

## Jesus the Outdoorsman

I imagine we're all familiar with what Martin Luther, the great German reformer, said about revelation:

- two Books of God:

The book of creation

The book of scripture

Both point us to universal truths, to God, to our place in the world.

So Today I'd like to read from both these books.

I'm giving you the heads up right at the start b/c I'm going to start with the book of creation before moving on to the book of scripture and the gospels in particular.

So opening the book of creation.

Want to start with your own experience of this book — a dip into your own lived story of this book.

If you'll humour me — lead you in a wee imaginary exercise.

Ignition - composition of place....this place is your childhood happy place in nature.

Take a moment - find yourself in a particular place. Could be backyard, a place you went on vacation. Could be a park down the street. Only rule is has to be safe - nothing conflictual happened there. If you can't find that place then pick a place from adult life.

Like you're watching the opening scene of a movie - let that place appear in your imagination.

What do you see?

What do you hear? Smell? Touch?

What time of day?

What season?

Finally - what do you feel? Take a deeper breath - ribs expand - let that feeling get a little bigger in you.

Have time to name that place in the discussion in a little bit. So bookmark your place in your personal creation story.

Now like to give a snapshot of my particular bit of creation down in South Surrey on the unceded territory of the Semiamhoo people, to a place called Kingfisher Farm (shared with Anne and 5 other families). It's a little 10-acre farm situated between the two border crossings. On the northeast corner of the little farm there's a forest. It's a small patch of trees really; semi-trucks can be heard barrelling down the roads that border two sides of this small Eden. But despite it's diminutive size this woodland packs a bio-diverse

punch. On the woodland path that runs through this patch of forest I have encountered white tail deer, an American beaver, red-legged frogs, river otters, rough skinned newts and birds of copious variety from owls to warblers to heron flying in cruciform overhead. And then there are the trees –towering Western Red Cedars and magnificent Douglas firs the oldest of which dates from the 1700's.

In the fall, As I walk amongst these trees I brake spider webs with my face. In the fall, when the spiders have grown to the size of coins I walk with a stick, held out like a machete, allowing me to hack my way through the gossamer threads, a hacking which sends the spiders sailing like trapeze artists to safer shores under twigs or leaves. But in spring and early summer I let my face lead the way. The light is usually so dim I don't see the webs coming, but I walk on anyway, until strings of web and pencil-point-sized spiders dangle from my head like Hasidic curls, imply a vow.

And this is my vow: to map my place with my walking. To, every day, wake to the gratuitous wonders served up by the hand of a generous Creator. To breath in creation, and in that breathing find myself restored, recalibrated, more like the human I want to be--calm, centered, kind.

It sounds very Walden Pond Wonderful, doesn't it? Walk in the wood, and, voila, a new saner, more spiritual self. It sounds so Walden Pond Wonderful, that even I, an every day forest walker, am tempted to roll my eyes and get on with the daily work of making the world a better place. Get on with the task of becoming more like Jesus.

But what if I told you that both science and Jesus back me up on this one? What if I told you that walking in woods lowers the stress hormone cortisol in the brain, while at the same time increasing cerebral blood flow, immune defense and overall mental health -- all health benefits that the same amount of walking in the city or on a treadmill do not confer. This is true -- studies have shown it!

This is why in the mid to late 1800's doctors and hospital administrators built tuberculosis sanatoriums near woodlands. Patients who spent time under trees got well faster and in greater percentages than patients in the city sanatoriums. Recent studies have shown that even if people can't walk or sit under trees, just being near or seeing plants has health benefits. In a fascinating ten-year study at a Pennsylvania hospital it was shown that patients recovering from gallbladder surgery in rooms with a forest view recovered remarkably faster and used less pain medication than patients recovering from the same surgery in rooms with views of brick buildings. A Norwegian study showed that office workers with a view of a plant (not even a whole forest, but just one solitary house plant) recorded fewer sick days than officemates with no view of a plant.

The studies and pro-plant findings go on and on and have been applied to everything from ADHD (yes, forest walking reduces symptoms in children) to depression and high blood pressure and road rage (yes, yes, yes in reduction of symptoms and incidents). Why do plants make us healthier and happier? The answer is long, but it has to do with things like the aromatic chemicals evergreen trees emit, as well as the negative ions, those charged molecules found in abundance in forests and near moving water, both of which promote the release of happy hormones and antioxidants in humans. Besides the physiological benefits, a recent theory on the plant-brain relationship centers around a psychological benefit dubbed the “provocation of fascination” effect. In other words – forests incite fascination, aka wonder.

And wonder is psychologically good for us. It is also good for those around us. A study in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology shows empirically that people who participate in wonder-inducing activities are more immediately altruistic. In other words, people who regularly look at trees or the night sky are more likely to make their world a better place.

