A Word From the Editor

When relentless rains caused Tennessee rivers to overflow and flood everything in their paths in May 2010, I had a front-row seat. The street in front of my house became a raging waterway. At one point I saw a garage door, forcefully ripped by the waters from a neighbor’s house, sail by. As the waters continued to rise, fences, trees, and even cars disappeared. Men waded through chest-high water carrying children and pets to rescuers in canoes and boats. Floodwaters completely overtook the homes across the street from mine, stopping only a few feet short of the housetops. In a matter of hours, scenic rivers, the source of recreation and pleasure for so many in our area, had turned destructive, even deadly.

As soon as the floodwaters receded, signs of hope, large and small, emerged. One of my neighbors spread sheets in the front yard and placed her children’s shoes and toys on them to dry in the sun. “Everything’s soaked, but we’re alive. We’re going to be okay!” her gesture seemed to say. Scores of volunteers descended upon our neighborhood offering assistance, their numbers so great that our streets could not hold their vehicles. This continued for weeks, a scene repeated city- and statewide.

We could not have anticipated what happened. What meteorologists had first termed “the flood of the century,” they later upgraded to “the thousand-year flood.” Yet in the midst of a terrifying experience that resulted in massive and indescribable losses came help and hope from unexpected sources. As is often the case, human intermediaries were vessels not only of practical aid but also of divine comfort and grace.

Threatening waters figure prominently in some of our readings this quarter as we recall God’s creation of the world, human beings, and the nation of Israel. When people’s sin became so great that it broke God’s heart, God flooded the earth, destroying everyone and everything in it except the faithful Noah, his family, and the animals he took aboard the ark.

Later, when water threatened to destroy the Israelites fleeing Pharaoh’s army as they crossed the Red Sea on the way to the Promised Land, God intervened in a dramatic and miraculous display of power. From devastation, destruction, and impending death, God delivered God’s people yet again.

Like the first people of God, we sometimes face hardship, pain, threats, and even disaster—at times the result of our poor choices and disobedience. Like they, we too discover that our God is unwilling to give up on us, is faithful and trustworthy, and takes an active role in our deliverance. Along with Moses we can sing, “The LORD is my strength and my power; / he has become my salvation” (Exodus 15:2).

Jan Turrentine
Editor
Our Writers for This Quarter

**Stan Purdum**

Stan Purdum has served as a full-time parish minister in Ohio for a number of years. He retired recently after serving part-time as a pastor. He also works as a freelance writer and editor. He holds an education degree from Youngstown State University, a master of divinity from Methodist Theological School in Ohio, and a doctorate in ministry from Drew University.

Long an avid bicycle tourist, Stan has ridden several long-distance bike trips, including a cross-nation ride recounted in his book *Roll Around Heaven All Day*, and a trek that covered the entire length of US Route 62 from Niagara Falls, New York, to El Paso, Texas, the subject of his book *Playing in Traffic*. Stan is also the author of *New Mercies I See* and *He Walked in Galilee*. He writes regularly for *Adult Bible Studies* and DAILY BIBLE STUDY.

Stan and his wife, Jeanine, live in North Canton, Ohio. They have three grown children.

**Clara K. Welch**

Clara Welch has served churches in Maryland, South Carolina, and Georgia as a diaconal minister and an ordained deacon. She is certified in the areas of Christian education and older adult ministry through the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. Following graduation from Lebanon Valley College with a bachelor’s degree in music education, Clara taught music at Red Bird Mission in Kentucky. She then attended Scarritt College in Nashville, where she earned a master’s degree in church music and Christian education. She also earned an MTS at Candler School of Theology, Emory University. Clara and her husband, Brian, have one daughter, Rebecca Jo.

**Carol Miller**

Carol Miller is a native of Zion, Illinois. She has served United Methodist churches in eastern Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. Carol has written numerous curriculum pieces for Cokesbury and has authored the Kerygma Program books on Mark, Luke, and Acts; the Advent texts; and the Lenten texts. She received her B.A. degree from Illinois Wesleyan University and her M.Th. and D.Min. degrees from Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University.

She and her husband, the Reverend Richard Miller, have two married daughters, Heather and Mary, and three grandchildren, Acacia, Evan, and Grace. The Millers live in Annapolis, Maryland.
“I’ll start at the beginning.”

