

May 26, 2019

TEXT: [Job 12:7–10, 13](#)

TITLE: Asking for Advice

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

In one of the books I read this week, I stumbled onto this intriguing phrase. It said “the Bible is an outdoors book.” How ironic is that? The bible is an outdoors book, although we almost always read it indoors—inside churches, inside chapels or in quiet rooms in our homes. Yet if you think about it, most of the stories in the bible involve being outdoors. There are the Genesis creation stories and the Exodus stories of Moses being found in the river Nile or the Hebrew people wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. There are the judges and kings fighting battles with their neighbors, Ruth gleaning wheat in Boaz’s field, and Psalms telling how the heavens reflect the glory of God. The New Testament has more urban settings, but even there we have Jesus preaching on a hillside or in a boat on the Sea of Galilee, and dozens of parables about grains of wheat, vineyards ripe for harvest, and the good shepherd who goes searching for the lost sheep.

It changes your perspective on scripture if you think of the bible as an out-of-doors book. We read it differently if we imagine creation—nature—as not just background scenery for bible stories, but rather as an integral part of the faith message scripture is trying to tell us.

Now, I’m an indoors, urban person just like most of you. I like having a roof over my head, a ceiling fan over my bed, and things like storm doors and screens that keep the ants and stinkbugs out of my house. We all like to visit nature—to go for walks, to hike the trails or ride our bikes, to be tourists out in nature, whether that is something exotic like a Grand Canyon expedition or something as mundane as a stroll around our block on a cool May night. Nature is nice “out there,” but scripture keeps prodding us to see nature as “right here” —as part of God’s plan and part of who we are. We may think of ourselves as set apart from nature, but I’m not quite sure God sees things in exactly the same way.

Back in the Middle Ages, a Church of England theologian named Richard Hooker said this great phrase: *There is nothing in all of creation that can say to anything else, I need thee not.* That is a powerful perspective. Imagine what it would mean to say about everyone on this planet, “You are of value to me.” But then go further and imagine what it would mean to say to every creature “You have value to me.” The bible, that great outdoors book, supports this position. When God commanded Noah to build an ark before the great flood, God told him to collect two of every living thing—animals, birds, all creatures great and small. Apart from the logistics involved in this task, not to mention the questionable wisdom of bringing termites onto a wooden ark, the bible is making a point—our salvation is intimately tied to the salvation of all life, all creatures. We are not separate from nature. We are nature and it’s time we starting acting like it.

There are plenty of reasons why this is important, especially given the current conversation about the dangers of climate change. The recent United Nations report is just one example. This document released a couple weeks ago warned us that one million plant and animal species are on the verge of extinction. Thanks to Pittsburgh's own Rachel Carson, birds like the bald eagle were saved through the banning of dangerous pesticides like DDT. But now we are faced with threats of extinction far more pervasive than the DDT crisis. Scientists point to entire ecosystems at risk: coral reefs bleaching and dying, insect life wiped out from aggressive use of chemicals, mammals losing their habitats due to deforestation and human overpopulation. It all feels overwhelming. The more the danger is defined and publicized, the more helpless we feel about fixing things. We've known all this since the 1970s yet politically, nationally, and often personally we have not done nearly enough to reverse this dangerous trend.

I recently read about a small zoo in Cairo that became a laughingstock after customers visiting it realized that their zebras were actually donkeys with white stripes painted on them. The fake zebras' floppy ears and smudged stripes gave them away. It is laughable to imagine this silly stunt, but it points to something sadder—the global loss of wildlife and our superficial, comical responses to this instead of us committing to much-needed, systematic, environmental action.

It is tempting to become pessimistic about the environmental crisis. But pessimism leads to despair, and despair leads to inaction—and that is simply not a faithful response. This is where our “out-of-doors” book becomes so handy. Think of the times Jesus directed us to focus our attention on nature in order to become wiser in matters of faith and life. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6), Jesus said, *Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Creator feeds them... Consider the lilies of the field; they neither toil nor spin, yet even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.* These examples remind us that the same God who cares for the plants and animals is also aware of our needs and cares for us. But the deeper wisdom here is the idea that God's attention is focused on both the human order and the natural order. They are not different categories in relation to God, but one and the same. So how we live with the natural world reflects how we live as God's children.

In the book of Job, we have someone who was struggling hard to understand the ways of life and the priorities of God. Job had false friends come to him with lots of clever explanations as to why Job was suffering. But he pushed back on their supposed wisdom—knowing that human answers will always be partial answers. Frustrated with empty rhetoric, Job cried out that wisdom, counsel and understanding come from God—and if you are looking to gain this knowledge, then here's the best way: *Ask the animals, and they will teach you; listen to the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, the fish of the sea and they will declare what is right to you.* (Job 12:7–10, 13)

In a very real way, thinking about the global environmental crisis from the perspective of plants and animals—asking them for advice, in effect—is the best way toward living into

faithful solutions for the future. Think of it this way. The challenge of addressing climate change is complicated because it requires us to do two things we are not very good at as a species. It requires us to prioritize our actions both on behalf of the poorest people on the planet and on behalf of those who aren't here yet because they have not yet been born. We typically respond to those who shout the loudest and those who are right in front of us. But for this crisis, we have to learn to speak up for those who are poor and act now for the sake of those yet to be born. These are not natural instincts for us—with our “me first” mentality and “let tomorrow take of itself” attitudes—which is precisely why we need to ask for advice from other members of God's family.

This is not an impossible task. Look at the attention we expend on our pets. We can learn to care as much for creatures around us since they too are beloved by God. And we are far from indifferent about the future needs of our children. We can faithfully learn how to act now by reducing carbon emissions and fossil fuel use, stopping plastic pollution and wanton chemical destruction of the land for the sake of the unborn, the grandchildren and great-grandchildren who will inherit the earth. Our children can already see the trajectory of devastation we have unleashed on earth. They, along with the lilies, sparrows, zebras, donkeys, coral and cicadas, are calling us to listen to them and care for God's creation faithfully.

When we read our “out of doors” bible, whenever we see the word “creation” we need to remember that it stands for “all life,” not just a small part of human life on North America. To be made in the image of God has never meant being given permission to exploit the world's resources, but rather we are to embody God's divine benevolence, justice and mercy as we walk gently over the face of this planet, among the birds, fish, flora, and fauna of this amazing world.

One chapter of the bible I encourage you to read every so often is Romans 8. It names our human failings even as it points to our being redeemed by Christ and daily empowered by the Holy Spirit. But it doesn't limit this spiritual conversation to just us. It has a much larger vision of salvation. It says this: *We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now waiting for redemption. [Yet] in hope we are saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope...But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.* (Romans 8:22–25) Take that image to heart. Listen to how nature is groaning and know that we must respond to those pains. Expand your vision to include the creatures around you, and adjust your actions to protect them as you would a member of your family—for that is precisely what they are. Do not give into pessimism and despair, but hold fast to hope—hope that is not yet seen, hope that is grounded in providing for those not yet born; hope that is real for it comes to us from a God who is faithful and just and with us even to the end of the age.

Find a moment to take your bible outside. You'll never be closer to God than in that moment.