None of this should come as a surprise. Two thousand years ago Jesus called his followers to become as little children. Have you watched a little child in nature lately? It's a wonder-fest. It's an emotionally recalibrating, kindness-inducing wonder-fest. Not only did Jesus call his followers to become like little children, he encouraged them to become bird watchers and botanist. Remember? Consider the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. We'll get to that a little bit later on, but for now I'd like to suggest that Jesus's own life modelled the goodness of a daily personal encounter with creation.

And so we come to the Book of Scripture, which as it happens includes over 1,000 verses that mention creation. As you know this book starts with the Hebrew creation story. In this story a refrain appears at the end of each day of creation: and it was good, tov, and it was good. Days 1 - 5: and it was good.

But then on Day six, when you have the creation of cows, and whales and nematods and as it happens: humans - everything mammalian, reptilian, and amphibian -- when you have all of it all together, including all the light and darkness and water and flora from the previous 5 days - when you have the whole web of creation interconnected and in balance, we find God saying it not just good, but it is tov, tov, tov. It is very good!

And of course it is. It is so good that the oxygen we are breathing in this room right now was emitted by the douglas firs and western red cedars in Stanley park a few days and even a few hours ago. And the CO2 we are breathing out will be metabolized by the

boxwoods and heather in the ornamental planters on commercial drive a few from now. And this is good, good, good.

But let's get back to Jesus.

In the scholarly and popular literature on a Christian consideration of creation, there is a bit of a gap when it comes to Jesus. For those of us with a bias toward a kinship with creation it would be handy if Jesus had extended the sermon on the mount to include prohibitions on pollution or over consumption. You know, right after he said, "You've heard it said an eye for eye, but I say, turn the other cheek," it would have been nice if he had added, "You have heard it said that you shall have dominion over the earth, but I say care for the animals and the plants."

Or it would be handy if we could draw upon the apocryphal Infancy Gospel of Thomas in which a five-year-old Jesus makes clay pigeons on a river-bank and brings them to life by breathing on them and then watches with delight as they flutter off in the distance. But Jesus didn't say those words, and as far as we know he didn't breath life into clay pigeons.

Nevertheless, if we pay attention to Jesus' life as recorded in the Gospels, we can learn a lot.

First is the significance of his preferred title: Son of Man, which is recorded as being used by him more than 80 times in the gospels. It's both a play on Daniel 7 and his role as messiah, but also a play on Son of Adam- from Hebrew Adama meaning dirt or red clay. Adam from adama. Human from humus, signifying his identification with creation as a human creature.

Second, and where we will spend most of our time is Jesus's own interaction with creation, which was such that I would like us to consider Jesus an outdoorsman. Of course, I don't mean Jesus in camouflage with a bird call and a rifle. I mean Jesus, a man whose stories and own life are primarily set in the outdoors.

Consider if you will: Jesus was born outside (in a cave surrounded by animals) and died outside. He begins his ministry outside, first in a river at his baptism, where an animal (a dove) marks the anointing of his ministry; and then in the wilderness, where Mark's gospel says "wild animals were his companions and angels attended to him." His work and teaching are physical and earthy. Besides being inside for meals, and a few gatherings, the Gospel narratives almost exclusively place Jesus outside, where he

does all sorts of earthy things: from touching bodies. To walking on water. To multiplying fish and loaves. To using spit and dirt to heal.

He preaches on mountainsides and on the water from a boat. When he needs the peace and companionship of God, he slips away to the shores of a lake or to a hillside. You never find a passage that says, Jesus got up early, hunkered down in the corner, threw his prayer shawl over his head and prayed. No, instead you have passages like Mark 1:35, When it was still dark Jesus got up early and went outside to pray. It seems like half the time the disciples don't know where Jesus is because he's wandering around outside!

So if Jesus lived his ministry life mostly outside it's no wonder that most of his stories are set outside. His parables and teaching are filled with sheep, goats, fish, fields, flowers, birds, bread, yeast, pearls, seeds, sand, rocks, floods, vines, vineyards, thorn bushes, thistles, wine, water, wheat, wolves, and foxes. Almost all of Jesus's stories have a common setting: the Galilean countryside. and most often have the theme of the good news of the Kingdom's coming, which is often about bounty and a reversal of fortunes,.

This theme of bounty and unexpected grace is played out again and again in Jesus' agrarian stories, where nature is not just a backdrop but a metaphor for how God's kingdom comes--it is like a tiny seed that turns into the largest of trees. It is also a picture of how nature works. Jesus saw creation as a place charged with the "grandeur of God" to borrow a phrase from Gerard Manley Hopkins.

So what does all this tell us about Jesus? How can seeing this obvious thing about Jesus--that his preferred places of prayer and teaching as well as his preferred choice of setting and metaphor was the stuff of the outdoors--how can recognizing this, help us see Jesus and creation afresh

To answer this question we must start with why Jesus was hanging out in the outdoors in the first place.

