

## SERMON, ST JOHN'S EPIPHANY III

Deep in the remote recesses of history, when I was at Exeter University in England, I sang in the university choral society. One of the high points of the 1974 season was singing the tenor part in Haydn's *Creation*, in particular that glorious chorus in Movement no. 13 of part 1, "The heavens are telling the glory of God, the wonder of his work displays the firmament. Today that is coming speaks it the day, The night that is gone is following night...In all the lands resounds the word, never unperceived, ever understood. The heavens are telling the glory of God, the wonder of his work displays the firmament." These magnificent words, of course, paraphrase the opening verses of Psalm 19, appointed for today: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork." These words speak to the theme of what theologians call "Natural Religion," the perception of divine reality as read through nature apart from divine revelation. This seems to be innate in human beings, who seem to be wired to seek the divine in the natural order, at least through our long history prior to the rise of modern skepticism of all things spiritual. Traditional religion, of course, was deeply imbued with the understanding that the forces of nature are either divine or convey deep religious meaning. The Hawaiians saw the creator deity Kāne in thunder and lightening, just as the Greeks understood Zeus as employing the thunderbolt, gifted to him by the Cyclops as a weapon. Hawaiians see divinized ancestors as *āumakua*, animal helpers who come to the aid of their descendants. Undeniably, all religions have their origin in the reading of nature, finding meaning and connection with the winds, the rains, unusual plants and curious animals, the movements of earth, sea and sky, stars and planets. It is, indeed, not surprising that our names for the planets and many of the stars are rooted in Greek and Roman mythology and even the days of the weeks commemorate both Roman and Anglo Saxon gods.

The philosopher William James wrote, "Were one to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it exists in the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves hereto." In other words, we come naturally to the declaration that "The heavens are telling the glory of God," and our spiritual and ethical lives consist of conforming to the beauty and harmony of the natural order. We are all familiar with those deep spiritual feelings we have when confronted by the majesty of nature – how can we not when we live and worship in such a glorious place as Maui? Here, the daily movement of the clouds as they form that mystical "maunalei" around Haleakalā is a wondrous testimony to the heavens telling the glory of God! Why bother with the Christian Faith at all, when all we might need to feed our souls is the beauty that is spread out so profligately before us? Why not simply worship nature like Frank Lloyd Wright who exclaimed, "I put a capital N on Nature, and call it my Church."

I confess that I am personally more drawn to the worship of God in nature than I am within the hallowed walls of the Church or any organized religion at all. That may be shocking to hear from the mouth of a priest, who's been serving the Church for almost 44 years, but it's true. I am a wild romantic and the beauty of the natural order excites and feeds my soul in ways that reading the Bible or attending church meetings usually don't. I am essentially a mystic and was

drawn to God through nature, hiking the Sierras or the wild and rugged coast of Northern California. Early in my life, when I was about 15, I also discovered the beauty of music, form, light, color and art in worship. The first church I ever attended on my own volition was the local Greek Orthodox Church, where the exquisite Byzantine liturgy with chant, incense, icons and shimmering mosaics literally blew my sock off and drew me into a life of devotion to God. My entry into the divine was initially most definitely aesthetic and the contemplation of beauty remains a very important part of my spiritual identity.

But I learned very early on that I didn't discover God in the beauty of nature or worship, but that God discovered **me**. Though natural religion came "naturally" to me, it wasn't enough to fathom the immense depth and richness of God's love, which for me could only come from meeting Jesus. This is what Christians call "revelation." Yes, God does speak to us through the natural order contemplation of beauty and human reason is capable of reading nature to learn magnificent truths about divine wisdom, but God's revelation of him/herself as perfect Love invites us into a **relationship** that is far more than a romantic or mystical reading of divine beauty in nature. This is not a "feel good" or "pretty" experience, for we all know that relationships aren't always pretty or easy. The invitation of God in Christ to conform our lives to the model of sacrificial Love manifested by Jesus is painful, but real – indeed, only by doing so can we ultimately live into the truth of who we were created to be.

The Jewish people very early learned that they didn't call God, but that he called them into a relationship. It took lots of time and the persecution and death of many prophets, but eventually they learned that seeking God is really about responding to God's call to justice, love and service. We heard that dramatic reading this morning from Nehemiah about the re-introduction and reaffirmation of the Torah by Ezra the Scribe in Jerusalem after the return of the Jewish people from their bitter exile in Babylon. The people were so starved for the revelation of God's love for them that when Ezra read the Torah, they wept en masse. Ezra told them not to mourn or weep, "for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

And so we come to our Gospel reading from Luke, surely one of the most powerful and critical passages in all of Scripture. Preaching in the synagogue of Nazareth, his home town, Jesus reads from the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor...Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Wow! Worshiping God in the beauty of nature may, indeed, touch our hearts and fill us with awe and wonder, but here we have the true essence of revelation as manifested in God's call to each of us to live lives patterned on Christ's life of sacrificial Love. This Love defines the very nature of God, as well as our own true nature made in his image since the beginning of creation. Creation was itself an act of sacrificial Love and so it isn't enough for us simply to worship God in the natural order that declares his glory, but to **live** glory by offering our lives in service to his creatures. The early Christian bishop, Irenaeus of Lyons wrote, "The true glory of God is humankind fully alive." "Humankind Fully alive" means nothing less than bringing good news to the poor, releasing the captives, giving sight to the blind and letting the oppressed go free. This is hard – I would so much rather sit at the back door of the Rectory and declare God's glory by watching the

exquisite patterns of the shadows of clouds over the sea toward Lana'i. But responding to God's call to Love as Christ loves us is the challenge of true spirituality. Trust me, it would be so nice to go with Frank Lloyd Wright's definition of the Church as the capital "N" for Nature, but this would not be the Body of Christ.