

Job 38 –42  
April 21, 2002

“John Muir, Job and the Creator of It All”

St. Mark’s,  
New Canaan, CT

For the past year, our church has been exploring a variety of way to “Connect with God.” It’s one of our intentional emphases for the year and one of the ways we connect with God is through nature. That is a deep passion of mine and the way I connect most profoundly with God – through nature, through, as the psalmist sings, “the works of God’s hands.” Today, I want to focus our thoughts on the theme of connecting with God through nature, knowing God through all his creation. And I want to do so by looking at the reading from the book of Job and the life of a man by the name of John Muir.

Today, April 21<sup>st</sup>, is the birthday of John Muir. Born in Dunbar, Scotland in 1838, Muir’s family came to the United States when he was 10 years old, and from the newly clear cut forests of Wisconsin, the young man emerged as the first major conservationist in our country. His was a voice from the wilderness, not unlike John the Baptist, calling on America to repent of its destruction ways of incredible misuse and abuse of the land, to conserve and preserve wilderness areas, not because some future generation might need to exploit all the remaining resources, but because there was healing, life, indeed, the presence of the Divine in it all. Through his writings and his life, Muir called for the preservation of wild places not for any utilitarian values, how we can use them, but because they have value in themselves, apart from human use. According to Muir, there was direct experience of God in wild places because they are places of pure awe, wonder, Mystery and joy that cannot be found anywhere else.

Muir was raised in an extremely strict, conservative Calvinist home. He was beaten regularly by his abusive, religiously fanatic father, was forced to memorize the New Testament and much of the Old and when he made mistakes, was beaten. The God of his growing up was harsh, judgmental, a God of punishment for laws transgressed, a God to fear, one who was far away in his heavens who came down from time to time to dish out punishment on disobedient people so they would avoid the terrors of hell and reap the rewards of heaven. Amazingly, Muir remained a Christian throughout his life, and through his encounters with God every day of his life, his God became close, personal, intimate, shining through every leaf and rain drop and ray of sun. Nature was a book in which he read the

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activity of the Divine with his creation. On his 1,000 mile walk from Indianapolis to the Gulf of Florida, while in North Carolina he wrote:

“O, these forest gardens of our Father! What perfection, what divinity in their architecture! What simplicity and mysterious complexity of detail! Who shall read the teaching of these sylvan pages, the glad brotherhood of rills that sing in the valleys, and all the happy creatures that dwell in them under the tender keeping of a Father’s care?”

What joy John Muir found in the creation of God! What Spirit! There can be no doubt that Muir found deep and abiding spiritual values in nature, in places untouched and “unimproved” by human hands. The Reformer John Calvin said that “the world is the theatre of God’s glory.” He was right. So was Muir. So was the author of Job and I believe that Muir understood precisely what God was talking about when he answered Job out of the whirlwind.

Most interpretations of this part of the book say that it is all metaphor, all symbolism, and that God’s answer is an intentionally obscure answer as the author tries to press a more important point that we simply can’t understand why bad things happen to good people. And therefore, we should just submit to God’s grace, mercy, justice and judgment, even though there are some things we will simply never understand. . . . I used to agree with that, and in part, I still do. But for the most part I don’t believe that anymore. I believe that as God speaks to Job in a very unpredictable way, making no reference at all to Job’s questions or concrete problems, this doesn’t seem to bother Job at all. Theologian Gustavo Guterrez writes, “The content of God’s speech doesn’t seem [right or fair]. What God says is disconcerting to the [modern] reader, but Job seems to understand it. Our aim is to share this understanding.”

The first thing we’ll understand about this is the sarcastic tone of God’s speech.

“Who is this whose ignorant words  
smear my design with darkness?  
Stand up now like a man;  
I will question you: please instruct me.”

Wisely, Job doesn't answer. And God continues.

“Where were you when I planned the earth?  
Tell me, if you are so wise.  
... who took its dimensions  
... what were its pillars built on?  
... did you stop the waters of the oceans at the beaches  
or ... set the sun to rising  
or ... know where the snow is stored?”

And on and on it goes. Here, in this great speech out of the whirlwind is God describing a world without people, a world that existed long before we came on the scene. Here is a world that has its own meaning independent of us.

“Who cuts the path for the thunderstorm  
and carves a road for the rain –  
to water the desolate wasteland,  
the land where no one lives;  
to make the wilderness blossom  
and cover the desert with grass?”

Here God doesn't seem to have a problem by the notion of a place where no human lives- in fact, God says he makes it rain there even though it has no human benefit at all! God makes the wilderness blossom – and in biblical times no human lives in the wilderness!