Many people make that decision when they first commit themselves to read the Bible. It is a perfectly logical decision for newcomers to the Scriptures, of course, but the beginning is also a worthwhile place for long-time Bible readers to return from time to time. There are always new things we can learn; and the readings this fall give us good opportunities to deepen our understanding of the accounts in Genesis and Exodus, with occasional related forays into other books of the Bible.

The common thread running through all of the readings is “first things,” and the readings this quarter begin with the creation of the world and humankind and the first understandings of what it means for mortals to relate to a holy God. That five-week unit is titled “First Days,” and it includes not only the Creation and Eden stories but also the accounts of the great Flood and the tower of Babel.

The next unit, four weeks long, is “First Nation.” It explores the beginnings of the Hebrew people. They were not the first nation to be formed but the first to understand themselves as a people called into covenant with God. The daily readings include stories from the lives of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, Isaac, Rebekah, Esau, and Jacob.

The third unit, also four weeks of readings, is “First Freedom.” It takes us into Exodus and follows the Israelites as they move from being slaves in Egypt to being a people traveling toward a land God has promised them. We hear about the afflication of the Israelites in Egypt, the commissioning of Moses to lead them out of slavery, the final plague, the first Passover, the crossing of the sea, and the building of the portable tent/dwelling for God.

These three unit themes belong under the larger “First Things” heading. Writing about Genesis, for example, professor of Old Testament Theodore Hiebert said, “Genesis shares the scientist’s fascination with the birth of the cosmos and the origin of life on earth, the anthropologist’s curiosity about the first human beings, the historian’s interest in the beginning of civilization, a family’s esteem for their earliest ancestors, and the theologian’s concern about the founding events of religious traditions.”

However, the accounts in Genesis and Exodus are first things not simply because they relate to events that come first in the Bible or even first in creation. Rather, they are first things in that they are foundational to understanding what God wants us to know about God’s self. While the New Testament gives us a broader picture of God, the stories in these first two Old Testament books help us to know something about the character of divine power and the nature of the presence of God in the world.

What is more, Genesis and Exodus are also foundational for comprehending the ongoing storyline of the Bible and its overall message. The New Testament, for example, is about a new covenant between God and humankind; but we understand that better when we know what the first covenant between God and Israel entailed. The New Testament insists that we are sinners, but that is clearer when we know about the disobedience
of our first parents and the consequences it had.

The New Testament calls us to be part of the church and the family of God, but we grasp that more clearly when we read in Genesis about Abraham and his descendants discovering that God had chosen them to be his people. The New Testament tells us God is with us through all that happens, and the Exodus stories dramatize that truth as God brought the Israelites out of slavery and steered them through the desert.

However, beyond foundational understandings is the fact that many of the early stories in the Bible invite us to see ourselves in a new light. Each of the daily readings in this book start with a question aimed not at our Bible knowledge but at our life experiences. They call us to put ourselves into the scriptural accounts and hear them as addressed, at least in part, to us. Each of the readings concludes with a prayer inviting us into a deeper relationship with God.

One way to view the Bible is as a finger pointing to God, and Genesis and Exodus do that. Though there are many different people in the stories in these two books, the protagonist throughout both books is the Lord God. So read the daily passages as showing you something about God.

However, another way to view the Bible is as a finger beckoning you to come into the Scriptures and find yourself there in relationship to God. So read the daily passages to learn more about yourself in your walk with God.

The readings this quarter will help you know more about what is actually in Genesis and Exodus, and they will help you to think about first things and beginnings. At the same time, however, they will point to God and beckon you to see yourself in relationship with the One who made first things first, right from the beginning.

1From The New Interpreter’s Study Bible (Abingdon Press, 2003); page 1.
How do you trust God to feed and clothe you?

I had not realized how much time shopping took up until my husband was laid off. He was without work for almost a year, and during that time we sharply cut our spending. I no longer took the time to peruse mail-order catalogs or browse at the mall.

In the uncertainty that goes with unemployment, I found myself taking a closer look at my faith and my relationship with God. Did I trust God to take care of us and provide for our needs? Interestingly, I had more time to reflect on these questions, to pray, and to study Scripture since I had given up shopping. Perhaps this is what Jesus had in mind when he told us to “desire first and foremost God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness” (Matthew 6:33) rather than worry about food and clothing.

