

WIDENING THE CIRCLE “OF OUR CARE FOR CREATION”

Second in a sermon series by James R. Blades
First Presbyterian Church of San Luis Obispo, CA
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Text: Genesis 1:27-28; Psalm 8; Romans 8:14-25

Think back to a time when God’s presence was very close and real to you, when you heard the *whisper* of God’s voice. Where were you?

I can tell you now that nearly every time I have had close communion with God, it has been in the *sanctuary* of God’s Creation: While numbering the ocean waves, or sniffing the tonic evergreen air of the Sierras, or watching the froth of a bubbling brook or listening to the stillness of sunset.

When I first became a Christian, I served on a summer evangelism project in Lake Tahoe. There I learned the daily discipline of listening to God’s voice in the reading of Scriptures. I would take my Bible and journal and walk into the forest of Camp Richardson, sit against my favorite tree and read. They were among the sweetest divine communions of my memory, listening to God’s word there in the cathedral of God’s wonders.

Have you not, across the years of your life, felt the closeness of God’s presence in communion with God’s Creation?

If so, you are in good company for most of the great visionary encounters of the Bible took place not “in temples, but in sheep pastures, in the deserts, on the mountains, in the middle of the sea.”¹

Why is that? Why do seekers so often find God’s presence in the communion of God’s Creation? Isaiah said it best:

Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts!
The whole earth is full of God’s glory.

Our own John Calvin elaborated: “God has written and ... engraved the glory of his power, goodness, and wisdom and eternity [in all His Creation] For the birds sing of God, the animals acclaim him, the elements revere and the mountains resound with Him, the rivers and springs throw glances toward him, the grasses and the flowers smile.”

Go into any great art gallery and stand amazed at the works of a Rembrandt, Rubens, Van Gogh or Monet. Walk through the Sistine Chapel and crane your neck to see the wonders of Michelangelo. Where do you find God’s art? The whole earth is God’s gallery. The whole earth is a symphony hall echoing the music of God’s magnificent orchestrations.

The Bible says that God created human beings in God’s own image. African theologians take that a fascinating step further. They believe that all of God’s Creation bares God’s likeness—that all its facets reflect the image of its Creator. “The whole earth,” said one ancient seer, “is a living icon of the face of God.”

So what’s the point? Simply this: that if anyone on earth should be an environmentalist, if anyone on earth should be in love with nature, if anyone on earth should be committed to the protection and valuation and adoration of God’s creatures, it should be God’s people who reflect God’s character.

“O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth,” sings the psalmist. “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have

¹ Quoted from Rodney R. Romney’s essay: “In Love with All Creation”

made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands ...”

When someone so entrusts what is dear to them to our oversight and supervision, when someone puts their cherished belongings under our care, how do we treat those things? Does it become an occasion for defacing or mistreating those things? No, but an occasion for grateful, faithful *stewardship*.

This is the heart of our calling as Christians, as God’s people: to love the things God loves as God loves them, to value the things that God values as God values them. And just how much does God love and value this world’s creatures?

“Not a single sparrow falls to the ground apart from your Father’s care,” said Jesus. “Even the wild lilies of the field are the object of God’s caring attention,” he said, “for not even Solomon in all his glory could clothe himself as God has clothed one of these.”

But God’s love of Creation goes even farther, suggests the New Testament. “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son,” it says.² That word *world* in the original Greek is *Cosmon*, from which we get our English word, “Cosmos.” It includes not just humanity but Creation itself. The implication is clear: It wasn’t just the human race that God sent Jesus to deliver from bondage to sin and decay, it wasn’t just the children of Adam that Jesus loved enough to die for. It was all the living things of the world. I’ll bet you never learned that in Sunday school!

“For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God,” said Paul, “[when] the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”

Look at the concluding chapters of the Bible, turn to the last page of the redemption story and there you read of it: God’s Creation of a new earth; a day to which even the ancient Hebrew prophets looked forward, when ...

... the wolf will lie down with the lamb, [when] the nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra [when] no one will not hurt or destroy in all My holy dwelling, says the LORD. For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.³

So what do we do while we await that great day? I know there are whole sects of Christianity that rather think, “Well since the whole house is going to be remodeled, who cares what we do to the house now? If Jesus is returning to make a new heaven and earth, what matters whether we despoil the earth’s resources today?”

Here’s what matters! “You are the light of the world, the light of the present cosmos” said Jesus. “Let your light shine in such a way that all the world may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”⁴

What is this light if not God’s grace-filled presence, God’s all-embracing love, God’s mothering care over every living thing that God has created in the present world?

The whole point I’m driving at is this, and maybe the reason I’m driving at it is because I’m trying to drive it into my own head: If God so loves Creation, we who call ourselves his people should love it too. If Christ gave his life to redeem Creation, it ought to be a primary goal

² John 3:16

³ Isaiah 11:6ff

⁴ Matthew 5:14

as Christ's church to redeem and protect it too. "Be imitators of God, as God's beloved children," said Paul, "and live in love as Christ loved . . ." ⁵ And that includes all God's creatures.

I know some of you are already impassioned about Earth Care. In this coming year, we want to find out how to take this calling to the heart of our mission as a whole congregation.

And isn't it time?

You don't have to be a scientist to see that the world is in trouble; that the delicate orchestrations God has set in place in this planet's systems are becoming a dangerous cacophony; that the splendors of the earth God entrusted to us for our blessing and nourishment and cultivation are being ravaged at an accelerating rate.

Widening the Circle is the theme of our stewardship initiative for the coming year. And what greater stewardship have we been granted than the care of this wonderful earth, this sanctuary of God, this divine work of art, this icon of God's face, this image of the Creator's riotous ingenuity?

How can we widen the circle of our care for God's Creation? That's the question! Let's look together for answers in this coming year. Not mediocre answers that make us feel just good enough to pat ourselves on the back for being politically correct. Not just jumping on the Green bandwagon and unfurling a Green banner. But doing significant things, taking significant measures, making significant sacrifices to produce a difference in the future of this, God's beloved planet. How about it? Are you game?

Start right here. How many of us use the internet? Would you be willing to receive the Kirk, our church's newsletter, online instead of in the mail? A bit of an inconvenience, granted. But it would save 35,000 sheets of paper over the next year, not to mention ink and copy machine and staff resources and thousands of dollars in our church budget.

How's that for a challenge? You'll hear more about it after the New Year.

Stay tuned, for our church's Creation Care Team is preparing other strategies too for 2009, including a class using this resource: the *Greening Congregations Handbook*, which is loaded with all kinds of terrific ideas. I'm excited about the prospects!

Let's close with a prayer of Saint Francis.

Most high, all powerful, all good Lord! All praise is yours, all glory, all honor, and all blessing. To you, alone, Most High, do they belong. No mortal lips are worthy to pronounce your name.

Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures, especially through Sir Brother Sun, who brings the day; and you give light through him. And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendor! Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars; in the heavens you have made them, precious and beautiful.

Be praised, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air, and clouds and storms, and all the weather, through which you give your creatures sustenance.

Be praised, My Lord, through Sister Water; she is very useful, and humble, and precious, and pure.

⁵ Ephesians 5:1

Be praised, my Lord, through Brother Fire, through whom you brighten the night. He is beautiful and cheerful, and powerful and strong.

Be praised, my Lord, through our sister Mother Earth, who feeds us and rules us, and produces various fruits with colored flowers and herbs.

Be praised, my Lord, through those who forgive for love of you; through those who endure sickness and trial. Happy those who endure in peace, for by you, Most High, they will be crowned.

Praise and bless my Lord, and give thanks, and serve him with great humility.

Amen