

Finding God in Nature

By John Zlatnik

We gather today, here in our church sanctuary, and from our homes. Jesus said, "Whenever two or three are gathered in my name, I will be there with you." I'm sure that applies to us today. This morning, I ask you to imagine a different kind of sanctuary—one not made with hands, not built of boards and bricks, but one living and active with every blade of grass, every flying bird, and every crashing wave. It is the sanctuary of the natural world.

Long before temples were built or scholars discussed the mysteries of life, the first human beings encountered a sense of the Holy not in books or buildings but under the stars, beside hills, and within forests. We can benefit today from rediscovering the sacredness in wild-ness. The natural world is a holy place, a revelation, a cathedral without a ceiling. For those of us seeking a faith that is grounded and relevant today, we can connect with the Spirit of God by being receptive to the creative force of God. Today, we will explore what it means to see God in nature, not only as a metaphor but as a living experience and mystery. Moses was mystified, and probably terrified, by seeing what he could not explain. You and I also experience the inexplicable in everyday mysteries, nature offers us great wonder and beauty.

But the natural world also contains the brutality of natural selection. It is so easy only to see the sweet and beautiful, still we must also recognize that the natural world includes fierce competition for food and space. God uses the challenges and crises of life as part of the processes of adaptation and creation. God's ongoing world is both a wonder and a mystery.

The idea that nature reveals God is not new; it is deeply rooted in Scripture and Christian tradition. The Old Testament Psalmist wrote, "The heavens declare the glory of God."

Paul said, "God's invisible qualities are understood from what God has made."

Creation is not just something God did one time—it's something God is doing continuously. Our goal is to understand natural miracles both poetically and empirically. The Bible speaks in words, Nature speaks in cell processes, and changes over eons of time. We see God at work through the study of mutation and adaptation. We lose something vital if we don't accept the reality in both interpretations. Many people today lose their way by over-emphasizing one view or the other. We must learn to see and experience the natural wonders around us again, truly. The starting place is to let yourself be genuinely open to commonplace natural experiences. This starting place will allow us to encounter the joy and surprise of natural events while also remaining open to questioning and forming more exact hypotheses.

Genesis says that God created the world and all living things. This is a beautiful poetic description. At the same time, we are also invited to interpret the process differently. DNA molecules in your cells carry a genetic code that enables the cell to carry out functions. Small changes in the DNA code can happen due to random cosmic radiation or coding errors. Most mutations are lethal. A few mutations produce positive changes in the genetic code that can lead to the formation of new traits that increase chances of survival. The latest traits can then be passed along to later generations. This slow addition of new characteristics can eventually lead to entirely new organisms, suited to the environment. That is the story of God's creation that we tell today. The modern story is every bit as wonderful and filled with mystery as the old.

We live by faith in many ways in our world.

People today have no problems having faith in the idea that invisible electrons and force fields can travel in a wire to give us electricity and light. We also believe that our planet exerts a gravitational force on all objects and pulls them toward the center of our Earth. We believe this concept, even though the force of gravity is invisible. Accepting the presence of the loving Spirit of God active in our lives is not so very different. Marcus Borg, a modern progressive theologian, stated that the Spirit of God was incorporated in all matter and energy at the time of the "Big Bang," the instant of creation. In that moment, God became incarnate in the created world, becoming present in all matter and energy of creation...including you and me.

This does not mean that a tree is God or that the ocean is God—but it does mean that the spirit of God is embodied in the tree, also in the sea, and also in each of us. A cello is not music, but in the hands of a skilled musician, it can convey great beauty and emotion. —So the created universe becomes the instrument through which God's spirit is expressed.

I love the Celtic tradition that sees God as a wild presence, not locked in theology but active in the sunlight, present in the heartbeat of a deer. Celtic spirituality speaks of "thin places"—places where the veil between heaven and earth seems especially thin. Seeing a bee collecting pollen inside a flower, walking into the mist zone of a waterfall, the birth of a baby—these become experiences of the sacred.

Thin places can also be moments in our daily lives—moments when we suddenly see things with clarity, in moments when our everyday ego quiets, we see with new understanding. The spirit of God generally does not speak to us in thunder but more often as a still, small voice. We must train ourselves to hear it. That can be difficult in our noisy world.

Jesus himself seemed deeply attuned to the natural world. He spoke of lilies and sparrows, of mustard seeds and fields of grain. The teachings of Jesus are an excellent example of how the natural events of nature can serve as metaphors for deep understanding.

When he described the kingdom of God, he didn't point to a throne room—he pointed to a vineyard, to a woman baking bread. Nature was the world he knew, the world of his time and place. He found revelation in the ordinary rhythms of life—sunrise and rain, planting and harvest.

For me, the God that I know is the active creator spirit of God in this world, not some faraway, distant heaven. This is the same spirit that was active in the person of Jesus and the same spirit to whom you and I can pray and from whom we receive blessings and peace.

This is the spirit of God that offers us grace. Grace is a gift - if we but accept it. No questions asked. We limit our understanding of God if we think of him only as the one we call on when we are in need.

Today, many people are disconnected from the natural world. We live inside houses and cars, we stare at screens, we walk on concrete. We know the generic names of birds and trees, but we don't know them as friends. In losing touch with Creation, we begin to lose touch with the Creator. Many of us have a love affair with our favorite wild places, trees, or animals. I rejoice when I see a covey of quails running free ahead of me.

This disconnection is not just biological—it's spiritual. We love God when we care for the Earth. Climate change is not only a scientific issue; it is a moral and theological one. We cannot claim to love God while destroying the creation.

The call to find God in nature is not just about personal spirituality; it is about working together as a community to support each other in knowing God and nature. It is about seeing the natural world not as a resource to be used up but as a part of God's creation, not as a possession but as something to care for.

If you want to know a beloved one, you must spend time with them- relate with them, enjoy them. When you commune with the wild things, as you walk in nature, you will be surprised by what they have to tell you.

It is a satisfying form of prayer to sit in a beautiful location and practice mindful breathing. Practice listening. Sit under a tree. Watch the clouds. Feel the wind. Quiet your ego, and let the silence speak to you.

The mystery of creation is part of the human story. We humans did not originate our body traits. Each bone, muscle, and organ that we have is the result of mutations that arose in

our pre-human ancestors. Even your sweet kitty cat shares 90% of her genes with humans. Her genes aren't exact duplicates, but they deal with the same traits in both species. Her heart and your heart aren't the same, but similar in origin, structure, and function. That means we have to go back further still in time to find the origin of our traits. How else can we relate to this holy Spirit of God but with awe and wonder?

Will you pray with me... Spirit of the living God, you gave us a magnificent world, and you gave us the responsibility of caring for it. Open our minds to new understanding so that we live in harmony with the earth and love it as a brother or sister.

Amen

Quiet Reflection

1. Recall a time that you experienced holy wonder at something that you encountered in the natural world.

2. Where can you go into nature to feel the closeness of God's spirit 3. Where can you go to quiet your mind from the "chatter "of everyday thought and just "be" in the presence of the Holy Spirit 4. If you wake in the night, what nature images can you replay to give you peace...