Ah, well . . ." and I said, "No, why are you late?" And he says, "Well, I was coming up and we stopped at the stop light and this kid just came out of McDonald's, opened his window, and threw the trash out on the ground. It was still a red light so I got out of my car, went up, got the trash, knocked on his window and said, 'This is my Father's world. I'm sure you just dropped this by accident.'" And I was like, *woooaaahhh*, and on the inside I'm thinking *thank God I didn't go to McDonald's today*. This is my Father's world. Again, we sing a song: "This is my Father's World." For him it was more than a song.

There's a guy named Richard Foster and Foster writes this great phrase. He says, "We plant evergreens, we compost garbage, we clean rooms, we recycle, and in all these ways, we help to tidy up Eden." I love that phrase. "We help to tidy up Eden." Almost every one of you can tidy up Eden today. It doesn't take legislation; it doesn't take a demonstration. You will have the opportunity to clean up Eden today if you look at the creation that God has made and look for where it's groaning, because creation started in a garden with the tree of knowledge. Remember that? God created a tree and the story climaxes on another tree where God comes back to earth and says, "This is Mine. I'm willing to die to restore it." Jesus begins to restore all of creation starting with broken people in a broken world. Starts in a garden with a tree, climaxes with another tree in another garden, but it ends in a city. You guys ever think of that? The Bible actually ends in a city. It says,

¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away...²I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.
[Revelation 21:1-2]

When you and I gather at this table, we talk about the groaning of creation. We talk about how we're broken and damaged, and how God needs to forgive us and restore us. But when we come to this table, we're also putting our little pictures on God's refrigerator and saying, "What do You think?" and Jesus smiles and says, "I love it."

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.