

June 10, 2018

“Summer Fun: The Great Outdoors”

Psalm 8, *Common English Bible*

Hear these words from Psalm 8:

LORD, our Lord, how majestic
 is your name throughout the earth!
 You made your glory higher than heaven!
 When I look up at your skies,
 at what your fingers made—
 the moon and the stars
 that you set firmly in place—
 what are human beings
 that you think about them;
 what are human beings
 that you pay attention to them?
 You’ve made them only slightly less than divine,
 crowning them with glory and grandeur.
 You’ve let them rule over your handiwork,
 putting everything under their feet—
 all sheep and all cattle,
 the wild animals too,
 the birds in the sky,
 the fish of the ocean,
 everything that travels the pathways of the sea.
 LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name throughout the earth!

Have you ever noticed how often scriptures feature creation as a metaphor for God’s greatness and majesty? I have, and I get it. For me, the natural world breathes the presence of God. To be immersed in the sunshine or rain, birdsong or rippling water, golden sunrise or tawny evening, is to be in the presence of the Creator. It is to keep company with the mystery of the holy.

Father Richard Rohr says this about mystery:

Mystery is not something that you cannot understand, but it is something that is endlessly understandable. It is multilayered and pregnant with meaning and never totally admits to closure or resolution.

Things Hidden, p. 62

I think this perfectly sums up the awe that we feel when facing a mountain landscape, a brilliant cardinal or a single flawless bloom. It’s why we stop, and stare, and breathe it in, pausing everything for the stillness of the moment. And then it’s why we share it on Facebook!

Nature brings us messages from God that are multilayered, pregnant with meaning, and never stop coming when we slow down to listen.

When I was a child there was a sunporch off my second story bedroom—a former balcony that had been windowed in, and beds placed on either side of a central aisle. My sister and I slept out there in the summer. It faced the front of the house, where two huge maple trees shaded the house and the street. It was like sleeping in a tree house, and there was so much to see and listen to. The breeze rustled the leaves. The lock and dam just down the river let out low moans of a horn as barges approached, and they answered with piping tenors. Trains down by the river rumbled rhythmically along. The cicadas and crickets and tree frogs sang us to sleep. In the morning we were awakened to the sound of birds singing. It was here that I learned peace, and security. I go back to this memory when I can't sleep, or when stresses seem overwhelming. Here I vividly recall being held safely in God's hands while his creation sang over me.

I also have many memories of canoeing in the Boundary Waters of northern Minnesota. The scenery is beautiful, and there are so many sounds to listen to. There is the particular splash that a paddle makes when it strikes and releases the water. There is a certain singing against the aluminum hull of the canoe as it sails over the lake. There is the rapid heart-beat of ducks' wings as they rise and fly, the crackle and pop and hiss of a campfire, the lapping of the water against the shore. There is the eerie and beautiful calling of the loons across the darkness, the whisper and roar of the pines in the wind. And there is an indescribable hush as the sun sets, and creation seems to hold its breath and then let it out, gently, into night.

It was this listening that led me to retreat as a spiritual discipline. I learned the value of time apart, time untouched by demands, phones, TV, to-do lists. I learned the peace of focusing on essentials: food, shelter, rest, family, friends, God.

There are so many lessons to be gained when we listen to God through the great outdoors. We learn that life is a cycle. The cold of winter is a fact, but it yields to the warmth and color of spring. And summer always comes, with sun and the richness of life and light. And although fall is a fading, it is a fabulous fading, with blazes of bright color that do not surrender gently, but gloriously.

And we are reminded that our lives are a cycle. We have seasons, too. Seasons of the coldness of being lonely, the hardness of facing change, the bleakness of grief. But with the light of God, spring always comes. Hope always arrives. Healing is just around the corner, and we surrender to the warmth of joy again. And even in those times of trouble or transition, we can blaze brightly in the confidence of our faith.

Nature reveals to us the mysteries of ice and water. I remember walking with my father in Shimek Forest near my hometown in Iowa, on a winter hike. We walked Lick Creek, looking for animal tracks. Along the way, sometimes the ice supported us, but sometimes it was splendid fun to break through, crunching and cracking it beneath our feet. Ice is hard—it shatters and breaks under tension. But water is soft. It gurgles and flows under the ice and around the

stones—it cannot break, but bends itself around every obstacle, gently embracing it and then letting it go.

It's a life lesson. Harden yourself with armor and walls and layers of negativity, and you will break under pressure. You will go to pieces under life's crushing weight. But relax, let yourself go with the flow, and obstacles will soften you, open you. You will be able to embrace the new, the change, the challenge, and move gracefully around and through them. You will be able to let go of the armor, walls and negativity and live in currents of blessing, streams of living water.

Our Creator shows us that life is persistent. Once on a summer day I sat in the grass of my backyard. A tiny beetle landed on my leg. His coat was iridescent green, and his head and legs black. As he marched along, I noticed that one leg ended abruptly at the first joint. I pondered for a minute what accident or predator was responsible for the missing leg, but then realized it didn't matter. He was supremely unaffected by his handicap. He strode over my knee on 5 little legs and didn't even know the difference.

And flowers bloom in sidewalk cracks. Tiny trees sprout up where a fire raged. Fruit decays into the ground, but leaves seeds to bring life anew. We, too, are persistent. Age claims us, but the young fill in the gaps. We face illness and handicap, but they never keeps us from love and purpose. When one phase of life fades, another meaning and direction makes itself known. And God is the power and strength and wisdom to persevere in every phase.

Creation shows us that life is connected. There is a connection between birth, living and dying that perpetuates itself in every generation of every living thing. There is a linking of water pouring down from the sky, soaking earth and stream and lake, and rising again in air and cloud. And what seems like waste finally pours itself out onto the ground as nourishment for all life. Nothing is wasted in the connectedness of life, nothing is beyond redeeming.

We should learn our connectedness to the earth and each other. What feeds the chickadee and the deer and the looming oak also feeds us. What waters the fields and the forests also waters our bodies and our souls. And we are connected to each other in a web of life. Your hand on my shoulder comforts me, and empowers me to be a comfort. The wisdom shared between sisters and brothers becomes a wisdom shared in ever wider circles. Joined together in worship, in fellowship, we are more than individuals, but the body of Christ, his hands and feet and voice and face to each other and the world. Our connectedness to him and each other reveals to us the Kingdom of God, the place of his redeeming of all things.

Spending time in the great outdoors discloses that life is about activity, but also about rest. The earth rests for a full season before bursting into light and color and growth. Foxes have their dens, squirrels have their bundle of leaves, deer have their grassy patches in the forest. All God's creatures need to rest. And so it is with us. We are called to serve God and his Kingdom. We are called to jobs and chores and tasks and to-do lists, but we are also called to come away with our Creator. He desires nothing more than time spent with us. So we pray, and read scripture, and seek those moments of solitude when we can listen to God.

So as a parting gift of this sermon, here is one such moment. I'll close with this beautiful song, "I Shall Not Want," by Audrey Assad. Take a moment to rest, to ponder the greatness and the love of your Creator.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8Td9cZajyE&index=3&list=PL5wx6Q6rhSm9IE51jAw4ba8TNarQeH0WP>

References:

Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality, by Richard Rohr. Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2008.