

Naturae Divina

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, September 26, 2021, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Ezekiel 31:3-7](#)

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If you've spent any time on social media, I'm sure you've run into a story that impressed you or surprised you or made you feel warm in some way. And then somebody burst your bubble, doing a little fact checking, finding out that some of the central claims of the story are inaccurate. That happened a few days ago at our "Thursday Night Check-in" social Zoom gathering, and I was the bubble popper.

The story that was shared is that the iconic song "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" from *The Wizard of Oz* is about the Holocaust. Since the song was written in 1938, before Kristallnacht, that central claim cannot be true. A quick Google search found this information.

That said, the composers (Harold Arlen, music, and Yip Harburg, lyrics) were Jewish, and it is very likely that their and their parents' experiences with antisemitism influenced all their writing, including the writing of this song. And that fact-checking Google search did find several articles about how people (Jews, especially) have looked back at the song and hear in it references to the profound Jewish hope that someday there will be a place where they are free from the fears of pogroms and where antisemitism will be no more.

I said in that Zoom gathering that connecting the song "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" to being about the Holocaust is more a case of eisegesis than exegesis. I was asked to translate those terms, terms I learned in seminary as part of my biblical studies classes. We were warned against eisegesis – the act of reading into a text one's own ideas – and to work for exegesis – the reading "out" of the text the author's meaning, what the author meant to convey. I think it is eisegesis to read into "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" a post-Holocaust meaning. While their experiences as Jews influenced their work (it had to have), the song was written to set up the plot for what is essentially a fantasy movie the bulk of which takes place somewhere over the rainbow.

I bring all this up because, despite what my biblical studies professors taught me, I don't think eisegesis is always bad. Take today's scripture reading. It is a snippet of a chapter in Ezekiel taken out of context. In context, the reading belongs to the middle section of Ezekiel, written during the first years of the Babylonian exile, in which Ezekiel offers oracles against foreign nations. The particular nation that is feeling Ezekiel's heat in chapter 31 is Egypt. God directs Ezekiel to tell Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, that – though he thinks his country is hot stuff – it is in peril. The passage we heard starts with the words, "consider Assyria." Ezekiel compares Assyria to a mighty cedar of Lebanon, and then reminds Pharaoh that, just as a tree can be chopped down, his nation will fall to the Babylonians just as Assyria did.

The thing is, today's sermon isn't about geopolitics or history. Today's sermon is about an ancient Christian spiritual practice – a practice in which eisegesis isn't shunned – and how that spiritual practice might be applied in a different way.

The spiritual practice I'm talking about is Lectio Divina. *Lectio divina* literally means "divine reading" or "sacred reading" and it dates back to the 300s C.E. Rather than being a *study* of a passage of scripture, it is a *prayer form* that encourages us into a deep, personal, relational reading of scripture, and through that way of prayerful reading, into a deeper union with God.

Though there are plenty of variations on the specifics that have evolved over the centuries, Lectio Divina involves reading a passage four times with each reading having a different intention. I find it helpful *before* I begin practicing Lectio Divina to center myself. That might mean lighting a candle if doing so is safe and if it will help me still my thoughts and opening my heart. Offering a simple prayer, silently or aloud, a prayer like, "God, help me to hear you," can also help. This preparation is vital, I find, because my mind can be so noisy that it often blocks out my ability to hear God.

The first reading is called "Lectio" and is an opportunity to get to know that passage of scripture. In this reading, I notice what I'm noticing; I'm paying attention to what jumps out at me, to the words or phrases or images that catch my attention. So, the question I ask as I enter this reading is, "What is catching my attention?" And when I have an answer to that question, I sit with my answer for a few minutes.

The second reading (of the same passage) is called "Meditatio" and is an opportunity for reflection. In this reading, I listen for what God might be saying to me through this reading. This isn't study. This isn't an exercise of exegesis, where I'm trying to understand what the author was trying to convey. This is closer to eisegesis, where I'm allowing the passage to speak to my life. So, the question I ask as I enter this reading is, "What is God saying to me?" And when I have an answer to that question, I sit with my answer for a few minutes.

