

April 16, 2023

Sacred Earth: We See God in Creation

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If we were to share our favorite photographs on our phones, we'd likely see endless pictures of our kids, grandkids, the family gathering last Christmas, the Fourth of July picnic, and pets – lots of pets. Some of us would have pictures of muscle cars and baseball games. Others would have pictures of favorite restaurants, the best burgers we've ever eaten, happy times in happy places, maybe with happy beverages with little umbrellas. But most, if not all, of us, would have pictures of sunrises and sunsets, waterfalls and mountains, oceans, lakes, and forests. We'd have pictures of places we've been in the world that we'd return to in a second. Most, if not all, of us, could share favorite photos of our vast creation that takes our breath away.

This, of course, raises an important question: Why? What is it about our experiences with the natural world around us that connects us so intimately with the Creator? I'll tell you right up front that I think God has a purpose for this. It's the gift of our spiritual wiring. It's intentional on the part of our Creator!

The Creator has created us to appreciate the stunning beauty all around us because our Creator wants to be known, seen, heard, smelled, touched, and even tasted in the creation.

In 2014 the Pew Research Center in Washington DC published the findings of their landmark Religious Landscape Study. It revealed that even people with no religious affiliation reported that the outdoors was where they had an experience of the Spirit/ of God... that was unmediated and unfettered, uncomplicated by dogma and doctrine.

In the yellow, pink, and white petals of the Minnesota Lady Slipper, in the vast expanse of the Grand Canyon in Colorado, in the quiet meandering of the headwaters of the Mississippi, people directly experience the closeness of God's presence in a way that nothing else can.

In the beauty of the sunrise in the Eastern skies of Apple Valley and the sun setting behind the Prince of Peace cross tower, we experience an awesome, transcendent God who has given us this sacred earth to enjoy and nurture.

We're beginning a short series called Sacred Earth. The guiding narrative for the next three weeks is that our connection with the earth grounds us in our faith because caring for God's creation helps us understand God. We'll consider how the seemingly insignificant decisions we make each day can greatly impact the environment around us. We'll talk through some very practical ways to improve and protect the creation that God entrusts to our care. Today we'll explore the majesty of God's creation and why our earth is intrinsically worthy of our careful stewardship, not just for our benefit but for the blessing of the entire world. We're also making available to you the bold and comprehensive social statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, to which this congregation belongs, acknowledges that we are part of God's magnificent creation, that we are connected with every other part of that creation: all living creatures, plants, trees, every kind of growing thing, the climate, and the minerals in the ground we walk upon. There are rich spiritual lessons to be learned in the lifelong process of recognizing our connection to the earth, our place in the ecological web of life, and celebrating the gift that we can know God through deeply knowing and experiencing creation.

Passages in scripture that celebrate God's creative presence are as numerous as the photos on our devices.

In Genesis 1:31, we read, "God looked over everything God had made; it was so good, so very good!"

In Psalm 19:1, we read, "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork."

From the beginning, God intended for all humankind to know God by experiencing creation's wonder, power, and beauty.

Later, in the book of Psalms 95:3-7, we read this: "For the Lord is a great God and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed. O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our

Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand."

And in Psalm 104:24-25, the Psalmist writes, "What a wildly wonderful world, GOD! You made it all, with Wisdom at your side, made earth overflow with your wonderful creations. Oh, look—the deep, wide sea, brimming with fish past counting... the sea, teeming with creatures innumerable, living things small and great!"

Again and again, we see that God's heart intended for all humankind to know God by experiencing the wonder, power, and beauty of creation. When we look around at all of the beauty in the world and acknowledge God as the Creator, that everything we have is a gift from God, and that we can see God in creation, that changes how we treat the created order. How we understand the environment as a gift directly reflects how we understand God. To fail to care for the gift that God has given us is to fail to acknowledge God as the Creator.

In the book of Romans [1:20], the Apostle Paul captures the essence of experiencing God in nature when he writes, "For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see God's invisible qualities—God's eternal power and divine nature. So, they have no excuse for not knowing God."

But with awareness comes responsibility. God has set us in charge – has made us stewards of the beautiful world around us. God has called us to care for this sacred earth. So here's the reality: If we're not careful, we'll miss what's right in front of us. And God is always right in front of us. So how does that happen? How do we miss God's wonder, power, and beauty in creation? A couple of ways. First, we go about our routines without wonder. We've let ourselves become so busy that our over-developed schedules determine what we look at - what we hear, what we smell, feel, and even taste. Life becomes so routine and monotonous that the wonder, power, and beauty disappear. English writer and philosopher G.K. Chesterton responded brilliantly when he wrote,

"Grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun, and every evening, "Do it again" to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately but has never got tired of making them. It may be that [God] has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our [heavenly] father is younger than we. The repetition in nature may not be a mere recurrence; it may be a theatrical encore."

What happens is that we think nothing of missing everything – we miss the forest AND the trees. Unless we train ourselves to slow down and observe the beauty around us, we miss God's endless sermon through creation.

Consider this: because we walk less and drive more, we miss so much between Point A and Point B. And God is always between here and there. Think of the last time you were in a hurry to get somewhere. You hopped in the car and raced off. You got to where you were going, did what you were there to do, then hurried back home. Maybe you opened the garage door, drove in, and lowered the door without noticing the beauty all around you – including the neighbors, each one created in God's image.

When we do that – and we all do that, we close the door on opportunities to experience God in the lives of our neighbors; we don't see how the buds on the trees are ripening, we don't notice the robins in the trees, the clouds in the sky. Not only that, but when we stop to think about it, we can't even remember how we got to where we went in the car in the first place. So, it's no wonder that when we do head out of town for a weekend and get into the wilderness and look up at the night sky, the only words we might have are "that's amazing," to say nothing of expressing gratitude to God for the billions of stars. We miss the forest, and we miss the trees.

