

## Nature and the Voice of God

Driving across the Minnesota plain on my way home worry consumed me. I was a new professor in a new job...one who hadn't completed his dissertation, which dragged on and on. What if I didn't finish it? What if my advisors didn't accept it even if I did finish it? What would I do then? What other sort of career could I, a newly married man, pursue and what would it mean?

I looked up from the road for a moment, and the sky jerked me out of my brooding. Alive with bands of purple, orange, yellow and red, I had never seen a sunset like this in my almost thirty years of life. In that moment I realized deep within myself that God was telling me that, whether or not I succeeded with the dissertation, God was much bigger than dissertation, career, and marriage. God could handle it and would do so. That deep message within carried me through the next few years with its ups and downs, and the eventual completion of the Ph.D. God spoke to me through a sunset and in no small way changed my life.

The sunset served as my burning bush. Jews, Christians and Muslims all realize that God can speak to us through nature, the nonhuman part of God's creation. They often refer to Mose's experience of the burning bush, when God got Moses' attention and sent him on his life-changing mission, as an encounter with Beauty, with God. Plato, too, talked about Beauty as that which calls out to us from within something else, a reality that lies below the surface appearance of things. It changes us if we but listen. Doestoevsky, the great Russian novelist, agreed, famously saying in one of his novels that "Beauty will save the world."

The ancient church fathers teach that, if Jesus is the Word of God (*Logos*) that spoke creation into being (Jn1: 1-14), then every rock, plant and animals are words of God (*logoi*) that speak something to us about God. All of creation then constitutes a living Book of Nature that complements the book of scripture. In fact, to really understand scripture one needs to understand the Book of Nature. Similarly, one cannot understand the Book of Nature without immersing oneself in scripture.

Thomas Merton, the great 20<sup>th</sup> century spiritual figure who lived in the Abbey of Gethsemane in Kentucky, served both as the Abbey's forester and novice master, the one charged with forming the spiritual lives of the monastery's young monks. In the 1950's he wrote that one of the greatest challenges his novices faced was their lack of experience in the contemplation of nature, of reading the Book. We can only imagine that he would rate the situation now as even more serious given our addiction to screens and to social media. For many of us our experience of nonhuman creation consists of watching the Nature Channel or of watching funny cat videos on YouTube. If, as Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI says, "The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast," how might we go about bringing water to a thirsty people and planet?

I have been involved for twenty years or so with the Opening the Book of Nature program (OBN), which introduces people to the experience of learning about, and encountering, God through all of God's creation. Usually lasting anywhere from a few hours to a few days,

these events begin by presenting quotes from a variety of sources, such as saints, theologians, and poets (and in an interfaith context well-known persons from other faiths) so that participants realize that this experience is an integral part of Christianity (and of other religions). Participants then spend time in creation after receiving some simple instructions and return to share their experiences in small groups.

I have seen remarkable things happen. During one session we held in the fog a clergyman shared that up until now he had hated fog. During his seminary days his wife had to drive to work in it and he worried about her every time she left. This time, however, in the fog he encountered beauty and the loving presence of God. It now brought him closer to God and he loved it. God healed him of his aversion. At another event an agnostic ophthalmologist had such a strong experience that she decided God indeed exists and cares for her. Yet another time God led me and two Hindu/Buddhists to pray together for healing of hurts in our lives, hurts that surfaced in our times outdoors. God heals, overcomes divisions, and brings us together by speaking to us in ways we all understand – our common experiences in God's good creation.

Weekend events are great, but even better is sustained effort in learning to see and hear God speaking to us, and to learn how to respond. This takes practice. Streams, flying squirrels and oaks all are part of God's creation, just as people are. So, we can practice the lessons we learn from them by applying them to the way we relate to humans. In this effort it helps greatly to have the support of others who also are trying to grow. Consequently, we have built on the OBN introduction to create a nine-month-or-so program to facilitate spiritual growth preferably in groups or as individuals.

We do this, for instance by working for a couple of weeks on one thing, such as appreciating those we encounter. When we go out and have to learn to appreciate all that we encounter, including greenbriers, we learn patience, humility, and acceptance of others. We learn to see the good things in others when before we often found them irritating and obnoxious. These attitudes, of course, are precisely the attitudes that open us to God's life within and around us. Then, when we encounter Joe, our neighbor down the road who always has been a real pain in the neck, we then realize that Joe is a human greenbrier – and we start appreciating him. God offers us the opportunity to get to know, and possibly even love, those who in the past we have loved the least. God teaches us through creation how to love, how to become more Christ-like.

Learning to open the Book of Nature enriches our spiritual lives, whatever our religious persuasion or spirituality. So, try it. Go outside with an open heart and mind. Ask God, Life, the Spirit, or whatever you name the deep reality around and within you, to guide you. And see what happens!

If you would like to learn more about OBN or the longer program, whether to attend an event or learn how to lead them, feel free to contact us at the Center for Religion and Environment ([cre@sewanee.edu](mailto:cre@sewanee.edu); 931-598-1243) or Allen Johnson ( ). We'd love to talk with you.