

“Godliness in Creation” Sermon
SELC – 9/13/20 – Pastor Mark Perry

Last week, we talked about the GOODNESS in creation. That God’s sevenfold repeated word, “it is GOOD,” still inheres today. That we are called to enjoy, cherish, and share with others as fully as possible the pleasures, delights, beauty, wonder, and provision of this natural world.

This week we go deeper and more profoundly into not only the GOODNESS of creation but the GODLINESS of creation. That we can experience not only the *blessings* of that goodness in and through creation but the actual presence and power of God. That the “stuff” of this universe all around us is also the MEANS by and through which we know and experience God and God’s grace.

Now, this *is* a series of *teaching* sermons. This particular one is going to go into some finer theological points. I’ll be referencing a number of quotes from the bible and church authorities. I’m going to use those quotes so that you can see this isn’t just my opinion and that these ideas aren’t just mine I made up to fit a particular viewpoint but have strong biblical and ecclesiastical basis. It may all seem a bit complicated, but I encourage you to hang in there, as it’s going towards a particularly important point about our relationship with God and God’s creation. (and this sermon is printed out if you want a copy to read closer later).

In Lutheran teaching, we refer to “the Means of Grace”- Word and Sacraments- by and through which we experience the presence and benefits of God through Jesus Christ. They are the “channels” or ways through which we access God and God’s promises to us. They are great gifts and not to be taken lightly nor ignored. They are the unique ways in which we hear not only that God is love but that God specifically loves US, each one of us, personally and intimately. The more we participate and share in these “means,” the more likely it is that we experience the joy of being in God’s presence and receiving of God’s strength, love and wisdom.

I’m proclaiming today that the created order is also a “Means” of Grace through which we can access God and many of God’s gifts. Renowned Lutheran theologian, Dr. Joseph Sittler, in his classic book called Gravity and Grace, describes this as the “common” grace of God, which means not simply ‘ordinary’ but available to all when he says,

“By ‘special grace’ [early church leaders] meant that historical, incomparable appearance of grace in Jesus Christ. By common grace (they) meant the grace into which everyone is born.....Before one is baptized, or even if one never is, such grace meets one in God’s creation. There is common grace in the pear tree that blooms and blushes. There is common grace in the sea (that massive cleanliness which we are proceeding to corrupt), in the fact that there was, before we laid hands on it, clean air. Our task is to appreciate that grace...”

This idea has its basis in bible passages like Psalm 19 and Romans 1, which clearly state that nature reveals God's grace and presence:

"The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

² Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.

³ There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;

⁴ yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world."

And from Romans: "Ever since the creation of the world **his eternal power and divine nature**, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made."

Note in Romans, it is not only the power and glory of God that is evident in creation, but the "divine nature." What the *Message* translation calls, "the mystery of his divine being."

Early 5th century church father, St. Augustine, echoes Psalm 19 when he said,

"Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Read it. God, whom you want to discover, never wrote that book with ink. Instead He set before your eyes the things that he had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that?"

Or, as 19th century inventor and leader, George Washington Carver put it in a more succinct and fun way, "I love to think of nature as an unlimited broadcasting sermon through which God speaks to us every hour, if we will only tune in."

Now, it is true that, though nature can reveal the existence and reality of God, we need the written Word to understand and appreciate Who that God is and what that God is about. But BOTH are ways God reveals Godself to us and through which we can experience God.

Jesus himself regularly went into that place of divine wonder and wisdom through what He saw and experienced around him. Think of all the times he uses things of the natural world to teach a divine word of wisdom or revelation: "Look at the birds of air... the flowers of the field..." In other places: salt, light, sheep, shepherd, wolf, wheat, vineyards, grapes, seeds, building on sand versus solid rock, wind, water, babies, bread, wine... on and on. And where did Jesus go to be closer to God? Into the wilderness, sometimes in prayer and meditation all night long. It seems Jesus himself regularly fully

immersed Himself in the natural world, observed and listened to what God would say to Him in it, and then drew wisdom and truth from it to point out to others.

Could it be that this is also what Martin Luther meant when he said, “God writes the Gospel not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars?”

And is this truth behind what 19th century naturalist and writer, John Muir meant when he said, in his book, *My First Summer in the Sierras*, “I wish you could come here and rest a year in the simple unmingled love-fountains of God. You would return with fresh truth gathered and absorbed from pines and waterfalls and deep-singing winds, and you would find that they all sang of fountain love just as did Jesus Christ.”

So, if you’ve ever watched a baby being born, a spectacular sunset, an awesome night sky speckled with stars beyond count, the exquisite beauty of a tiny flower, or any other experience in nature where you were “spellbound” or held in awe, or filled with a peace you can’t explain, I suggest that was and is a “means” by and through which God’s power and nature was revealed to you.

