

A Sermon by Joelle Novey

26 August 2012

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

I remember it so vividly – I am 10 years old, sitting on the banks of a lake at mid-morning, between tall grasses on all sides that closed around and over my head. I am a camper at Jewish summer camp in the Pocono mountains of Pennsylvania, and usually we pray the regular weekday morning liturgy, from books, on benches inside. But this morning, the counselors have told us to spend the prayer time each by ourselves, to go somewhere outside.

It is very quiet. I feel very at home here, very still. Suddenly the wind picks up, rushing through the enormous trees that line the lake, and my heart lifts.

Today's reading from Kings describes the ark of the covenant – a place the Israelites built as an earthly dwelling place for God. Though they know that "even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain" God, "much less this house that [people] built," they long to know that there is a place towards which people can turn, on earth, to connect with the Divine.

Today's reading from psalms describes this longing. People long – have always longed – to know where to go to be in the presence of God, to find the place that God dwells. "My soul," writes the psalmist, "longs, yes, longs for the courts of the Lord." "Happy are those who live in your house." "A day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere."

And what about us? If I asked you, this morning, to sit in

silence and to recall a spiritual experience, a deeply meaningful experience you have had in nature – what comes up?

Take a moment to picture where you were, and how you felt ...

When I am asked this question, I am a ten-year-old at camp, experiencing deep awe surrounded by tall grasses on the shores of the lake. The prayer book sits closed on my lap, but I am, intensely, unquestionably, at prayer.

Rev. Fletcher Harper, who leads an organization called GreenFaith in New Jersey, has asked this question many many times to hundreds of adults in their congregations. He writes, in a collection of essays about the religious environmental movement, that “I believe that people’s most powerful experiences of God almost always happen outdoors” “all unique, but each containing a strong connection to the sacred” and that, “pastorally, most religious leaders don’t know what to do with these experiences.”

“I’ve spoken with hundreds of adults about their spiritual experiences in nature – all unite, but each containing a strong connection to the sacred. Invariably, it is a captivating thing to do.

“Over and over, in different settings, the same pattern of events unfolds. Individuals gather. They are invited to sit in silence and to recall a spiritual experience, a deeply meaningful experience they’ve had in nature, in the environment. I don’t define the terms beyond this. It’s not necessary.

“After a minute, no more than two, I ask people to share their stories. There is little delay. One person describes an experiences, then another, and another. People of all ages take part, not just those accustomed to talking in small group discussions. People of all ages speak, men as often as women. As the stories emerge, everyone in the room becomes more animated. Those telling the stories speak slowly; they choose

their words carefully and artfully, modulate their voice tone and pace of speaking, and express what I see as a reignited life. Their facial muscles shed the customary tightness of involuntary stress, and their expressions become more complex, nuanced. Everyone becomes quiet. For almost everyone who takes part in this exercise, it is the first time they have ever spoken about these experiences, frequently among the most powerful spiritual experiences they have ever known.”

(Love God Heal Earth, p. 155)

An African American Baptist pastor told him the following story:

“I grew up in south central LA. I was Baptist, and I must have sung ‘How Great Thou Art’ a thousand times by the time I was 12. Then, one summer, my Boy Scout troop organized a trip to climb Mt. Whitney. It was a very difficult, challenging climb. I had never had to work so hard physically as I did to get to the top of that mountain. But when I did, and when I looked around at the hundreds of smaller peaks that fanned out below where we were standing, when I looked at the huge expanse of land that I could see – then, for the first time, I could say ‘How Great Thou Art’ and mean it.” *(Love God Heal Earth, p.154)*

Like my memories of camp, the pastor’s story is a story about awe. But Rev. Harper says that the stories sometimes push to a deeper truth. For example, an essay by a Ruth Kamps describes her relationship with the tree outside her porch:

“Sitting on our small deck, knitting and resting old legs, I am entertained by my spiritual sister, an equally old pine tree. She is very tall, probably 40 feet or so, and is at least as old as I am. She leans a bit; so do I. In her care are many birds that I watch with pleasure. They love and fight and nest in the tree. At Christmas time, pairs of cardinals decorate her limbs.