Which points to one of the many meanings of God's speech: we humans are a part of the whole created order – a part. We're not the center of existence – God is. God did not create this cosmos for the sole purpose of satisfying our every want and desire. God created and loves every single part of it – from the behemoth and the vulture, to the lioness and the ostrich, to the horse and antelope and mountain and sea and sky. We are not the center piece of creation; God is. And because God is, because God is not in some distant cloud far away who comes down from time to time to intervene in things but is right here, right now, then God can be experienced in what we call nature. John Muir was right. Job was right. St. Basil the Great was right when he said in the 4<sup>th</sup> century:

“I want creation to penetrate you with so much

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admiration that wherever you go, the least plant may bring you the clear remembrance of the Creator. . . . One blade of grass or one speck of dust is enough to occupy your entire mind in beholding the art with which it has been made.”

Have you ever experienced a deep sense of peace and satisfaction or wonder, Mystery or awe, when you’re in a garden, on a hiking trail, sitting quietly beside the ocean? When you gaze at a clear night sky lit up by the moon or stars, or when you’re watching a sunset? . . . God’s presence. Sometimes, I think we Christians emphasize that we are a people of the Book so much that we forget about reading the other book God made, the Book of Nature.

“Some people,”

wrote St. Augustine, 1600 years ago,

“in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book, the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Read it. God Whom you want to discover, never wrote that book with ink. Instead, God set before your eyes the things that he made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that?”

A fellow pastor wrote an article after a vacation in Alaska.

Here’s a little piece of it:

“Just a few miles outside Anchorage, as I drove along the inlet called Turnagain Arm, I noticed a number of cars pulled off the highway. [I did, too]. Against the slate-gray sky, the water of Turnagain Arm appeared to have a slight greenish cast, interrupted by small whitecaps. Soon I saw these were not whitecaps at all, but whales – silvery white beluga whales. A pod was feeding no more than fifty feet offshore.

“I stood for forty minutes, listening to the rhythmic motion of the sea, following the graceful, ghostly crescents of surfacing whales. The crowd was hushed, even reverent. We passed around binoculars, saying nothing,

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simply watching. For just that moment, nothing else – dinner reservations, the trip schedule, my life back in Chicago – mattered.

“We were confronted with a scene of quiet beauty and a majesty of scale. We all felt small [but hardly alone or insignificant]. We stood together in silence until the whales moved farther out. And then we climbed the bank together and got in our cars to resume our busy, ordered lives, which somehow seemed less urgent. . . . And it wasn’t even Sunday.”

This man had been in the presence of fellow creatures of God, doing what God created them to do and be, surrounded by the Spirit of God alive in the Book of Nature.

Can you see it? Hear it? Feel, smell, touch, taste it? Does it stick in your soul and you can’t figure it out in your head but you **know** it’s the presence of God?

Presence. It’s everywhere in the creation of which we are a part. In those whales. In the brilliant forsythia in my backyard. In the finches in our trees just waiting for the right time to make their nests in the hanging baskets which will come on our porches. God’s presence is with the grizzly in the wilderness of Montana and Alberta. And his presence is with you and me.

God’s glory and life and fullness and richness is in and through it all! Today at my church, the Adult Education will be seeing part of a video by National Geographic called, “What’s Right With the World.” Well friends the bottom line is, this is what’s right with the world – God is in the world! This is what John Muir cried out of the wilderness over a hundred years ago. This is what God was saying to Job: “O, yes, Job! There is pain! I understand. O, yes, there is evil and destruction and murder and abuse of my planet! O, yes, Job, there is suffering that doesn’t make sense and when very good people like you run into a freight train of bad things that are not of your making, there is no theological answer for why you suffer so. That’s just the way it is. But Job – people! – look at life! Look at yourself! See it all, sense it all, feel it all because I am there, I am right there in the middle of it all. You can know me! You can love me! And despite anything that may happen to you, I will be with you! I will be with you like I am with the “recesses of the seas, and the chains of the Pleiades and the cords of Orion! I will be with you like I am with the mountain goats and the wild ox and the hawk that soars and the Behemoth that I have made just like you. Job! People! You are part of it all, a wonderful, delightful part of it all. Live in that fullness!

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That's what I want to say to you today. The one God of Jesus Christ is all around you. Through his Spirit, he gives life and breath and hope to all life, all his creation. No, you will not understand it all; not with your head, at least, but you can experience the presence of God. Open yourself to it all. Let yourself be in the presence of the Creator of us all. . . .

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