Jesus calls our attention to two of the more vulnerable parts of God’s beautiful creation: the birds and the flowers. We do not know specifically what flower Jesus spoke of when he indicated the “the lilies in the field” (verse 28), “since the word is used of all kinds of wild flowers, but it has been suggested that here the scarlet anemone is compared to the royal robes of Solomon.”1 Jesus’ point is that if God takes special care to provide food for the birds and dress the “grass in the field so beautifully” (verse 30), then God will certainly provide for our needs, for we are “worth much more than they” (verse 26).

Jesus was not saying we should not do our part. Unlike the birds that are unable to “sow seed or harvest grain or gather crops” (verse 26), humankind has been given the ability to earn a living. The Book of Proverbs warns against laziness (Proverbs 6:6) and points out that even the ants “store away their food in the summer” (Proverbs 30:25).

Indeed, God has provided enough food to feed God’s people. The fact that children go to bed hungry is due to humankind’s selfishness, not a lack of provision on God’s part. God has called us to be the hands and the feet of Christ. We do this by making donations to food banks and soup kitchens, supporting programs that teach families to raise animals and crops for food, and working against injustice. While my husband was unemployed, I knew that if our resources ran out, the church would be there to help us.

After my husband found a job, I did not rush out to the mall. I preferred the lifestyle change I had adopted during the time of unemployment, focusing more on “God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness” (Matthew 6:33) and less on shopping. Jesus asked, “Isn’t life more than food and the body more than clothes?” (verse 25). How does your lifestyle reflect your answer to that question?

1From The Interpreter’s Bible, Volume 7 (Abingdon Press); page 322.

Prayer: Generous God, teach me to seek your kingdom and trust you for my daily needs. Amen.
Tuesday
August
27
Psalm 104:1-4
The Greatness
of the Creator

How do you experience God’s presence in creation?

When have you felt God’s greatness reflected in creation? When have you, like the psalmist, wanted to worship God with your “whole being” (Psalm 104:1)? Perhaps it was while watching a sunrise or a sunset, standing on the ocean’s shore or a mountain ridge, or observing the delicate and intricate patterns of a flower petal or a butterfly wing.

The psalmist began this hymn of praise and thanksgiving with the exclamation, “Let my whole being bless the LORD!” (verse 1). We can picture him standing with arms open wide, raising his voice toward the heavens. Although biblical scholars have not been able to identify the author of this hymn, we can identify with him. We stand in awe of the same creation and offer our songs of praise to the same Creator.

The psalmist declared that God wears “light like a robe” (verse 2), a light so bright it is concealed behind a curtain of sky. This idea that God is clothed in light appears in other places in Scripture. When God appeared to Moses, it was in the light of “a flame of fire in the middle of a bush” (Exodus 3:2). God told Moses he was “standing on holy ground” (Exodus 3:5), and “Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God” (Exodus 3:6). In his letter to Timothy, Paul wrote that God “lives in light that no one can come near. No human being has ever seen or is able to see him” (1 Timothy 6:16).

The psalmist envisioned God living in a “lofty house on the waters” (Psalm 104:3). With the word lofty, we sense that he meant the waters God placed “above the dome” (Genesis 1:7), or sky, at the time of Creation. He pictured the wind, fire, and flame as God’s messengers and ministers (Psalm 104:4).

These images of wind, fire, and flame are also present in the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). In contrast to the psalmist’s idea that God lived above the heavens, Paul wrote that God, through the Holy Spirit, lives within us (1 Corinthians 3:16).

It is awesome and humbling to know we live in the presence of the Creator. When we view a range of snow-capped mountains, feel the power of an ocean wave, or watch the seasons change outside our kitchen window, we know why the psalmist described our Creator as being “clothed in glory and grandeur” (Psalm 104:1). In the presence of such grandeur we may feel with the psalmist that God wears a robe of light too bright for us to approach. Yet as Christians we know God is approachable.

God through Christ opened the door for us to live in relationship with our “fantastic” (verse 1) Creator. How does creation remind you of this wonderful truth?

Prayer: Creating God, thank you for your awesome creation that reminds me of your greatness. Amen.
Psalm 104:10-17

Nourishment for All Creatures

In what ways does God nourish you?

The psalmist painted a beautiful, almost idyllic picture of God’s creation. It is a picture we might see on a calendar or in a magazine about life in the country. Read the verses again. What colors do you see? What actions are taking place? What sounds do you hear? How do you feel as you read these verses?

