

GOD'S BIG SHOW

Psalm 8

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Next month will mark the 100th anniversary of America's national parks. The National Parks Service oversees 84 million acres, land in every state. I know that many of you have fond memories of times spent in national parks, and perhaps plans to visit more. We are so fortunate to have the beautiful Cuyahoga Valley National Park a short distance from us.

One of my favorite national park experiences was my only visit (so far at least) to Yosemite. We were there one year in early May, which was fortunate for two reasons. First, we beat the crowds. Second, it had been a very snowy winter and as a result, the waterfalls were full and flowing. When you are in the Yosemite valley, it's almost more than you can take in. We would turn in every direction and see a picture postcard view, another gorgeous waterfall, another iconic site.

Yosemite was most famously explored by John Muir. He was born in Scotland. His father brought his family to the United States for religious reasons. He found the Church of Scotland to be too strict. When they arrived here, the family joined the Disciples of Christ movement, which is the church in which I was brought up and ordained.

John Muir was raised in Wisconsin, attended the university there and began to study botany and geology. While working in a wagon wheel factory, he injured his eye and thought he might have lost his sight for good. He was confined to a darkened room for six weeks. When he emerged, he was grateful to see and made a decision that he would not waste it. He was determined to follow his dream of exploration and study of plants.

He eventually settled in Yosemite, where he spent his time studying every inch of the park, getting to know its plants, animals, mountain formations. He learned how the valley was formed, and he served as a park guide. His writings are still read today. When he first saw the Yosemite valley, he described as having “the authentic force of a conversion experience.”

In 1871, after Muir had lived in Yosemite for three years, Ralph Waldo Emerson, the great naturalist and writer, along with a number of academic friends from Boston, arrived in Yosemite during a tour of the Western United States. Muir had been reading Emerson for years, and Emerson was anxious to meet John Muir. Emerson spent only one day with Muir, and offered him a teaching position at Harvard, which Muir declined. Muir later wrote, "I never for a moment thought of giving up God's big show for a mere professorship."

God's big show, God's works in nature, became John Muir's life purpose. He found God in nature, and wanted other people to have that same experience of ecstasy. So he poured himself into the work of conservation and preservation. He was aware of how delicate and fragile our ecosystems are and how full of care we must be if we want to enjoy them for generations to come.

Like music, nature is a portal to the divine. For many people, spending time in nature is the surest, quickest way to feel connected to God. And just as different people respond to different kinds of music, there are favorite places for each of us. Some prefer the beach, some the mountains, some the woods, but in each, we sense the spirit of the Creator. There is a healing property to nature for which we can be deeply thankful. Every single time I go hiking, even if I've left home feeling tired, even if I'm in a bad mood when I start out...every single time, hiking makes me feel better. There is something about being surrounded by the sights and sounds of nature that soothes.

I'm so grateful that so many members of our church are able to go to church camp, and I thank the congregation for supporting them and the camps. Our children are learning at an early age about the healing power of nature, the ways that nature can connect them to God, and the importance of caring for this earth that has been entrusted to us.

As I heard the news this week, more violence in the streets of our nation, I wondered, "Is it too naive, too innocent, too simple, to think that perhaps one antidote to it all is nature?" You see, this sermon topic was on my mind...and the questions keep coming. What will it take to unite our nation? Why not wonder? Why not grasp at solutions? Why not try everything we can think of because our nation is in desperate need of healing. What would happen if more children went to camp together? Brown children, black children, white children, Muslim children, Jewish children, Christian children, inner city children, suburban children, rural children, children whose parents are in the NRA and children whose parents are in the ACLU and children whose parents are voting for Clinton and children whose parents are voting for Trump and children whose parents aren't voting at all, and the children of police officers and the children of prisoners...what might happen if they got to know each other as people under the tree-lined canopy of God's creation? Some might laugh at such an idea, but where are there any others that are better?

Psalm 8 calls us to care for everything God has created. It is the first job we are given, in the book of Genesis. Care for this world that God has created, that God has pronounced as "good." There are two ways to care. We can care out of duty or obligation, because we've been told to. Or we can care because we're motivated by passionate, enthusiastic love. You can always tell the difference between the two kinds of care. We will take better care of each other when we love each other. And we will take better care of the planet when we love nature.

There are three organizations in our community which are helping people to do both, and all three of them are led by members of this church. The newest organization is Coleman Gardens, an organic farm at the corner of Krebs and Lear, owned by Joe and Marcia Coleman and their family. They sell produce every Tuesday here on our front lawn, at the second organization I want to honor today: The Avon Lake Farmer's Market, in its second summer of existence, under the leadership of ALUCC member Leanne Hoppe. Just west of here, at the back of Troy School, is the Avon Lake community garden, where many people are able to grow vegetables in a lovely fenced lot, without the worries of the deer coming to dinner every night. In all three of these places, God's creation is being cared for and celebrated. Our community is being strengthened, our natural world is being enhanced, and there are all kinds of new reasons for people to love and care for it. (Invite them to stand.)

