

## BEAUTIFUL CREATION

Psalm 65:5-13

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Human life is meant to be balanced. Humans were created with two arms and two legs so that our human bodies have a certain natural balance.

That natural ebb and flow of life means that when we take on one thing, adding weight to one part of our life we have to let go of something else. Letting go is not a negative; it is, rather, something necessary. So, for example, if we become parents, taking on additional responsibilities, we let go of other activities, other commitments.

If you want to pursue a new hobby or interest or project, you have to create space in your life, you have to carve out time. We have to say “no” to some things in order to say “yes” to others.

When we take on the way of discipleship, when we choose to live our lives following the example of Jesus, living our lives as he taught and lived, what is it that we need to let go of? Saying “yes” to living as Christians means saying “no” to other ways of life.

Mostly, saying “yes” to Jesus means saying “no” to a self-centered life. In Matthew, Jesus puts it very plainly: “Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me.’” (Matthew 16:24)

Living the way Jesus taught and lived means constantly reminding ourselves to NOT think first of our own pleasure, our own comfort. It’s hard because we like thinking about ourselves. We like to be comfortable. Usually one of the first few words children

learn is the word, “mine.” Parents don’t have to teach children to think about themselves. What parents do is to teach children to be empathetic, to care about others, to share. Parents teach children to get outside of themselves, to put aside a focus on their own self-interest. But that’s a life-long pursuit.

People of every age struggle with selfishness. Like other bad habits, the battle with selfishness is one we are up against daily. Most of us wake up in the morning and have some variation on this thought, “What can I do today that will make me happy?” It takes spiritual maturity to move from that thought to this one, “What can I do for others today? What can I do today that will make the world a better place?”

Spiritual maturity is the ability to put God at the center of our lives. In those moments when we are able to do that, we find that our lives achieve a balance, and a harmony that creates deep joy, not just fleeting happiness. When God is at the center of our lives, all of the other pieces of our lives seem to fit together.

We are in the midst of a sermon series called, “Beautiful Things.” There is no more beautiful “thing” than this world we have been given to enjoy and to care for. Yet our beautiful planet is in peril.

It occurs to me that some of the environmental crisis our world is facing is, at its root, a crisis of self-centeredness. We don’t want to change our lifestyles because we don’t want to give up our comforts and our pleasures.

We’re thinking more of ourselves than we are of the other people who share the planet. We’re thinking more about ourselves than about future generations.

There is also a sense in which the problems in the environment seem overwhelming and out of our control. And when we feel that nothing we do will make a difference, we become apathetic.

Our passage for this morning reminds us that our connection with the creator and our connection with creation are linked together and cannot be pulled apart. The more we fall in love with God, the more we put God at the center of our lives, the deeper our appreciation will be for everything God has made. And when we, as people of faith, encounter nature, we find that spending time in our favorite places is not just fun, not just enjoyable, not just beautiful, but deeply spiritual, an experience that draws us closer to God.

For a moment, I would like you to think of one place that is sacred in nature for you. One place where you feel the presence of God in the natural world. Fix an image of that place in your mind. Imagine that that place is as precious to you as the most important person in your life, and that the future of that place is in your hands. How does that responsibility feel?

When a boy named Matthew Louv was four years old he said to his father, "Are God and Mother Nature married, or just good friends?" Somehow, at that tender age, he knew that his connection with God and his connection with God's creation were tied together so closely that he could barely separate one from another.

The eloquent writer and rabbi Joshua Heschel once said this, "Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement." "Get up every morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed."

In one of the creation stories in the book of Genesis, human beings are told to care for all that God has created. This isn't meant as punishment. This is meant as a gift. Look at what we have been given! The fresh air that blows through your bedroom on a spring morning, after months and months of having the house shut up tight. The

majestic mountains which cause your spirit to soar. Beaches to walk on, your bare feet leaving footprints as you lose yourself in the sound of the waves. The purpose of creation is to bring us closer to the creator. Through nature, we are introduced to transcendence; we understand instinctively that there is something more going on than just ourselves and our lives. We are a part of something bigger than us, older than us, and something that, all of us hope, will survive us.

Many educators and psychologists believe that children need experiences with nature in order to fully develop as human beings.

Listen to a few sentences from an essay written by a ninth-grade boy. He calls his essay, "The Spot."

"As long as I can remember, every time I heard the word 'nature' I thought of a forest surrounded by mountain peaks seen off in the distance. I never thought too much of this until one year while i was on a family vacation at Mammoth Mountain. I decided I would try and find a place that was similar to the place I have thought about since I was a kid. So I told my parents I was going to go on a walk. I grabbed my coat and I left.

To my surprise, it only took about five or ten minutes to find The Spot. I stood there in awe; it was exactly how I imagined it. Dozens of massive pine trees were visible. Maybe one hundred feet from where I stood, snow lightly covered the ground; pine needles were scattered about. Out in the distance above the trees was a breathtaking view of the mountaintop. to my side was a small creek...I was in such a star-struck daze for what seemed to be five or ten minutes, but it turned out I spent two and a half hours in that spot.

My parents had been looking for me because it was getting dark. When we finally met up, I told them I had gotten lost, for how could I share such an experience, such an overwhelming religious experience?”

That young man lost himself in nature, much as Jesus lost himself in the synagogue at a similar formative age.

Two weeks ago, when we hosted the visiting youth choirs from Crystal Lake, Illinois, I was interested to read the bios of the students. They were asked about their favorite memories from their annual choir tour. Evidently a year or two ago, the tour was in Wisconsin and the students from suburban Chicago had an opportunity to spend time at a farm. Several students said their favorite memory was seeing a baby pig being born or milking a cow. These students, who have seen plenty of malls and amusement parks in their day found themselves remembering a much simpler, more natural experience.

The connection between our spirituality and our experiences in nature is undeniable. And it is especially evident in the lives of children and young people. It's one of the reasons we are such strong and outspoken advocates of church camp in this church. Something happens at camp that cannot be replicated elsewhere. When our students are in an untouched and unspoiled natural environment, in a place where God is freely spoken about and sung about, there is the possibility for transformative experiences, encounters with the divine, transcendent and life-changing moments. I was once in a group of clergy who were talking about what their experience of church had been like as they were growing up. We were being interviewed to see what it was that encouraged us to think about ministry as a profession. Was it having a beloved minister in our home churches? Was it a class in college? What was it? The common

thread was camp. One person after another mentioned a memory of church camp that, in part, shaped a sense of vocation.

From the time I was six until the time I was 13, my family lived in southeastern Kansas. Several of those summers we spent our summer vacation at the YMCA camp in Estes Park, Colorado. We would drive through the wheat fields of Kansas, and I would begin to get excited as we crossed the border from Kansas into Colorado -- even though eastern Colorado is just as flat as western Kansas. Still I knew we were getting closer. I would watch out the front windows of the car because I wanted to see the foothills. There was something magical about driving further and further into the mountains. It seems inconceivable now (and shows my age), but when I was 12 years old -- again, that formative age -- my parents allowed me to roam that park freely. I would walk and hike the mountains that ringed the park every day. I would be sad to leave, and then, every spring, I would start to dream about returning. Those dreams continued for years after we left Kansas.

I'm sure that you could each share a similar story about a place that has transformed you. What can we do, as disciples of Jesus, to ensure that future generations will have access to the beautiful places we have enjoyed? What can we do, as disciples of Jesus, to ensure that the rest of the world has access to clean water? What are we called to give up in order to protect and preserve God's creation?

(Inspiration for this sermon comes from Last Child in the Woods, by Richard Louv)