Water is a recurring theme in this passage. The water comes up from the earth as “gushing springs” (Psalm 104:10) and rains down from God’s “lofty house” (verse 13), which the psalmist envisioned as being built on the waters above the sky (verse 3). Then, as now, water was critical for survival. The psalmist praised God for this sustaining gift that satisfied wild and domestic animals and nourished the grasses in the pastures and crops in the farmers’ fields.

Abundance is another recurring theme. The water from the springs is “gushing” (verse 10) so “every wild animal” (verse 11; italics added) might drink. Creation is “filled full” (verse 13) and “well watered” (verse 16). The “cedars of Lebanon” (verse 16) are the only trees mentioned by name in this psalm. They were tall, strong, and majestic trees, extravagant, perhaps, in comparison to smaller trees. The high resin content in cedar made it a durable building material. King Solomon used it in the building of the Temple in Jerusalem.

The psalmist praised God for providing for humankind’s basic needs: food to eat, water to drink, and materials to build a shelter. The psalmist also noticed God provided for more than humankind’s physical needs. The fruit of the farmer’s labor “cheers people’s hearts” and “sustains the human heart” (verse 15). What aspects of creation “cheer” and “sustain” you?

When a family member was in the hospital, I made daily trips to visit. Dogwood trees were in bloom, and their bright pink and white blossoms reminded me of new life and the gift of God’s presence during that difficult time.

The sound of a bird singing has the power to distract me from the cares of my day and remind me that my Creator watches over me. My husband said sunshine brightens his heart, and expansive vistas bring him a feeling of peace. Gardeners often find dandelions to be pesky weeds, but our preschool-aged daughter often squealed in delight at the sight of the bright yellow flowers.

If you were to write a poem or a song about the extravagant nourishment God provides for you in creation, what would you include? How can you offer praise and thanksgiving to your Creator who provides for your needs and also cheers and sustains your heart?

Prayer: Creating God, thank you for gifts that cheer and sustain me and remind me of your presence. Amen.
How do the sun and the moon remind you of God's providence?

When I was in kindergarten, I liked to paint pictures of a bright yellow sun. I remember a poem our teacher taught us that began, “Good morning, merry sunshine.” My mother used to sing a song about the moon. Since the beginning of humankind’s history, we have been fascinated by these two heavenly bodies. Pagan cultures in the ancient world used the sun and the moon as objects of worship, believing them to be gods. In contrast, the psalmist expressed the Judeo-Christian belief that the sun and the moon are God’s creations and were placed in the universe to fulfill God’s purposes.

The psalmist may have been familiar with the Creation story in Genesis 1, for he wrote, “God made the moon for the seasons, and the sun too” (Psalm 104:19). In Genesis, we read, “God said, ‘Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night. They will mark events, sacred seasons, days, and years’” (Genesis 1:14).

The psalmist expressed the belief of his time that the sun traveled across the sky, providing daylight, and then knew “when to set” (Psalm 104:19). It is interesting to note that the psalmist did not equate darkness with the setting sun but with God’s power to “bring on the darkness” (verse 20). God’s wisdom is reflected in God’s plan that animals prowl and seek food at night and sleep during the day, thus making it safe for people to be out and go to work when it is light (verse 23). Verse 4 reminds us that God watches over creation day and night: “Israel’s protector / never sleeps or rests!”

Unlike the sun, the moon actually does travel across the sky, as it rotates around our spinning planet. It revolves around the Earth from west to east, with each rotation taking approximately four weeks. Israel’s calendar was based on these lunar months. Passover was celebrated at full moon in the spring. The Feast of Booths, celebrating the harvest, was observed at full moon in the fall.

Like the psalmist, we find wisdom in God’s plan for the cycle of days and seasons. In the Creation story, we see that God observed the daily cycle of work and rest. We know we feel better and are more productive in our work when we follow this example and take time for sleep. Our years are divided into seasons, each of which reveals the nature of our Creator. The cold landscape of winter holds the secrets of spring. Spring reminds us of God’s gift of new life, which blossoms into the fullness of summer. In the fall we gather in the harvest, sustenance God provides to nourish us through the winter. The golden sun and the silver moon are gifts from our loving Creator, gifts that meet our needs and cheer and sustain our hearts.

Prayer: Creating God, thank you for the sun and the moon that order our days and seasons with you. Amen.

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How does the promise of God’s triumphant justice give you hope?

We live within a tension of “now” and “not yet.” We look forward to the coming kingdom of God, yet we already live within God’s presence. Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God as a coming age and a present reality.

