

September 13, 2009
Psalm 19; Mark 4:26-32
First Parish Church, Brunswick
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The Book of Nature

Last Monday, five adults and eleven of this year's confirmation group hiked Tumbledown Mountain, which is next to Mt. Blue State Park in Weld. It was one of those gloriously beautiful days we have been having lately. So, you might be surprised to hear that we spent the day studying. In fact, we spent the day intensely studying God – for about seven hours - but I don't think the young people know that we did.

Let me explain. After we parked our cars and were getting our gear together, one of the parents teasingly said he had told his son to bring his Bible, because that's what we were going to be doing on the hike. I chuckled back and said, "Well, today we're going to study the other great book of theology, the book of nature."

The Apostle Paul expressed it this way in the opening chapter of the letter to the Romans (1:20),

Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made.

And so we immersed ourselves in the creation – putting footstep after footstep, climbing up the side of the mountain as hundreds have done before us, huffing and puffing over rocks (at least some of us were huffing and puffing), stopping at openings in the trees to soak in the glorious view of the mountains and lake around us. When we got to the opening near the top, some jumped into the glacial pond there, and some of us decided it was just too cold. During the day our eyes feasted, our ears were soothed by the absence of technological sound, our noses filled with fresh air, our tongues relished the food and drink we had brought, our hands helped one another up the boulders, as our hearts pounded. Later our muscles ached. It was a great day of theological study.

Throughout the centuries theologians have spoken of the two great books that tell of God: the Bible and Nature. Yet, these two books have not always rested easily side-by-side on the shelf in theological and ecclesiastical circles. Religious authorities have often wanted to place much greater emphasis on the scriptures.

Consider today's Psalter reading, which contains both of these themes. It is an ancient writing, which begins with the witness of nature, *The heavens are telling the glory of God*. Then, halfway through, the focus of the psalm shifts to the witness of scripture. I had to chuckle when I read the footnote in my study Bible which suggests that likely a later writer added these verses praising the scripture in order to counterbalance the focus on revelation through nature, considering it too pagan. So we can see that the creative tension between the revelation of nature and special revelation is an ancient one.

My experience in the life of the church is that there is a lot of attention paid to scripture, with the Book of Nature being relegated to a back shelf. I guess that's not surprising since I've been part of the Protestant tradition, which has its roots in making scripture available to all people. In addition, we live in a time of modern scientific inquiry. This has often led to a total separation of science and religion, to our detriment. It has left nature to the scientists as simply 'things' to be examined. We have often lost the poetic, metaphoric, mystical witness of creation.

Jesus often used examples from the natural world around him in his teaching. For example, in today's gospel, he points to the growth of seeds as an image of the growth of the Spirit.

Today, with the growing concerns about the environment, we find ourselves paying more attention to creation and to our spiritual connections with all that is. In so doing, many of us have realized that we, in the church, may have not been paying enough attention to how creation nourishes our spirits, as well as our bodies.

The most common response when I ask people where they experience God's presence is "in nature." Occasionally I get a sly grin and someone says they like to worship God on the golf course ...sometimes on Sunday mornings. My reply is, "Next time, please invite me along."

In my time living in the Southwest, where I often went to Ghost Ranch in northern New Mexico for continuing education. There I was exposed to Native American culture and traditions. (If you know the paintings of Georgia O'Keefe you would recognize the landscape.) I was struck by Native American reverence for creation and their profound sense that we are part of the created order. This prompted me to look for strands of this perspective in our own Christian tradition. One place I found it is in Celtic Spirituality.

Therefore, for my sabbatical this summer I spent time with Celtic and Native American traditions. They both have creation-centered spiritualities. At the same time, neither of them is romantic or naïve about the wildness or fierceness of creation. I find that particularly in how they reflect on death. But that's for another day.

Today I'm going to focus more on Celtic tradition and another Sunday I'll speak more about the Native American traditions. As I said last Sunday, this summer I went to Iona, a small island off the west coast of Scotland. It first became the center for Celtic Christianity 1,400 years ago. Today there is a retreat center, where Celtic traditions have experienced resurgence in the last century. In the seminar I attended we wondered where this strand of Christian practice has been over the centuries. The simplest answer is – on the fringes.

It is one of those stories of the tension between the two books of scripture and nature, often influenced by the power bases in church and state. This story comes to us from the 7th century in Northumbria, which in the present day is part of England and Scotland. The Synod of Whitby was held at a Celtic monastery, whose abbess was Hilda. There

were representatives from two missions, the Celtic and the Roman. On the surface the argument was about the date of Easter. But there was also tension between the differing spiritualities.

The Celts traced themselves through Iona back to the authority of St. John - the disciple whom Jesus loved and who rested against Jesus at the Last Supper. "He had become an image of the practice of listening for the heartbeat of God. This Spirituality lent itself to listening for God at the heart of life." In this tradition Christ is an ever unfolding mystery rather than a one-time event. Christ leads us into the unity of all life. On the other hand, the Roman mission traced back to Peter, who was seen as the rock on which Christ built the church. "This spirituality favoured a listening for God in the ordained teaching and life of the Church."

(Listening for the Heartbeat of God, J. Philip Newell, pg. 1-2)

The King who had called the synod – no separation of church and state there – made the ruling. He decided for the Roman mission in terms of the date for Easter. Even in Celtic territory the Roman church was beginning to exert a powerful influence as has been true ever since. The Celtic practices didn't die out but they moved more the fringes.

It is a loss to all of us when either Nature or Scripture are relegated to a back shelf. For the richness of our individual faith journeys and our life together we need the full range of spiritual practices and sensibilities. Many gifts for the common good.

One image from Celtic tradition that is significant for our conversation today about the two books is the Celtic Cross. A Celtic Cross has a circle connecting the branches of the cross. Some speak of it as the sun, some as the world. Either way, effectively the Celtic Cross represents the holding together of Creation and Christ.

I have found that re-discovering the Celtic strand of Christian heritage has nourished my soul and broadened my understanding of the rich diversity of Christian expression that is part of our heritage. The past doesn't change, but the histories we tell about it are always changing.

I want to finish with words from a hymn attributed to St. Patrick. It's referred to as the "breastplate hymn." It's an epic hymn, which reflects characteristics of Celtic Spirituality. I'm only going to share two verses, which I think reflect the two books, Creation and Christ.

*I bind unto myself today
The virtues of the star-lit heaven,
The glorious sun's life-giving ray,
The whiteness of the moon at even,
The flashing of the lightning free,
The whirling wind's tempestuous shocks,
The stable earth, the deep salt sea
Around the old eternal rocks.*

Christ be with me, Christ within me,

*Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.*