The third reading (still, of the same passage) is called "Oratio" and is an opportunity for response, a response that could be as simple as offering thanks for as complicated as engaging in community organizing. During this third reading, I'm listening for a sense of call from God. So, the question I ask as I enter this reading is, "What does God want me to do?" And when I have an answer to that question, I sit with my answer for a few minutes.

The fourth reading is called "Contemplatio" and is an invitation to simply sit with God. I try to let this fourth reading (at this point, I'm pretty familiar with the passage) become a soundtrack to my sitting with God. Rather than trying to hear it or hear something from it, I simply let the reading be. And, as my mind starts to wander (which it inevitably does), I invite it to return to a stillness and a being in the presence of God. So, I try not to ask a question as I enter this reading.

By stripping away the parts of Ezekiel that are about geopolitics, the passage becomes a poetic description of a tree and a ripe passage for Lectio Divina. Did you notice, as Mike read the passage, that certain lines caught your attention or evoked images? There were several for me. And if you were to listen to the passage again, do you think you might hear God saying something to you about your life, and maybe calling you to some action? And could the passage become a soundtrack for simply sitting and being with God?

I bring this up because it occurs to me that a similar spiritual practice could be used with nature. Though I have many a theological bone to pick with Saint Augustine, I do like

his concept of the “Two Books.” “He held that we ought to approach the quest for knowledge by holding together the two sacred forms of revelation that God has given to humanity: the Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature.”¹ Augustine believed that both books were authored by the same “divine pen” and so both reveal truth and cannot be in conflict with each other.²

Augustine was hardly the first to argue this idea that creation reveals God to us. I think it is reflected in the first chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans. In it, Paul says that God has revealed Godself to humanity in nature. We can learn about God, Paul says, by paying attention to what nature can teach us.

It seems to me that the Book of Nature can be read with a similar prayer form as Lectio Divina. And just as *any* scripture can be prayed with Lectio Divina, I think any thing in nature, any place in nature can be prayed in Naturae Divina. Whether you are praying with some grand vista or something small, you can notice what you notice and sit with that noticing (lectio). And then you can ask this piece of creation what God has to say to you, and listen (meditatio). And you can ask what God might be calling you to, and listen (oratio). And you can sit in the presence of God and that piece of nature (contemplatio).

I realize now, looking back, that this is a natural prayer form for me. One experience in particular comes to mind. About 20 years ago, I was in Holden Village, a retreat center in the Northern Cascades. A small group of us met up with a leader for a short meditative hike. After preparing us by inviting us into quiet and then reading a brief essay he had written about a transcendent encounter with a grove of quaking aspen, he invited us to walk along a trail that went from the Village to a waterfall. It was a fairly level and well-maintained trail that ran along a steep mountainside. As I walked, a grove of trees growing much like the trees in this picture, bowed at their base and then curving back to grow up directly above the center of their root system, caught my attention. I wondered what made them grow this way and realized that when they were saplings, they were probably bent down each winter by the snow sliding down the mountainside. Then, each spring, the snows



¹ Kurt Willems, “Augustine, Evolution, and Two Books,” *Patheos*, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/thepangeablog/2010/08/25/augustine-evolution-and-two-books/> (posted 25 August 2010; accessed 25 September 2021).

² *Ibid.*

would melt, and the saplings would start standing back up. Eventually, they grew big enough and strong enough that the winter snows (if they didn't cause an avalanche) no longer bent them down.

As I stood there, looking at these trees, I had a revelation. The trees were not only trees. They were mystically every person who was bent down by abuse in their childhood and who had managed, nonetheless, to stand up again and again and grow. That was the word that God had for me as I read this grove of trees from the Book of Nature. And through that word, God invited me into deeper compassion. I could have stood there in contemplation with this grove of bent, strong trees – and I would have had I not felt an obligation to meet up with the other hikers at the waterfall.

Wendell Berry said, “The Bible leaves no doubt at all about the sanctity of the act of worldmaking, or of the world that was made, or of creaturely or bodily life in this world. We are holy creatures living among other holy creatures in a world that is holy.”³

Amen.

³ Wendell Berry, quoted on “Daily Dig,” *Plough*, <https://www.plough.com/en/subscriptions/daily-dig/odd/april/daily-dig-for-april-24> (posted 24 April 2021; accessed 25 September 2021).