And the answer to this question is quite obvious: Besides the fact that there were no football stadiums for large public gatherings, Jesus discovered wisdom and the presence of God in Creation. Perhaps the reason he was able to produce all those parables seemingly on the spot was because he had already wandered the hills and lakesides as an invisible and unknown young man. He had already looked around at the birds and the fields and the flowers, seen and heard both the oppression of his people, but also the voice of Divine Love.

So way before Jesus ever said, "Consider the lilies of the fields," he himself considered the lilies of the fields. Particular real lilies in particular real fields. Jesus would not have instructed us to do something he himself was not doing.

Jesus found refreshment and reorientation in creation

It seems obvious from his "consider the lilies and the birds of the air" passage, that he found not just emotional refreshment, but spiritual refreshment as well. Creation itself was the arena of God's action and care. In his considering, he saw that God cared for these seemingly insignificant things--wildflowers that were a dime a dozen, bits of vegetation that could be trampled upon without thought. God cared for these little vulnerable things. God clothed them in beauty beyond even what a king could afford. And if God cared for something as fleeting as a flower, how much more would he care for him? That word "consider" in Greek, can also be translated "apprentice yourself unto". Live like the flowers! Let them be your mentors and teachers. Let them be a model and influence in your life for the sake of a more peaceful way of living.

A modern rendition of this consider the birds and lillies verse was written by Wendell Berry in poetic verse. See if you can pick up the same message in Berry's version:  
**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**

**for fear of what my life and my children's lives might be, I go and lay down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water and the blue 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 waters. 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.**

**Consider the birds says Jesus. Consider the wood duck says Wendell berry.**

With regard to God's interaction with nature, an observant Jew, Jesus was following a tradition that saw God in creation. Jesus's biblical ancestors encountered God in an oak tree, a burning bush, a cloud, a mountain, a stone pillow, a raven, and a gentle wind (to name a few). They didn't confuse these things with being God, but saw them as places where the divine could show up.

Is it any wonder given Jesus' affinity for and observation of creation then that when Mary found Jesus in the garden after the resurrection she mistook him for the gardener? There's only one occurrence with no explanation from Paul or another New Testament writer, so we're left to surmise for ourselves. Could it be that she mistook him for the gardener because he was gardening? Who knows! It's certainly the most logical and

straight-forward explanation and it jives with Paul's passages later in the New Testament especially in Colossians 1 with all things reconciled in Christ. But whether Jesus was really pulling weeds or not is a bit beside the point, his whole life points to his right relationship with all of creation, both as a place for his own spiritual nurture and a place of and for ministry.

Jesus, son of God and son of Adam, who when he was a little boy surely played in the dirt and perhaps made clay pigeons on a river bank. Jesus who grew up under the tutelage of Joseph, working with wood and perhaps building furniture or even houses. Jesus who ate olives and bread and honey and drank wine and water and sometime water that he turned into wine. Jesus who, when the time came to enter into the calling of his ministry, announcing the coming of the Kingdom, where all are invited to the banquet table of God -- when it came time for all this he chose a title that pointed to his solidarity with humanity and creation: Son of Man. Second Adam. Second Dirt person.

Creation was not a backdrop to his work. It was a part of it, just as he was part of creation. I believe he found solace, and encouraged his followers to find solace in watching the birds and considering the flowers b/c they spoke to the interconnectedness of all things -- they pointed to Day Six of Creation - tov, tov, tov. All things held in the love of God, all things on heaven and on earth, as Colossians 1 states, reconciled in Christ. So...I walk in the woods because life is hard. It is beautiful and fascinating, but hard and the news is scary, and left to my own devices I can easily descend into ego-centric narratives. I can become selfish and ruminating and tempted toward despair. Frankly, I need all the serotonin and negative ions I can get. I also need the profound spiritual benefit that comes from finding my place as a creature in creation. I need the recalibration that comes from considering the birds of the air and the lilies in the field, knowing that God's face is shining on me just as God's face is shining on all that God created. Like Jesus, I need to experience the nearness of God in creation.

So, as we close, I wonder if you'll humour me again —

Close eyes and return to your own childhood place. Allow your breath to be a bridge back to that place. Noticing inhale and exhale - making space for imagination. See again what's around you. Hear again. Are there birds? Are there flowers? Allow the sense of the place to be felt right now in your body.

And now invite you to welcome a sense of the divine in that place. Maybe Jesus comes and is with you. Maybe the Spirit in the form of an animal like a Dove or just a general sense.

Perhaps a conversation happens, or perhaps there's an action (embrace or something else).

Let it unfold like you're watching a movie and see what happens.

Going to be quiet for a few minutes as you invite the sense of divine presence to be felt in your imagination in that place.

And then I will close us in prayer in about 4 minutes.