Comments to St. Thomas Church – Season of Creation, 2020-09-27

Week 3: Wilderness

Thank you, everyone, for welcoming me into your community today, and for including me in your celebration of the Season of Creation.

I feel particularly privileged to have been present to hear Kyle's thoughts last week. His interpretation of nakedness (and the realization of nakedness) as an act of separation of humankind from the natural world is one that I've been thinking about all week. I think it has particular relevance to the idea of "wilderness" and the way we as humans have conceptualized wilderness, at least in our Western cultures. And, of course, that is also the focal theme of this Sunday in <u>this</u> Season of Creation.

Now I have to admit to having been totally bewildered when I read today's readings as an assembled set: couldn't whoever put together the liturgy have found readings that are more comprehensible, that have clearer messages for us to use as inspiration in a troubled time? But it occurs to me that it is this "*unsettling*" that helps to evoke the idea of wilderness. Joel describes a time of ruin, when the comforts of society, civilization, have failed us; the "settled" relationship between human society and the natural world has been ruptured. And to me, Paul's lament in Romans reflects the pain of an *unsettled* relationship between humankind and the natural world – and a yearning for reconciliation. And to <u>this</u> pagan (thinking back to Kyle's suggestion that we rediscover how to be pagan), I notice immediately the language in the reading from Matthew that celebrates Jesus' baptism by reference to his introduction to - and welcoming by - the natural world: the heavens open up and the spirit descends like a dove, as Jesus wakes from the water and enters into a new relationship with creation – immediately following, of course, he enters the wilderness…

I understand that "wilderness" in Biblical tradition has at least two associations: on the one hand, the idea evokes a desolate, abandoned place beyond human settlement – or even inhabited by evil spirits: a place inhospitable to humans. In this sense, wilderness can then be seen as a place of trial, or possible purification. It is interesting to think of such a wilderness as a place that can be chosen (as in Matthew), or a place one can be exiled to – which links to the thoughts Kyle shared with us last week: to be expelled from the garden meant wandering in this wilderness – humans cut off from their natural place as part of an ordered "home" in nature.

The other understanding, however, evokes images of freedom: places beyond the reach of the city or village, and its rules and social norms. I find it interesting to reflect on how this dual meaning is reflected in our history as a people here in North America – and carries through into our own times. It is my thoughts on <u>this</u> theme that I hope to share with you this morning.

Within the last year, three of my reads speak to each other and to this idea of wilderness in provocative ways:

Mary Oliver, in "Upstream" recounts a moment in her childhood when she became "lost" in the wild:

"I walked, all one spring day, upstream, sometimes in the midst of the ripples, sometimes along the shore. My company were violets, Dutchman's-breeches, spring beauties, trilliums, bloodroot, ferns rising so curled one could feel the upward push of the delicate hairs upon their bodies. My parents were downstream, not far away, then farther away because I was walking the wrong way, upstream instead of downstream…."

She continues: "If this was lost, let us all be lost always. The beech leaves were just slipping their copper coats; pale green and quivering they arrived into the year. My heart opened, and opened again. The water pushed against my effort, then its glassy permission to step ahead touched my ankles. The sense of going toward the source. *I do not think that I ever, in fact, returned home*." (4-5)

Robin Wall Kimmerer, in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, grapples with the struggle we modern Americans seem to be having regarding our relationship to the wilderness in the form of a natural world in crisis: "When my students learn about the latest environmental threat," she recounts, "…They say 'If people only knew…" "If people only knew… then they would, what?" she asks. "I honor their faith in people," she says, "but so far the *if-then* formula isn't working. People *do* know the consequences of our collective damage, they *do* know the wages of an extractive economy, but they don't stop. They get very sad, they get very quiet…" (327-8)

Earlier in the same book, Kimmerer reflects on the meaning of becoming indigenous to place: "After all these generations since Columbus," she says, "some of the wisest Native elders still puzzle over the people who came to our shores. They look at the toll on the land and say, 'The problem with these new people is that they don't have both feet on the shore. One is still on the boat. They don't seem to know whether they're staying or not.' This same observation," she continues, "is heard from some contemporary scholars who see in the social pathologies and relentlessly materialist culture the fruit of homelessness, a rootless past…" "What happens when we truly become native to a place, when we finally make a home?" she asks. (207)

In *Erosion: Essays of Undoing*, Terry Tempest Williams similarly grapples with our relationship to our wilderness: "Remove our national parks and wildlands from the United States and what remains?" she asks, then responds: "An intolerable and lonely self-constructed world without the wisdom and beauty of a landscape much <u>wiser than we are</u>." "We need human endeavor and intelligence," she says, "but we also need the intelligence of the wild – the millennial authority of redwood trees, the forbearance of bison, and the lyrical sermon of a wood thrush at dawn."

