



SUNNYVALE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

728 W. Fremont Avenue • Sunnyvale, CA 94087

408.739.1892 • FAX: 408.739.3491

From the Pulpit

Sermon: “Discovering God... in Creation”

The Rev. Dr. Steve Harrington ~ January 31, 2010

Psalm 19:1-6

Psalm 8

Our focus today is on discovering God in creation. During the sermon we'll be occasionally changing the slides up front here just to give you a couple of different images of the beauty of nature and to remind us of the intricate and amazing handiwork of our Creator God.

Also there at your seats we have distributed little baggies of crayons and pieces of blank paper to invite and encourage you to express your *own* creativity. The invitation is to draw your own pictures of nature: abstract, Impressionism, realism -- whatever. And if so I would invite you to draw a particular place in creation when and where God was powerfully real to you. It might be of a time when you were at the beach or in the woods or on a mountain top. It might be from a time at church camp or on one of our wilderness ministry trips or maybe from a hike you took one morning all alone. But see if you might capture in the limited palette of the few crayons we gave you one of those significant, profound, even sacred moments when God's awesome majesty, delicate beauty and intricate creativity struck you in a powerful way.

For me if I were coloring that picture it would be of a day that this photograph captured back in 1983. I'm leaning back on a hillside in the Bighorn Mountains of Wyoming -- looking a lot younger than I do now. I'm seated on a grassy slope between Upper Crater and Lower Crater Lake right at the base of Cloud Peak. Sheer jagged rock walls surround me and small patches of white snow can still be seen in a few shadowed crevices where the sun has not had a long enough chance to melt it away. I'm leaning back in a patch of lush green grass with yellow woolly sunflowers and pink fireweed blossoming all around me.

If anyone ever says go to your happy place -- *this* is where I go. It was an afternoon when I experienced a lovely freedom and a gracious peace and a full contentment in the presence of God and with the few companions there with me. Of course, given my penchant for wilderness adventures I have many other such places -- but what would be your picture -- where would it be and what would it look like? And keep that in your mind as we go through the rest of our service today and maybe capture it in crayon there in your seat. And as you head outside in the entryway there will be a portable divider where, if you'd like, you can post and share your picture -- think of it like God's refrigerator door! Okay, let's hear from God's word in Psalm 19.

Read Psalm 19:1-6

The poet¹ says, "Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God; but only he who sees, takes off his shoes -- the rest sit round it and pluck blackberries."

I love Elizabeth Barrett Browning's words here because they recognize that in the cathedral of creation different people will see different things. One person sees a blackberry patch waiting to be picked and plundered; while another looks at the same plant but sees a burning bush and the very presence of God... and they take off their shoes in reverent awe.

The first person reaps a harvest of juicy berries for a cobbler or to top their ice cream -- a wonderful thing to be sure. But the second person sees in the bounty of the earth the blessing of God and is transported from one who *observes* a scene into one who *absorbs* the sacred. And the truth is -- at least in *my* experience -- we can move from one of those places to the other pretty quickly. One moment we're just looking out at the ocean enjoying the view. And then the sun begins to set and it turns into this warm orange softness. It slowly sinks behind the horizon as the sky becomes a veritable aurora borealis of pinks, oranges and purples and the clouds catch the last few embers of the day. Suddenly we are transformed from gawking tourist into a humbled pilgrim and all we can say is glory!

The New Testament tells us that God's power and deity are made evident in creation. It tells us that *in Jesus* all things were created; that they were created *through* him and *for* him. But it's the poetry of the Psalms that celebrate that the created order is a partner *with us* in lifting up praise and adoration to God.

The Psalmist tells us that creation speaks of the glory of God *but* that it does so without words: "There is no speech nor are there words", verse 3 says, "Their voice is not heard." *And yet* everyone of us here knows how powerfully God's created order can speak to us in deep and profound ways that become forever preserved in sacred memory reminding us of a time when God's power and God's grandeur -- when God's breathtaking creativity made us feel both insignificantly small and yet infinitely expanded.

I have often envied the chirping bird and the blooming flower, the soaring cliff and the towering tree because they so easily -- *they so naturally* -- praise God. I don't know about you but sometimes I get so distracted with the details of my life, I become so bogged down by concerns and worries -- by various projects and problems -- that I have to really work at praising God. But Psalm 19 tells us that just by fulfilling their creation -- just by doing what they were made to do: by birds chirping and trees growing and flowers blooming... just by doing what they were created to be creation praises God. That's a great encouragement to us, right? It says that when we are who God has created us to be -- when we're using our gifts and we're in relationship with God and we are at peace with the people around us and we are caring for creation... then we are praising God!

We who live here in the Bay Area -- not far from our incredibly beautiful and rugged seashore; not that far from the majestic peaks of the Sierras -- I think that we have a special appreciation for how creation renews us and speaks to us about an amazing and awesome God. But I think that with all the beauty that we have here we can be tempted to focus only on creation and forget the Creator.

Nancy and I were up skiing on Donner Pass at Sugar Bowl last Thursday on a postcard perfect day. Overhead was a bluebird sky; between the runs were tall green pines with snow still

¹ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Aurora Leigh. Book vii

on the branches; and underneath us was 10 feet of white joy. After one of the runs a woman joined us on our chair lift for a ride back up the mountain. We got to talking and she said she was from Lafayette-Orinda so I mentioned that I knew the pastor of one of the churches there just as a way of perhaps opening a small conversation about faith (I didn't tell her that BOTH of us were pastors – no sense having her jump off the lift). She looked at the scenery around us and said, "I'll take this as my religion."

Surveys that query the religious perspectives of our community would indicate that most of our neighbors would agree with her. Most believe that to experience nature is to encounter God. And while it is true that in nature we get a fresh and powerful experience of God's handiwork it is NOT God. Creation was never meant to be the *point* of our faith. It is always a window *through which* we better understand and experience our Creator God. Stopping with creation as our sole focus would be like delighting in the fingerprints of your spouse rather than in the person themselves. In creation we have the handiwork -- the *handprint* -- of God; but we need to look beyond the handprint -- past even the hand -- to see the face of our God.

Creation teaches us much about God whether in the beauty of the natural order or in what we see and learn from the animals. I shared with you a while ago how I was being mentored by my dog Max – our 140 pound Rottweiler/ shepherd. Max was teaching me how to feel appropriately bad for what I'd done and *then* quickly shake it off, receive forgiveness and believe I am quickly and easily loved again. He was a good teacher. Earlier this month we had one of those terrible days when the vet said we needed to put Max down and now we miss him terribly. In his absence we remember how much he also taught us about love and joy, about loyalty and contentment; about friendship and faithfulness.

The heavens declare the glory of God and even our pets can teach us about God's love and faithfulness. Here's a little video that celebrates that in a fun and touching way: (show God and dog video)