Psalm 104 | Creation

Session 2 · October 9, 2025 · Singing in the Dark · Epiphany Seattle

Context — When, Where, and Who

- **Book:** Book IV (Psalms 90–106) — the Psalter's theological response to exile. God still reigns when kingdoms fall. A lavish creation hymn sitting here is deliberate.
- **Date:** Likely pre-exilic, before 587 BCE. Some scholars place it in the early monarchy, 950–700 BCE.
- **Author:** Anonymous. No superscription. Communal and cosmic voice. This psalm belongs to everyone.
- **Type:** Creation Hymn. God is the point; the world reveals God.

The psalm resembles Akhenaten's Great Hymn to the Aten (c. 1350 BCE) — 400 years earlier. The debate is unresolved: direct borrowing, common source, or generic similarity? Most likely the psalmist used this tradition as theological subversion: in Egypt the sun disk is the god; in Psalm 104 the sun is merely a timekeeper.

Poetic Structure — How the Psalm Is Built

- **Form:** Synonymous and synthetic parallelism throughout. Line 2 deepens or extends line 1. Cumulative, expansive, generous.
- **Movement:** God, sky, earth, sea, creatures, humanity, night, day — and back to God. Creation breathed out and breathed back in. The last verse echoes the first.
- **Sounds Like:** Follows the same sequence as Genesis 1. But where Genesis is spare and architectural, Psalm 104 is lavish and delighted. A blueprint versus a painting.
- **Notice:** The leviathan (v.26) — the ancient chaos monster — is here just playing. God made it for sport. There is no battle. The terror is domesticated by delight.

Four Words Worth Sitting With

Nephesh (v.1)

Soul / living being / throat. "Bless the LORD, O my nephesh." Not a disembodied soul — the whole animated creature. You praise God with the very breath God gave you. The same word appears in v.29: "when you take away their breath, they die." The creature that praises and the creature that dies are one.

Ruach (v.30)

"When you send forth your ruach, they are created." Spirit / breath / wind — the same word as Genesis 1:2. Creation is not a past event. It is a present breathing. Every morning is a new act of creation.

Kabod (v.31)

Glory / weight / honor. Kabod carries physical density — related to the Hebrew root for "heavy." The glory of God is not a glow. It is a weight, a presence that presses. The world is dense with God. Every creature is a glimpse of the kabod.

Samach (v.31)

"May the LORD rejoice in his works." Rejoice / delight / be glad. God is not merely satisfied with creation. God delights in it. This is the theological center of the psalm. Creation is not a project. It is a delight.

The Shape of the Psalm — Into the Text

- **vv.1–4 God Robed in Creation:** God is clothed in creation — light, wind, fire, clouds are his garments. God is not behind creation; God is clothed in it.
- **vv.5–18 Earth and Its Creatures:** Wild donkeys, birds, storks, goats, badgers. Specific. Named. Loved. God sees the badger in the rocks. This is not a God interested only in humans.
- **vv.19–23 Night and Day:** God orders time as well as space. Lions hunt by night; people work by day. The lion and the laborer are both creatures under the same Creator.
- **vv.24–30 The Sea and the Ruach:** "O LORD, how manifold are your works." The leviathan at play. When God hides his face, creatures are dismayed; when God sends ruach, they are created anew. The world depends on God's continued attention. This is not frightening. It is intimate.
- **vv.31–35 Doxology and Return:** "I will sing to the LORD as long as I live." The psalm opens and closes with nephesh. Note: verse 35 contains the first use of Hallelujah in the entire Old Testament.

Textual note: The Masoretic Text reads "let sins cease" (v.35a); a Dead Sea Scroll reads "let sinners be consumed" (the NRSV reading). One prays against evil; the other against people.

Psalm 104 | Creation

Session 1 · October 9, 2025 · Singing in the Dark · Epiphany Seattle

Jesus and the Holy Spirit in Psalm 104

The Holy Spirit

Psalm 104 is appointed for Pentecost Sunday — the day the church celebrates the Holy Spirit — because of verse 30: "When you send forth your ruach, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground." The Spirit who renews creation in this psalm is the same Spirit poured out at Pentecost. This psalm is not just about creation; it is about the continuing creative work of the Spirit in the world right now.

The Eastern Orthodox tradition's opening prayer at every Divine Liturgy — "Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of Truth, present in all places and filling all things, Treasury of blessings and Giver of life" — draws every phrase directly from Psalm 104. The psalm is the theological source text for Orthodox pneumatology: the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus

John 1:1–3: "In the beginning was the Word… all things came into being through him." If Christ is the agent of creation, then every creature named in Psalm 104 — the wild donkey, the stork, the leviathan — was made through him. The psalm is already a Christological text, even before the early church read it that way.

Colossians 1:16–17: "In him all things were created… and in him all things hold together." The contingency of creation in verse 29 — when God hides his face, creatures are dismayed and die — finds its New Testament answer in Colossians: what holds creation together is Christ. The psalm's theology of divine sustenance is the theology of the incarnate Word.

Verse 4 of Psalm 104 is quoted directly in Hebrews 1:7: "He makes his angels winds and his servants flames of fire." The writer of Hebrews uses this verse in an argument about the superiority of Christ over the angels. The angels are God's servants; Christ is God's Son. Psalm 104 thus enters directly into the earliest Christological debates of the church.

The Trinitarian Reading

If ruach is the Holy Spirit and the Word is the agent of creation, Psalm 104 is a Trinitarian creation hymn, written centuries before the Trinity was named. The psalmist did not have that language. But the reality was already there — in the breath that creates, in the word through whom all things are made, in the weight of glory pressing against every creature in the world.

The BCP Translation — A Note on Coverdale

Miles Coverdale translated the Psalms in 1535, working from the Latin Vulgate and Luther's German rather than directly from the Hebrew. His translation has been in Anglican Prayer Books for nearly 500 years, unchanged through every revision — the 1549 Book of Common Prayer, the 1662 revision, and the 1979 American BCP. The result: the Psalms most Anglican worshippers know by heart are in Elizabethan English regardless of what translation sits in their pew Bible.

Key differences in Psalm 104 worth noting in class:

- **"How excellent is your greatness"** (BCP) vs. "you are very great" (NRSV). Coverdale's version is more exclamatory, more liturgical in feel — shaped for chanting.
- **"Wrap yourself with light as with a cloak"** (BCP) vs. "garment" (NRSV). "Cloak" is more intimate — something you pull around yourself.
- **"To take his pastime therein"** (BCP, leviathan) — Coverdale's archaic English for recreation or play. Warmer and more domestic than the NRSV rendering. The chaos monster is not threatening; it is at leisure.
- **"O my soul"** (BCP) renders the same nephesh as the NRSV. Worth asking: does "soul" feel right now that we know what nephesh actually means?

Listening Suggestion

Rachmaninoff's Vespers, Op. 37 (1915) — widely considered his greatest work — opens with a setting of Psalm 104:1 in Church Slavonic: "Bless the Lord, O my soul." The same nephesh, the same opening gesture of the whole self directed toward God, moving through Russian Orthodox liturgy into one of the most transcendent choral compositions of the 20th century.

Recommended recording: Tallis Scholars, directed by Peter Phillips (Gimell Records, 1984). Available on most streaming platforms.

A Word to Take Home

"We began where the Psalter wants us to begin — in delight, in a world made carefully and joyfully. That is where faith starts. Not with a problem to be solved but with a world to be grateful for."

Next session: Psalm 78 | Religious Tradition | October 16