Now, let me pause and make sure there’s clear understanding about what I am saying and what I’m *not* saying. Sometimes, this line of thinking is criticized as smacking of *pantheism*. “Pantheism” is the belief that ALL is God. Look at tree: God. Look at a bug: God. Look at humans: God. That is NOT at all what I’m saying.

I feel the need to get rather theologically geeky here, just for a moment, to help us clearly understand this:

There are basically four ways of talking about the relationship of God with the universe:

1) There’s “deism,” which is the belief that God exists pretty much only as the maker of the universe who set it in motion in the first place and then stepped back and let it run on its own without any further interaction. The “watchmaker” idea of God, held especially by the 18th century Enlightenment thinkers, like Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin.

2) There’s “theism,” which is the much more common belief that there is a God, that God is involved with the universe, and that God inserts or comes into our world on occasions like speaking through a prophet, in Jesus Christ, in the coming of the Holy Spirit, and in miracles. Kind of a “touch down” God who comes just at certain moments, to “touch down” in our world when needed.

3) There’s “pantheism,” which some indigenous animist religions hold to, which basically says everything we see around us is god, or of divine spirit.

4) Then, there’s what I think is a much more helpful image of how God relates with the world, called “panentheism.” Note that little “en” there. Meaning “in.” Not “all IS God.” But “pan” (all) “en” (in) “theism” (God). All is in God. We can experience God in

and through what we see and feel around us BUT there is infinitely more to God than that.

Martin Luther seems to affirm this when, in his writings (Luther's Works, Vol. 37, p. 59), he says,

"...God in His essence is present everywhere in and through the whole creation in all its parts and in all places, and so the world is full of God and He fills it all, yet He is not limited or circumscribed by it but is at the same time beyond and above the whole creation."

When I hear this, I think of Isaiah's vision of the Temple, in chapter 6, "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and **the hem of his robe filled the temple...**" (Is. 6:1). You get that? Only the very edge of the robe of God fits in the vast expanse of that temple. God's presence goes far beyond that.

There's so much more we could say about all this. And I'm sure some are thinking, "Oh, I sure hope you don't." Others may be thinking, "Pastor, all this is interesting and all, but... so what? Why does it matter?"

Well, first because it's even more reason to praise and thank God for the wonder of the world around us. Second, it matters because it shows how importantly matter matters to God and matter should matter to us, too. As I believe I've demonstrated, that "matter," that "stuff" of the natural world, the universe around us, is *also* a means of grace through which we get to know and experience God. Like communion, baptism and the bible, it is a *channel* through which God reveals God self, even if in a more general and less specific and directed way than those traditional "means of Grace" shared within the Church. That channel, or that second "book" of God's revelation as Augustine calls it, is a wonderful gift through which anyone can access God's "common grace." But, what happens when that channel is blocked? What happens when it no longer is a means by which that grace is available to us, or access to it is greatly diminished?

One of the reasons we love living here in the beautiful SE Arizona is the gift of seeing the vast expanse of blue sky and the vista of mountains around us (thus the name "Sierra Vista"). Lately, that vista has been terribly diminished and dimmed by the vast cloud of smoke coming from fires in California and the West burning over 3.5 million acres. Many of you know I love to run long distances. I don't really feel I can do that in a healthy way at this time. And my heart and prayers go out to those who have reduced lung capacity or ability here and closer to the fires. That "channel" or "means" by which we're used to enjoying the beauty and literal healthier environment around us is being blocked. And, while climate change is not the *cause* of those fires bringing all that smoke, the much greater size and intensity of the fires, forestry and climate scientists tell us, is directly related to that climate change.

I look at it this way: If there was some physical obstacle, something that was getting in the way between hearing God's word of grace in the bible and receiving of God's forgiveness and new life in Holy Communion, our whole church would be doing everything it could to remove that roadblock so people could get receive of these great gifts. (Kind of like last week, when the AV system wasn't working properly at the beginning of the service and Larry and CJ were working hard and doing everything they could to get it up and running again).

Or, if there was something impure or harmful in the very bread and wine at the altar, wouldn't our Altar Guild be doing everything in their ability to make sure it was replaced or replenished with healthy, good bread and wine?

In a similar way, if our mission is to share the Good News of all of God's grace for ALL people, and that common grace through nature is being impeded, eroded, blocked, and made unavailable, shouldn't we be doing everything we could to make sure that didn't happen and that as many people as possible could enjoy the experiencing and knowing God's grace, presence and power in and through his good creation?

The answer is a resounding YES!

Amen.