The words of the prophet Isaiah 40:25-26 come to mind: "So—who is like me? [God says...] Who holds a candle to me?" says The Holy One. Look at the night skies: Who do you think made all this? Who

marches this army of stars out each night, counts them off, calls each by name - so magnificent! so powerful!—and never overlooks a single one?"

Friends, we can know God through deeply knowing, experiencing, and caring for creation. How do we do that? Let's get practical. Let me suggest a few spiritual habits and disciplines you practice this week.

First, Be Quiet.

In today's world, we are bombarded with noise. In the urban and suburban areas, we live with the constant hum of the traffic on the highway, car horns on the streets, and sirens in the neighborhoods. In the rural areas, we live with the constant distant natural noise of land developers and hunters. In our offices, we live with "white noise," a constant hum that camouflages the voices and conversations of people gathering, meeting, and having conversations in open areas. In our homes, we live with the constant noise and distraction of the sounds of television, children, cooking, and water running. As a result, our lives are filled with noise.

So, how can we be more aware of the presence of God in our noisy, busy lives? How can we be attentive to the whisper of the Spirit each day? There's a passage in the book of 1st Kings [19:11-12] where Elijah is at his wit's end, seeking God's direction, hope, and peace. His life had become so noisy that he couldn't see or hear from God. So, the LORD said to Elijah, *"Go out and stand before me on the mountain...."* And as Elijah stood there, *the LORD passed by, and a mighty windstorm hit the mountain. It was such a terrible blast that the rocks were torn loose, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, there was a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. But after the fire, there was the sound of a gentle whisper."*

The point here, in part, is that while we can certainly know God in creation, it's not always going to be some huge earth-moving moment with a flashing neon sign. Instead, it might be something we could only experience by slowing way down.

So, here's a practice to help us do that. Sit quietly in a quiet room at a quiet time of the day. Try to become more aware of everything in the room. Notice the sounds, the silence, the creaks, the wind outside or lack of it, a draft, the humidity, the aroma, the temperature, your body, the furniture, the light, each chair, fabric, texture, color, and how these things make you feel. Try to notice those things. Next, consider what else is in the room that you cannot see — radio waves, television waves, microwaves, cellular phone conversations. We can know God through deeply knowing and experiencing creation when we settle into the quiet spaces of our lives.

Second, Go Outside.

Connecting with the creation and being reminded of God's goodness is a powerful way to motivate ourselves and others to care for what's around us. Research shows that spending time in creation is so good for us in many ways – mentally, physically, and spiritually. This has ancient roots in scripture. In Psalm 8:3-9 the Psalmist writes what many of us have experienced. *When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers— the moon and the stars you set in place— what are mere mortals that you should think about them, human beings that you should care for them? Yet you made them only a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor. You gave them charge of everything you made, putting all things under their authority— the flocks and the herds and all the wild animals, the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea, and everything that swims the ocean currents. O LORD, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth!*

It's fascinating to me that we can encounter the Creator of the universe through our physical senses and that it's possible to encounter God through what we hear, see, smell, feel, and even taste. Again, ancient Wisdom bears this out. King David writes in Psalm 34:8, *"Open your mouth and taste, open your eyes and see— how good GOD is. Blessed are you who run to him."*

So, friends, Go outside! Set aside some time this week to be outside. Be open to how you hear, see, smell, feel, and even taste God's presence. Give thanks for what you experience in what God gives you as a gift at that moment. Look at the gift of your home; look at the gift of the landscape around

your neighbors' homes. Notice the plants and trees. Be aware of the aroma of things coming to life all around you. And then, share with a friend or family member what you noticed, what you saw, heard, and experienced. Give thanks to God for creating such a precious and amazing world.

Third, Commit to One Thing for One Year.

Sometimes trying to do too much can feel overwhelming. The key to this partnership is to ease into it on a small scale. Just commit to doing one thing for one year. For example, a woman from Australia challenged herself to refrain from buying new clothes, shoes, or accessories for twelve months. She acknowledged in an interview that we make daily decisions about the kind of world we want to live in by how we choose to spend our money - not just in what we consume, but how much. Her decision to stop buying new clothes became a spiritual discipline prompting her to pursue abundant life in God rather than in an abundance of things. There are many ways to embrace these habits that help us draw near to the Creator.

For example, Kevin committed to turning off the lights in rooms where no one was sitting.

Lisa brought her bags to the grocery store, and Patrick decided to walk instead of always driving everywhere. So, this week, set an intention. Think of a few things you could do to make a small imprint. Then choose one thing to do for one year.

Finally, Pray.

We certainly do not have all the answers to the many challenges facing our world today, which can feel overwhelming. A good place to start is with prayer. You could pray in your own devotional time, around the dinner table as a family, or invite your faith community or small group to pray for God's creation. The renowned early 20th-century theologian, pastor, and seminary professor Walter Rauschenbusch penned a prayer that captures the essence of knowing God through deeply knowing and experiencing creation.

O God, we thank you for this earth, our home; for the wide sky and the blessed sun, for the salt sea and the running water, for the everlasting hills and the never-resting winds, for trees and the common grass underfoot. We thank you for our senses by which we hear the songs of birds, and see the splendor of the summer fields, and taste of the autumn fruits, and rejoice in the feel of the snow, and smell the breath of the spring. Grant us a heart wide open to all this beauty, and save our souls from being so blind that we pass unseeing when even the common thorn bush is aflame with your glory, O God our Creator, who lives and reigns forever and ever.

- Walter Rauschenbusch, *The Beauty of Nature*