

## **All That is Within It**

Psalm 24

October 18, 2015

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The earth is the Lord's and all that is within it,  
the world, and those who live in it;  
for he has founded it on the seas,  
and established it on the rivers.

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?  
And who shall stand in his holy place?  
Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,  
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,  
and do not swear deceitfully.  
They will receive blessing from the Lord,  
and vindication from the God of their salvation.  
Such is the company of those who seek him,  
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.

Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.

Who is the King of glory?  
The Lord, strong and mighty,  
the Lord, mighty in battle.

Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.

Who is this King of glory?  
The Lord of hosts,  
he is the King of glory.

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One of my earliest memories of wanting to own something came when I was a first grader at Eastover Elementary School. The school had plans to hold a paper drive – and the students of the class that collected the most newspapers would receive their choice of a Star Wars action figure.

Let me do a little translation here for the benefit of the younger members of the congregation. Schools used to hold “paper drives” before the word “recycling” became a part of our everyday language. The goal was to gather used newspapers (and, yes, this was back when newspapers were printed on actual paper – instead of on your iPad screens). You would gather the papers together and tie them with string. Each class would collect what seemed like a mountain of old, raggedy newspapers and then the Principal would weigh each class’s mountain, and the class with the most paper would win the prize.

I had my eye on the Lando Calrissian action figure. I canvassed my neighborhood – knocking on doors – collecting my share. With the dexterity of a seven-year-old, I tried to neatly stack the papers in a pile and tie them together with string. We packed the back of the Volvo station wagon and got to school early so we could unload my haul to be added to Mrs. Martin’s first grade class total.

When the day of reckoning finally came, I remember waiting nervously for the Principal to announce the winner before the final bell rang. It was not to be. Not by a long shot. A sixth grade class won the paper drive...and I remember thinking that they were too old to even care about playing with action figures.

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When you think about it – most of us are well practiced in a life-long pursuit of ownership.

We work hard to earn enough money to afford that first car – the clunker that is on its last 10,000 miles, but can still deliver us from being dropped off to high school in mom’s mini-van.

We work hard to earn an education – putting in hours of study and spending (increasingly) a significant amount of money to own a diploma with our name on it.

We work hard to establish ourselves in the real world – maybe buying a house, getting furniture that is different than what was in our college dorm room, finding a neighborhood where we might set down some roots.

We work hard to make an impression at work – to earn a promotion – to prove to the powers that be that our work makes a difference to the mission of company or the organization, and to the bottom line.

For some of us, we want and realize our dream of having children. And, while we don’t “own” our children – when you stand in the hospital and the nurse hands you the sweetest smelling baby wrapped in one of those white and blue and pink blankets, you realize you are bound together...that your child belongs to you in the same way that you belong to them.

A lot of our life is built around ownership.

Ownership drives our decisions – it kindles our motivations – it defines our success and our self-worth.

Many of the laws that are meant to ensure order and fairness have, at their root, a goal of defining who owns what. Who has the title to the land? What party owns what share of the intellectual property? Who should have custody of the children?

Even in ways that are not tangible or physical, we talk about ownership. For leaders – we want to be the ones to own the vision. If we are effective, who we are should have some bearing on the culture of the place we work.

There is something innately human about ownership – how does the Scripture go? “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”<sup>1</sup>

Ownership comes with important and valuable upside. Ownership increases responsibility. Yesterday, I joined a number of our members in the Lakewood neighborhood where our church is working alongside ten other congregations to build two different homes for two different new-home owners. The research is clear – owning a home has a direct and positive correlation to increased levels of education for children, civic engagement, and economic opportunities.<sup>2</sup>

In obvious ways, ownership leads to investment. We tend to care about the things we own or want to own. Whether it is a business deal, a family decision, or a choice to support the church – we are *involved* with the things to which belong or that belong to us.

President George Bush famously called the United States an “ownership society.”<sup>3</sup> And, in a lot of ways, we are. And there are very good outcomes because of it.

But ownership is not perfect.

One of things that is generally true of those of us who own something is that it leads us to want to own something else.