When I was an undergraduate student, I took a course that has stuck with me ever since, called: "The Wilderness as an Idea in American History." It was my first exposure to these themes, and what we discovered in that seminar was the way we had created ourself as a people in that relationship between ourselves, and our "civilized" pasts, and the confrontation with the unknown "wild."

Frederick Jackson Turner notably advanced his "Frontier Thesis" in 1893, with "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," which he read at the Chicago World's Fair. We were a people defined by our confrontation with the wilderness: what would happen when that wilderness was exhausted? He asked.

Of course, the National Park system had already gotten its start by that time - in 1872, with the establishment of what would become Yellowstone National Park. This re-creation of a "wilderness" – largely along romantic lines of an unspoiled place where we can go to experience the freedom of nature – had its ugly side, as it required the expulsion of the peoples who had made these areas their homes for centuries, if not millennia.

Yesterday was National Public Lands day – a celebration I had been unaware of until one of my student interns suggested it as a reasonable cause for the Albert Schweitzer Institute to celebrate. Schweitzer – a European – developed his ethic of a "reverence for life" in response to his sense of disquiet with the direction of European civilization. He bemoaned the excessive materialism of that civilization, and the tendency toward violence in the Europe of his time. His epiphany came in an apocryphal scene on the Ogowé river in current-day Gabon. He had been grappling with the challenge of finding a universal ethic that could redeem mankind, and it came to him in *his* wilderness at dusk, as his boat turned a bend in the river and revealed the scene of a group of hippopotamuses bathing. It was, for him an "unexpected discovery, like a revelation in the midst of intense thought," he said. His awe in that moment translated into what he hoped would be his lasting contribution to posterity.

So as we prepared to celebrate National Public Lands Day, we conducted an exploration of the many ways we have surrounded ourselves with bits of the wild, and summoned them into our active imagination as a people. And this brings me to the beautiful creation that graces the neighborhood around St. Thomas': Edgerton Park.

I have the privilege of serving as the president of the Edgerton Park Conservancy, which looks after the park. A year ago, we completed our Landscape Framework Plan. My colleagues on the Conservancy Board contributed immensely to the research of the original design of the park – which is not natural, but rather a created celebration of "the wilderness." The main lines of the park derive from The Picturesque, the 18th Century European aesthetic that encouraged a "painterly approach" to landscape, and abandoned the straight line in favor of a continuous S-curve: "Strict architectural geometries" were "abandoned" in Edgerton, "in favor of rugged and naturalistic forms in order to create idealized scenes… The resulting landscape is a kind of 'hyper-nature' that presents an exaggerated condition in order to create a scenic experience." (17)

“The Pastoral,” a landscape movement from the turn of the 19th century is reflected in Edgerton’s evocation of Andrew Jackson Downing’s “vision for a new American landscape [that] merge[s] rough, agrarian scenery of frontier farms sprouting from wilderness with tranquil, genteel landscapes in which art and nature are in perfect balance.” (19).

When the Brewster family completed the re-working of their land in 1909, they created an idealized landscape that romanticized the frontier, and brought “wilderness” in close contact to the civility of New Haven, here on the “edge of town.”

So what is our relationship to the wild? To wilderness? How does it still define us? How should we develop this relationship in light of the challenges of our times?

The U.N.’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has warned us that the natural world is disappearing: human use now directly affects over 70% of ice-free land surface world-wide. Doug Tallamy brings these considerations to our neighborhoods: as human farms, lawns and office parks have taken over more and more of our wild places, habitat for non-human life is shrinking. Tallamy suggests that it is no longer good enough to set aside space for “conservation” – we need to “re-wild” the space we are in, by re-introducing native species into our curated landscapes.

For me, then, the ideas introduced by the readings this week: the relationship between human and non-human life - between settled existence and wilderness - are still “unsettled,” in flux – and more important than ever. They also raise the question: what is the wild? Is it really something separate from our settled lives, or do we try to separate it out to make our settled lives more uniform, ordered, predictable? How can we re-wild ourselves? As we celebrate this third Sunday of the Season of Creation, these are the questions that come to my mind.

References

Oliver, Mary. *Upstream: Selected Essays*. Penguin Books. 2019.
Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions. 2015.
Williams, Terry Tempest. *Erosions: Essays of Undoing*. Sarah Crichton Books. 2019.
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