I didn't grow up with a garden, and my earliest memories of vegetables were the kind that came out of a can or a frozen box. I didn't like them at all; eating them was pure obligation. Then one summer, my brothers and I spent six weeks with our grandmother. She had a tiny, beautifully cared-for piece of property in Oklahoma City and she devoted about half of the backyard to a garden. I would go out with her and walk the rows, learning what was planted, watching it grow, helping her water and weed, and finally harvest. I couldn't believe how good the green beans and tomatoes tasted, fresh from the soil.

Spending time in nature, with someone who loved nature, changed the way I looked at food from that point on. I'm so grateful that we have people in this community who are creating those experiences for our children and for all of us.

The more we love this earth, the more motivated we will be to care for it. And in nature we can find a healing balm for these weary, wearying times in which we live. In a week like this, sometimes what our souls need is to turn off the TV, stop watching the same disturbing footage

repeatedly, get off the computer and stop reading the message of commentators. Instead, walk or bike or drive to the shore of Lake Erie. Watch the waves, notice the changing color of the water, pick up some beach glass, skip some rocks, and feel connected to the one who is the source of all life.

It's what Jesus did when he was overwhelmed by the challenges of human life. He replenished his spirit. He would get on a boat and spend time on the Sea of Galilee, long enough for his own inner self to become as calm as those waters. Or he would walk out into the rocky desert near the Dead Sea...in the quiet and solitude of that place, he would begin to hear his own wisdom again. Those places in nature were sanctuaries for Jesus. There he remembered God's call to him, there he re-affirmed his life's purpose, there he gained strength. He would stay until he was re-charged, re-filled, until he again had something to give the world.

And then he would return and re-engage.

One of the great heroes of our day is Wendell Berry. Berry is a writer and farmer in Kentucky, who turns 82 this year. He has been called "a prophet of responsibility." He lives and works on the farm where his family has tilled the soil for 200 years. In his writing and in his political activism, he constantly calls for better care of the earth. Just five years ago, when he was 77, he joined a four-day sit-in at the Kentucky governor's mansion to protest mountaintop mining, which he says is a brutally destructive means of extracting coal. He says this, "There are no sacred and unsacred places; all of the world and our life in it are conditional gifts." He wrote this poem about the way that nature helps him to find healing:

"The Peace Of Wild Things" - Poem by Wendell Berry

When despair grows in me

and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting for their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

We can find solace in the beauty of the world around us. And then, like Wendell Berry, like Jesus, we are called to return and re-engage.

But don't engage the world until you feel balanced, until you feel centered, until you feel ready. Because our world doesn't need more people talking who haven't listened to God, who haven't deeply listened to others, who haven't listened to their own inner wisdom.

I am connected, online, to hundreds of ministerial colleagues. Most of the time, I find this online community to be helpful. I receive ideas about books and articles to read, speeches to listen to. It's like sitting down at a conference table with 1000 colleagues, each of whom has something to teach me. But Friday I had to shut it off, because this is what I found. One group of colleagues had one mantra, and another group of colleagues had another. One group of colleagues was saying, "If you're going to mention Dallas on Sunday, be sure you also mention the incidents of violence in Louisiana and Minnesota." And another group of colleagues was saying, "First and foremost, we have to pray for the police this week." And I thought, "There it is. A

snapshot of America right now.” It infuriates me when the church is part of the problem, contributing to the polarization and divisiveness. I refuse to take part in some sort of absurd competition about which hurting souls should be at the top of our prayer list. As if God grieves more for one group of people than another. God’s heart breaks with every victim of violence. God’s heart breaks at the violence we are doing to our world.

These times in which we are living call for us to be at our best. The natural order of things is fragile, the connections which keep our communities civil and peaceful are frayed to the point of breaking. We cannot afford to disengage, sigh that it’s all too much for us, complain that we’re helpless. Nor is it effective to spout off easy solutions, retreat to our tired entrenched political corners and blame the other side. Perhaps we are called to take our cue from Jesus. Spend enough time in prayer that we feel rooted and grounded. Acknowledge our own sinfulness, the contributions each of us has made to the brokenness of our world. And then look for ways that we can be a part of the solution. Look for ways that we can make a difference for good by caring for the planet and caring for our fellow human beings from a place of deep humility.