

God is Out There

29 June 2008

By Rob Flinn

One morning this past April as I had just begun the commute in to work, I noticed orange safety cones in the street up ahead. In the tricky light of daybreak the cones looked about a third their normal size. I did a sort of double take and after refocusing I could tell that it wasn't the tricky light. The cones were in fact a third the size of real roadway cones. They were kid's cones, maybe 7 or 8 of them laid out neatly to narrow the two lanes on my side of the median over to one and as I reflexively began to switch lanes I saw the dead cat. It was about half grown, a gray tabby. We can only guess at the story. Somebody, maybe a child and an adult or maybe a teenager had done this to keep the cat from getting run over repeatedly, maybe until the owners could get there and retrieve the cat. It was an act of kindness and compassion no doubt, but most importantly it was a radical act of reverence. It was most radical by flying in the face of apathy. Really, it was just another dead cat, come on. Kahlil Gibran said that "hell lies not in torture but in an empty heart." That scene of reverence for a domestic animal, probably helped fill lots of hearts that morning.

I think one important way that domestic animals are a blessing to us is by acting as emissaries of sorts between us and the rest of creation. The same case could be made for domestic plants, and gardens and zoos. We don't have to watch the "Dog Whisperer" to know that animals speak a different language than we do. Other things living and not living, individually and in their relationships, often move to very different impulses and rhythms and than we. To develop a working knowledge of their world, which requires us stepping out of our own world somewhat, is always an invitation to a healthy humility.

This sermon is about how we relate to the rest of "creation," a word which I will use interchangeably with "nature." The effort of considering nature in the light of theology and the Christian Gospel is difficult, and many great Christian thinkers have wrestled with it and continue to do so. The effort is vital because for one, as St. Thomas Aquinas said, there are two sources of revelation – that is two sources of knowing about God -- scripture and nature. For another, maybe more today than ever, it is vital because nature needs our help, and how we see ourselves in relation to nature directly influences how we help nature. I've got some thoughts and three good poems to share that I think help us approach an understanding of our relationship to nature within the context of the gospel. Let's turn now to the words of a wonderful poet who writes about nature very often. This is a poem entitled:

"Messenger"

by Mary Oliver

My work is loving the world.

Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird

equal seekers of sweetness.

Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.

Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?

Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect? Let me

keep my mind on what matters,

which is my work,

*which is mostly standing still and learning to be
astonished.*

The phoebe, the delphinium.

The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.

Which is mostly rejoicing, since all the ingredients are here,

*which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart
and these body-clothes,*

a mouth with which to give shouts of joy

to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,

telling them all, over and over, how it is

that we live forever.

My favorite line in that one is “Let me keep my mind on what matters, which is my work, which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished.” There is plenty in nature to evoke our wonder and astonishment. One of the things that most astonishes me is the beauty of nature juxtaposed with its brutality. The same nature that produces the gorgeous sunset and the hauntingly beautiful swan also produces storms and floods and is characterized by one organism eating another as a fundamental mode of relationship among creatures. So nature is paradoxical by nature, and I think this directly reflects the mysteriousness of God.

One gift to us from nature which is practical and spiritual and difficult to quantify is nature’s role as healer and comforter. I often use stories of animals and nature in the counseling work I do with children. Many of us go into nature for our rest and renewal, be that in our backyards, a nearby park or sometimes a place more grand and distant like a National Park. Here is a poem that speaks to nature as comforter:

“The Peace of Wild Things”

By Wendell Berry

*When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron
feeds.*

*I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

Nature also serves as a counterweight to our self focus, our love for our own concerns which individually we would call our egos and collectively we might call civilization. This self-focus leads to a kind of self-worship which is evident throughout our culture, and is sin in the sense of sin as separation from others and thus ultimately God. Nature can help

pull us out of that, as I suggested earlier in describing domestic pets as emissaries from other worlds. Let's go back to Mary Oliver again for a poem that speaks both to nature as comforter and as guide to the world outside ourselves. The poem is titled:

"Sleeping in the Forest"

By Mary Oliver

*I thought the earth
remembered me, she
took me back so tenderly, arranging
her dark skirts, her pockets
full of lichens and seeds. I slept
as never before, a stone
on the riverbed, nothing
between me and the white fire of the stars
but my thoughts, and they floated
light as moths among the branches of the perfect trees. All night
I heard the small kingdoms breathing
around me, the insects, and the birds
who do their work in the darkness. All night
I rose and fell, as if in water, grappling
with a luminous doom. By morning
I had vanished at least a dozen times
into something better.*

The nature mysticism being advocated here can be seen as a fruit of the Holy Spirit. We don't need to move away from science and reason. Through the Holy Spirit we can transcend the kind of misunderstanding that wants to put science and sacrament at odds. We don't have to move away from a practical, utilitarian viewpoint toward nature, but we need to include it within a deeper, richer understanding of our relationship to nature. That move includes nature within the Christian Gospel message about God's Grace. We stand "outside of and other than" nature in some senses, but through the lens of Grace and the Holy Spirit, we are part of nature, brother and sister to nature and stand with nature in the light of God's unconditional love. So as Christians how can we not be environmentalists, and strive to practice what the wonderful theologian, Sally McFague, calls a "horizontal sacramentalism," that is understanding nature not just as pointing to God. Rather she says we need to understand nature as being in God, a part of what God is.

The Gospel's promise of salvation in a kingdom, already among us, can save us from the pit of our despair over our sins against nature. Certainly we are responsible **to** nature as our neighbor and are charged to work for right relationship toward nature, but ultimately we are not responsible for nature. God is. And so ultimately nature will be alright, and so we do not get mired in despair.

A few years ago my nephew and I were ending a wonderful canoe trip we had taken with friends in the Big Thicket wilderness areas of East Texas. We stopped at a BBQ restaurant before we parted company. After eating, when we came back out to our cars, a robust looking middle-aged man, who was tending the outdoor BBQ pit and had seen our canoes, came striding over to us to talk about our trip. He was extremely enthusiastic about our stories of the beautiful places we

had seen, and he shared with us his wonderful experience hiking the Appalachian Trail. As the conversation wrapped up with some general remark from me about how great it was to be able to make these kinds of trips, the man's enthusiasm hadn't waned and he said with a twinkle in his eye, "God is Out There." We nodded in agreement. We had found a kindred spirit. The long drive home was made shorter for me as I pondered the full meaning of what he said. God is certainly in each of us, but also we are in God.

We have to keep working to be nature's neighbor in many practical and challenging ways. The good news is we can follow Mary Oliver in focusing on our jobs of "loving the world" and "standing still and learning to be astonished." As we relax our grip on superficial approaches to nature, we free ourselves for the kind of childlike wonder and kinship with nature that inspires placing toy safety cones around a dead cat in the road. We may enjoy a liberating humility and unabashed delight through our fuller connection to the world. Through the Spirit, we may move with the animating and sustaining knowledge that "God is Out There." Amen.