We sense this tension between “now” and “not yet” in Psalm 97. It may have been composed during the early period after the Exile. If so, the Israelites had recently experienced God’s deliverance from a foreign land and the return of exiles to Jerusalem.

This was a time of joyful thanksgiving for Israel. The people proclaimed with the psalmist, “The Lord rules! Let the earth rejoice! / Let all the islands celebrate!” (Psalm 97:1). The islands mentioned here included the islands and the coastal areas of the Mediterranean Sea.

The psalm is about God’s final judgment. The symbolism is eschatological in nature, meaning that it relates to last things and end times. The images of “clouds” (verse 2) and “lightening” (verse 4) are reminiscent of Israel’s experience at Mount Sinai. God said to Moses, “On the third day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai for all the people to see” (Exodus 19:11). On that day, “there was thunder, lightning, and a thick cloud on the mountain” (Exodus 19:16). The psalmist pictured God as ruling from a throne “built on righteousness and justice” (verse 2), not material wealth or greed for power.

As in other depictions of the last days, God’s enemies meet a violent end and are burned with fire (verse 3). Even the “earth . . . trembles” (verse 4), and “mountains melt” (verse 5). The people who worship idols “are put to shame” (verse 7).

In contrast to these frightening images, there is a reference to God’s “glory” (verse 6) that will be seen by “all nations” (verse 6). Even the false gods will recognize the one true God and “bow down to the Lord!” (verse 7). Israel’s response to God’s just and righteous judgment will be celebration and rejoicing.

Like the Israelites, we live in a sinful and unjust world. As followers of Christ, we work for justice and trust God’s righteousness. It is easy to lose hope and feel our efforts are inconsequential. Then we see glimpses of God’s kingdom here on earth. A child thanks a teacher for telling him about Jesus. An addicted mother receives help in a faith-based program and then involves her family in church. An adult hears about Christ from a mission team and begins to think seriously about her faith in God.

We remain faithful as we share God’s love with a hurting world. We serve with hope, trusting in God’s future just and righteous judgment.

Prayer: Loving God, I trust your righteous judgment as I faithfully work for justice. Amen.
How do you praise your Creator?

When I was in graduate school, I was walking across campus one day when a professor stopped me and asked why I looked so happy. I had to think for a minute before I could pinpoint the reason. “Because the sky is so blue,” I said. Indeed, the cloudless sky that day was a deep cobalt blue. Its bright, brilliant color was enough to put an extra spring in my step and a smile on my face!

The psalmist saw God’s glory revealed in creation and exclaimed, “Let the Lord’s glory last forever!” (Psalm 104:31). He noted God’s power over creation. The Lord had only to look at what God had made and creation responded (verse 32). The psalmist promised to “sing to the Lord” as long as he lived (verse 33).

When we offer our praise and thanksgiving to God, I wonder if sometimes our focus is more on ourselves than on our Creator. We may think, Look at the beautiful world God created for me. We may hope that God and even other people notice how thankful we are and how earnestly we sing our praises. If we are not careful, our praise may become self-centered rather than God-centered.

The psalmist exclaimed, “Let the Lord rejoice in all he has made!” (verse 31). The psalmist thought about the Creator’s response and hoped the Lord would find joy. He also wanted his praise of creation to be “pleasing” (verse 34) to God. He offered it as a genuine, heartfelt gift to the One who had given him life. What is your response to creation?

The psalmist declared he would praise God for as long as he lived. He did not put any conditions on his praise. He did not add, “As long as I am having a good day” or “As long as I am not too busy.” This might be a hard example to follow. It means we will praise God when we are running late and sitting in traffic. It means we will rejoice in God when we receive disappointing news or face a challenging time.

The interesting thing is that when we offer our praise to God, we are reminded of God’s promises. We are reminded of God’s steadfast love and continuing presence. Our genuine acts of praise keep us focused on our Creator and our place in creation as a precious child of God.

How and when do you praise God for the amazing gift of creation? Is it with a prayer of thanksgiving at the beginning and the end of each day? Is it through praise and worship with your community of faith? Are there aspects of creation that have the power to put a spring in your step and a smile on your face? Resolve to be like the psalmist, and offer your praises to God every day of your life.

Prayer: Dear Creator God, accept my expressions of praise and thanksgiving for your wonderful gifts. Amen.