After we move into the house we always wanted, it starts to lose its luster, and we find ourselves scanning realtor.com for our next dream house.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:28

<sup>2</sup> Harvard Study: “Reexamining the Social Benefits of Home Ownership After the Housing Crisis” (August 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Speech in Kennesaw, GA on December 16, 2003 (as cited by numerous sources. Mine: <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/achievement/chap7.html>)

Once we climb the ladder to achieve that promotion at work, we realize that there are other ladders to climb.

Halfway through the college degree that we worked so hard get, we discover that a bachelor's degree might not cut it, and we start to feel the pressure to pursue a good Master's program.

We hit the number that we thought we needed to hit to set us up for life and retirement – and find ourselves moving the goalposts, convincing our spouse and family that we need just a little bit more to truly be comfortable.

Another thing – something we don't often like to admit – is that what comes with ownership is a tremendous amount of pressure.

If you have ever held that baby in your arms in the hospital – or staying awake with that baby when they are nine years old and anxious about a test – or offering advice to that baby when they are in their mid-twenties and at what feels to them like a dead-end...you know. The pressure is real.

If you have ever been responsible for the vision – or the team – or the quarterly report – or the details of a smooth and fair acquisition...you know. The pressure is real.

If you have helped encourage a practice of wanting more and more – showing your love for friends and family by what you can purchase – and now find that it is harder and harder to sustain your lifestyle...you know. The pressure is real.

If you have ever felt the weight of the world on your shoulders because you don't know who else to trust – you don't know who else could carry the responsibility that you are carrying...you know.

And if you have ever worried about the future – a future that you know – despite your best intentions and most careful plans – is ultimately out of your control...you know. The pressure is real.

This past summer, I went on a transformative vacation into the woods and lakes of Canada. I was disconnected from the world for eight days – canoeing, fishing, hiking, camping. Part of why that experience was so transformative for me was because I have felt all of the pressures I just described. And to know that the world continued to spin on its axis without me at the helm was a gift of God's grace.

Since I have been home, I find myself reading more and more of Wendell Berry...that wonderful, earthy writer and poet who helps put me into touch with the beauty of creation.

Recently, I read these words that spoke to me:

*When despair for the world grows in me, and I wake at night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be—I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty in the water and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things . . . into the presence of still water. And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world and am free.*

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*“The earth is the Lord, and all that is within it...”* the Psalmist says.

Taking seriously who we are as people – and the reality of who we are as Christians who live, and work, and work out our faith in our particular culture, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann called this first verse of Psalm 24 one of the most radical statements in all of Scripture.

*“The earth is the Lord's, and all that is within it...”*

I'm struck with a question that I find to be as profound as it is simple: what would our life be like if we believed that? Not simply our life of faith – but the entirety of our life.

What freedom might come from the knowledge that we are not as responsible as we imagine ourselves to be?

What grace might appear if we could unburden ourselves from our quest – maybe even our addiction – to want more?

What perspective might take root in our hearts if we understood that even the things we own aren't really ours....that they are simply gifts on loan from the God who trusts us to watch over this beautiful creation until the time comes for us to join the company of the saints in light?

St. Francis of Assisi – from whom the wildly popular Pope Francis takes his name – was born in 1182...during the time of the Crusades. He grew up a privileged, spoiled young man – the son of a prosperous cloth merchant. Early in his life, Francis volunteered to fight in a war with neighboring Perugia where he was captured and forced to spend a year in prison and contracted malaria. When he returned to Assisi, sick and depressed, Francis wandered into a church in the neighboring town of San Damiano that was in disrepair but had a beautiful crucifix hanging over the altar. Francis heard a voice: “rebuild my church.” He literally rebuilt San Damiano, and then decided to rebuild the church by reminding people that God was available and alive all around them – inside and outside of the church. So he spent the rest of this life stepping outside the four walls of the church building and demonstrated what it meant to live as if this morning's Psalm was true: befriending everyone,

including animals, condemning no one, treating all with the respect he believed was in them because they were part of God's good creation.

I want to close this sermon by offering a prayer from St. Francis. May it be to us a prayer of thanksgiving and aspiration – as we seek to live the good news of the gospel...

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Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.  
Where there is injury, pardon.  
Where there is doubt, faith.  
Where there is despair, hope.  
Where there is darkness, light.  
Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,  
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;  
to be understood, as to understand;  
to be loved, as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive.  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.  
Amen.