

“Nature as our First Religion”

Psalm 24

A sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas M. Donley

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University Baptist Church

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Here we are at the last of our grab bag sermons. It seems appropriate that the requester asked for a sermon on nature as the first religion.

How wonderful that it rained this week. We got to see our rain gardens in action. We are using God’s natural filters to clean water as it flows into our rivers. Water protectors gathered at the state capital earlier this week, not only to oppose line 3 that transmits Canadian tar sands oil across tribal lands possibly poisoning our waters, but also to illuminate our dependence on clean water. The wild fires are in part the land’s response to human-created climate change that creates drought in one place and floods in another.

Reza Aslan in his book, “God, a Human History” certainly takes the position of nature as the first religion. As we were crawling up out of the primordial ooze, our ancestors looked with wonder at the natural world. They pondered the cycles of the moon, the seasons, the way the earth gave them food, shelter, blessing and danger. This was the source of devotion before we humanized God.

When I was on Sabbatical 15 years ago, I visited the ancient cathedrals built by the Anasazi people in places like Chaco Canyon and Canyon DeChelle, in what we now call New Mexico. These ancient astronomers etched and painted their star charts on sandstone walls that still amaze visitors 2000 years later. They erected their ceremonial Kivas in direct line with the sunrise on the solstice, accounting for slight variations over an 18-year cycle. It was intricate and simple. Their houses of worship did not have towers built to the sky. Instead they were round and sunken into the ground, like a womb. Before Religion humanized God, there it was integrated with the natural world.

This past week while on vacation, I gazed upon the majesty Mount Hood and wondered what the ancient Multnomah tribe or Tillamook thought of these semi-dormant volcanos. I come to find out that there was a sibling rival between two kinsmen over a woman. The chief got so upset that he asked the great spirit to turn them into mountains. Wy’East is the Multnomah name of Mount Hood. Klickitat is the name of Mount Adams and the woman they were fighting over, Loo-Witt became Mount St. Helens. Occasionally, legend says, they still throw rocks at each other—how’s that for an explanation of volcanos?

I witnessed the haze from wildfires and the least snow on the mountain than many had seen in their memories. It’s easy to see why people would find wonder in the natural world. I know I did. We saw deer, grouse, turkeys foraging for the last bits of moisture in the plants, while the nearby apple, peach, blueberry and pear orchards received their daily dowsing from mechanized hoses. We feasted on fresh peaches for a week. When we restocked our Mounds

View fridge with peaches upon our return, we were sorely disappointed in the fare from Cub foods.

While I was there, drinking in the views and the quiet, I had Barbara Kingsolver's latest book *Unsheltered* with me. Like many of her books, the chapters jump from one era to another. The inhabitants are on the same land one hundred and fifty years apart. They are living in the same house that seems to be falling down around them in whatever century. One of the characters has a correspondence with Charles Darwin, shortly after he wrote "On the Origin of Species". He used logic and science to show that evolution was how we came to be. This scandalized the people who held that God set things in motion in a very certain and specific way. Because of this belief, the world around them started crashing down—their sheltered environment which didn't allow questions started showing cracks, like the plaster in the continually crumbling home. It's no accident that Kingsolver sets this house on a shaky foundation with generations ignoring the obvious. One of the things that Darwin argued was that for the world to work, it needed all of its parts. It needed moose and bears and frogs and fungus and even mice and maggots. If we messed with the ecosystem, the earth often raged back and set things in balance again. We, humanity, are not God's superior creation, argued Darwin. Rather we are part of God's superior creation which needs all of its parts to function. This symbiosis is the great gift of God. Here are a couple of great quotes from the book first from an 1870's scientist: "When the Nuisance of old mythologies fall away from us, we may see with new eyes" (p.89) And in a nod to our current political climate she says, "When men fear the loss of what they know, they will follow any tyrant who promises to restore the old order."

Wildfires have a perfect storm of drought, and a certain fire management system. Forests are made to burn every few decades in order to keep them in balance. But if something hasn't burned for a hundred years, you get tinder on the floor and plants that need fire to burst open their seeds. When we lived in California, we saw Redwood trees that grew next to a burned out core. The core was its parent hundreds of years before. The new seedlings needed the nitrogen of fire to make them hatch.

With Colonization we brought with us a sense of ownership to this land. We put up fences, dammed and diverted the rivers, clear cut forests without replanting them, and declared that God had given it to us because our skin was the best color or some other such nonsense.

Maybe that's what the Psalmist was saying when he said "the Earth is God's and the fullness thereof." He didn't say the earth is yours to exploit and to destroy. The Psalmist then says that the worthy may climb the purple mountains majesty above the fruited plain. Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lie are trust-worthy of climbing the mountain and seeing God.

The reclusive Emily Dickinson mused about going to church and being amidst the holy.

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church (236)

*Some keep the Sabbath going to Church –
I keep it, staying at Home –
With a Bobolink for a Chorister –
And an Orchard, for a Dome –*

*Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice –
I, just wear my Wings –*

*And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
Our little Sexton – sings.*

*God preaches, a noted Clergyman –
And the sermon is never long,
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last –
I'm going, all along.*

What I think she is getting at is that God is all around us. Not just in buildings, as beautiful as this one is. God is in the songbird, joining her sisters and brothers in a holy choir if we just open our windows and our hearts.

I'm so glad that we are doing such intentional work on this little corner to which we are stewards. The loving gardens tended for years by able volunteers and enjoyed by students and seniors and bunnies alike have undergone a transformation. Buildings such as ours are wonderful and holy places. And their presence has displaced the natural water filtration system implemented by God. Storm water cascaded off our building and that which didn't find its way inside our basement, rolled off the sidewalks and into the street. Along the way, it picked up salt, garbage, phosphorous, sediment and motor oil on its way to the storm sewers and eventually to the mighty Mississippi just a block or so away. This little landscaping project is actually a restoration of God's natural filtration system. When it's done, these four rain gardens will divert 133,000 gallons of water a year from the street to the water table, all clean and nutritious. We are restoring our place in the ecosystem. And that is good news.

For some of us, I know nature is our first religion. I know I get spiritual pleasure out of extracting the nectar of our neighborhood maple trees and transforming it into a delicious sweetener. Those spring days in front of a fire feel holy to me—all that transformation happening around us as the crocuses bloom again and remind us that all is not dismal frost, but like Sunday, spring returns each year with its many gifts.

I know others who are taking these last fleeting days of summer to be out on a lake, to swim before the water gets too cold, drinking in the change of color in the trees, even as they drink in the long-needed rain, storing it in their roots to survive another Minnesota winter.

Mary Oliver says that every day she is looking for God. Maybe I am too. Aren't you? Where do you look? Where do you find it? Maybe it's in a finely designed leaf, or a lake that gives and takes life. Maybe it's in the face of a loved one. Maybe it's in a memory. There is evidence of God all around us. We saw it in the wonderful tribute yesterday for our dear Char Follett. I hope when you see evidence of God, you will pause, breathe in the holy presence, say a little word of thanks and walk with a bit more confidence and clarity. When you do that, God can't help but smile.