“She is still green, covering lots of old brown branches, like my gray hair covering the black. We both soak in the sun and the air and are trying our best to live lightly in our worlds. One day in the not-too-distant future she will fall and fertilize the earth, as I will do. It’s a consoling thought. We have children and grandchildren that give us the continuation of life. A bit of the divine in the tree and me. Yes, that’s close to what I believe ...

“There is a bit of the divine in the trees and the creatures who reside there ... I believe my tree and all other living things believe and feel in their particular living ways. I want to work on being as good a human as I am able, just as my tree does her job with grace and elegant treeness.”

(“Living Life with Elegant Treeness,” by Ruth Kamps, on National Public Radio, Morning Edition, August 15, 2005; as quoted in *Love God Heal Earth*, p. 156)

For Rev. Harper, these kinds of stories transcend simply awe. He describes Ruth Kamps’ story as one of “expanded communion.” It acknowledges that God doesn’t only dwell in our hearts but also, somehow, in the pine tree, and in the mountain, and in the lake, and in the other creatures. Perhaps when the psalmist envisions the sparrow, and the swallow, finding nests alongside their human neighbors in the divine court, this is the truth to which they are speaking – that all creation, too, dwells with us in the presence of God.

When I spoke here last summer, I invited us to listen to what the natural world is telling us about how our climate is changing. The cherry blossoms on the National Mall are blossoming a week earlier on average than when they were planted. The invasive vine called kudzu is no longer only the vine that ate the south, but is well established in Illinois and beyond. Blueberries, the iconic crop of Maine, now grows better over the border in Quebec.

There are tens of thousands of changes in plants and animals that testify to us about the rapid rise in global average temperature over the last 150 years. We need to understand how our climate pollution from burning fossil fuels is trapping heat in our atmosphere, and we need to think personally, communally, and politically about how to respond, quickly, and together.

But I'm reminded by our readings this morning about how disconnected we are most days from the natural world – our food seems to come from supermarkets, our clothes from a store. As Michael Pollen reminds us, even a twinkle is ultimately plant-based, but what, exactly, is a twinkle?

Why should we protest that climate pollution is playing an unprecedented experiment with the Earth's natural cycles, or that mining companies are blowing apart Appalachian mountains to get at coal, or that gas drilling companies are injecting gallons of toxic chemicals directly into the ground to extract natural gas?

Certainly we can object solely on practical grounds – because it will make people sick, or deplete the resources available to our children and grandchildren. We can certainly get plenty concerned about environmental issues just worrying about the human family and our future.

As the Director of our local Interfaith Power & Light, I have attended services in congregations of many faiths all over the DC area to speak about climate change. Every one of these communities honor and praise God as they do their work and live most of their lives – they do it indoors. And most of the green team meetings are likewise indoors, and most of the work we do, signing postcards to the EPA and testifying in hotel conference rooms and undertaking energy audits or hashing out solar financing agreements, likewise are activities undertaken on behalf of the environment, by people in offices and conference rooms.

But even in the course of our unnatural indoor lives, we have had moments in nature when God has shown up. We have each glimpsed a deeper truth – that the mountains and the lakes and the forests and the desert – that these are the places God dwells – that we are bound up with that divinity and with those places – and that we are called to honor that sacred reality.

I believe this morning that staying in touch with those experiences – cultivating, naming, and sharing our experiences of spirit in the natural world – will enable us to be more deeply grounded in our work to protect the natural world.

As Rev. Harper writes, “I don’t believe that our society will achieve ecological sustainability if we have not know the joy of nature’s beauty, been silent in the face of her wonder, felt grateful when we’ve been reconnected to the wider community of creation. We need to rebuild our basic bonds with the earth, so that we can hear the call to sustain that which sustains us.”

My prayer for all of us today is that, as we begin another beautiful autumn in our city, that we each take time to be attentive for opportunities for expanded communion. That we attend not only to our longing to dwell in God’s presence, but seek out opportunities to experience that presence in and through the natural world. The psalmist exclaimed, “How lovely is your dwelling place!”

May we know that loveliness, first – and fight like hell to guard and protect it.

The Rev. Canon Sally G. Bingham, ed. 2009. *Love God Heal Earth: 21 Leading Religious Voices Speak Out on our Sacred Duty to Protect the Environment*. (Pittsburgh: St. Lynn's Press).