

Celebrating God's Wilderness

I remember belonging to a men's group at the Baptist church I attended while I was in graduate school at the University of Iowa. We were pretty tender-footed urbanites and suburbanites. We had a pharmacist, and a realtor, business men and retirees. Not exactly outdoorsmen. But somehow the idea got planted in our heads, much to the chagrin of our spouses, to go to the wilderness.

And so the day finally came when we packed up our camping gear to have a 25-mile canoe trip with 5 portages – to the boundary waters of northern Minnesota reaching up into Canada. It was a completely different experience for all of us – we weren't exactly wilderness types and there was some occasional grumbling. But the experience was awesome. The lakes were pristine, and to get a drink of water we just dipped our cups into the lake. The woods were untouched. We never saw another human being for five days. Bears and other wildlife had free range. I remember being mesmerized by a loon at twilight, gliding down through the air to make a perfect landing on the mauve-colored lake just at sunset – it was awesome. We were in God's country. Feelings of peace and grandeur and awe filled our hearts – and it was ever so evident that the Creator had touched this sacred space.

You know, since the 4th century and the time of Augustine, Christian theologians have used the metaphor of “two books” to picture how God has revealed Himself to us. This is how Augustine put it – “Listen to the book that is the divine page, and look at the book that is the orb of the world.” A later theologian from Belgium wrote:

We know God by two means – First by the creation, preservation and order of the universe which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures great and small are as so many letters leading us to see clearly the invisible things of God, even His everlasting power and divinity, as the apostle Paul writes in Romans 1:20 'All which things are sufficient to convince men (and women) to leave them without excuse (not to believe.)'

Second, he makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by his Holy and Divine Word – that is to say as far as necessary for us to know in this life, to His glory, and our salvation.

Paul concludes:

What may be known about God is plain to people, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities – His eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly understood from what has been made – so that people are without excuse.

Romans 1:19-20

To me, life is a mystery. How did we come to exist and thrive on one small planet in an unimaginably huge and ever expanding universe? Is it just chance? Where do the laws come from that hold this universe together? And even those who don't quite believe in God and eternity – beholding a scene like the untouched boundary waters or the awesomely powerful expanse of sea or space – must feel a need for God.

There is a French phrase *joie de vivre*, the joy of living. Few things in life fill us with such joy as watching squirrels cavorting on the lawn and trees outside our lawns ~ a little taste of wilderness ~ or flowers popping up with their glorious color and life out of the seemingly dead grey earth of Winter.

I remember visiting Yellowstone National Park in wintertime and seeing herds of bison and elk traversing the snow carpeted plains of the wilderness; or watching the geysers spray up into the air like fountains; or the bubbling hot sulfur springs in the middle of Winter, and know that somewhere below my feet was an ocean of volcano flows.

I remember teaching English and American History in Manhattan in the days before pollution was addressed. I'd walk down 57th Street off Lexington and take a detour through Central Park before getting on the subway. It was a little pathway away from the tall buildings that hemmed me in and the sidewalks and asphalt that insulated me from the earth and the blaring noise of the traffic and people that kept me from hearing the birds' songs.

We need to be away from the confinement of civilization – go to that little space of peace and natural beauty. Some people look at mountains and prairies and they see lumber and coal supplies and fracking for gas and oil. Others look and realize they are entering the cathedral of the wilderness, by just a taste like a park or a backyard garden or a vista like Yellowstone or the boundary waters – what they see is the stuff that keeps them alive, the water supplies, the oxygen producing trees and vegetation – our finitude, our dependence on nature and the creating sustaining power of God.

All we need to enter that cathedral, that awareness of God's holiness, is to enter it with the right spirit. We are too often enthralled and stressed by the gadgetry and pace of modern life – we need to take time out, to be still to hear the voice of God –

Two books of revelation – The holy page and the treasure and sanctuary of Creation – that is why we celebrate Creation Sunday.