EFUMC January 23, 2022 “Christ in Creation”

Psalm 19:1-4; Wisdom of Solomon 13:1-5; Colossians 1:15-20

 Big Sky country: Highway 212 in the Beartooth Mountains, way above the trees. At 10,947 feet, the air is thin, but it’s the closest to heaven I’ve been (looking out over Hell-Roaring Plateau!) When I moved from Iowa to Montana, I couldn’t help but encounter God in Creation because in the Rockies what God has created completely overpowers and outshines anything human beings have created. What was a beautiful Iowa cornfield planted in perfectly straight rows compared to the rows of ragged golden rocks of the Yellowstone River canyon? What were gleaming skyscrapers in cities compared to the snow-covered peaks of Glacier Park? If you ever need a reminder that the creature is not greater than the Creator, I have a mountain pass to take you to.

 Psalm 19 has it: “The heavens are telling the glory of God,” but it’s not just the heavens. The whole earth proclaims God’s handiwork. I found a beautiful expression of this thought in the Old Testament Apocrypha, those unfamiliar writings that come between the Hebrew and Christian scriptures in Catholic Bibles but are left out of Jewish and most Protestant ones. However, they were included in the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible that both Jews and early Christians read.

The Book of Wisdom was written in Greek, not Hebrew, by an unknown Jewish writer, about 50 years before Jesus was born. In the 13th chapter, the author warns people against worshiping the sun or moon or stars—in other words, creatures rather than the Creator. I love the way he puts it:

If through delight in the beauty of these things people assumed them to be gods,

let them know how much better than these is their Lord,

for the author of beauty created them.

And if people were amazed at their power and working,

let them perceive from them

how much more powerful is the one who formed them.

It’s not a bad thing that people have always used visible things to understand their invisible God. As the Book of Wisdom says: “For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator.”

 The Apostle Paul surely knew the Book of Wisdom, for in his letter to the Romans, he writes much the same thing: “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world [God’s] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things [God] has made.” [Romans 1:19-20]

 Jews, Muslims, Native Americans, just about everybody would sign on to the idea that we can see glimpses of the Creator in the Creation. But Christians have an added burden. The question for us is: can we see the Christ in Creation? We are in the season of Epiphany, the word meaning “manifestation,” and we are looking at where Christ is manifest in the world today. I certainly felt the presence and could see a semblance of the glory of our Creator God, way up there on Beartooth Pass. But could I see and where can we see our Redeemer Christ?

 Those questions made most Protestant Christians very skeptical of doing theology out in nature for centuries. For far too long, nature was seen as a distraction from or a corruption of the pure Gospel message of sin and salvation. Back then, human beings looked to Jesus to save them from nature. Now we need him so we can save nature from human beings!

 We don’t need to go to the Apocrypha for the wisdom we need right now. The New Testament has never separated Christ from the Creation; that was our doing. From the first verses in the Gospel of John, we get the good news of how Christ is intimately connected to Creation. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” So, what was the Son doing at the beginning? Exactly what the Father was doing: creating the world.

 Later in John’s Gospel, Jesus says to his disciple Philip, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” [John 14:9] That tells me that wherever we see God in Creation, we see the Christ, too. This is made plain in our third text for today, the letter to the Colossians, which states that *in* Christ, *through* Christ and *for* Christ “all things in heaven and on earth were created.” Christ is “before all things” and in Christ “all things hold together.” For, in Christ dwells all the fullness of God. In other words, everything that God is, Christ is. And through Christ, God reconciles (restores to right relationship) all things. [Colossians 1:15-20]

 This is an incredibly mind-blowing statement. This is a vision of interconnectedness and planetary healing and restoration and salvation that not even the most starry-eyed tree sitters in Humboldt County could come up with. In Christ, we are all connected, not just people, but plants, animals, rocks, rivers, sky, soil: everything.

 Our only challenge is to be able to see this Christ connection in these days that are so darkened by political division, social dislocation, and ongoing environmental destruction.

 I believe that, before we can see Christ holding together the Creation, we have to learn to read nature the same way we learned to read Scripture. You can’t just pick up a Bible and see that Christ is on every page of it. It takes years of living and growing and studying. The same is required before we can see Christ in a tree.

 Here’s how I learned to read nature. Some of you know that when I was diagnosed with cancer in 2015, I wanted to keep up my running routine but kept running into mountain lions in Santa Clara County. It was the height of the drought, and they were hungry and thirsty! I decided it would be better to exercise at Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park in Felton where there are rangers and restrooms. And there began my redwood redemption.

 I called it my “tree therapy” to go along with the chemotherapy. I used my time in the trees to learn from their wisdom and write about my cancer journey. I prayed that my stomach would have a lining as thick as redwood bark before my first infusion. I thought about how trees shed dead needles as I was losing my dead hair. And I longed for the ability to get nourishment from God the way redwoods can drink water from the sky. I posted each reflection with a photo on Facebook. And I’ve collected them into a document that you will be able to access through a link on our webpage. I will let you know when it’s ready and you can send the link to anyone you know who might be needing encouragement as they live with cancer. For anyone who would like to learn how to read Christ in the Creation, let me share one of those posts with you now.

 *Lent in the Trees*

After weeks of "atmospheric rivers" of rain that caused mudslides and road closures in the Santa Cruz mountains, I finally got back to the redwoods on Ash Wednesday, and it was good to be back [in Pogonip, a city park in Santa Cruz that is adjacent to Henry Cowell]. The first thing I noticed was how many trees that had managed to survive the last five years of drought did not survive this winter's storms and floods. How ironic. These trees had suffered so much and had been waiting for the rains for so long. It didn't seem quite right that when the rains finally came, they brought death along with life.

As I climbed over one downed log, considering the suffering of the trees, my mind drifted to the suffering of Christ. And a Scripture came to me, the passage in John's Gospel that reads: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends." [15:13]

I pondered whether trees could lay down their lives for their friends. That may sound like a bizarre question, but not if you are Suzanne Simard, a professor of forest ecology at the University of British Colombia. She has done literally groundbreaking research on the subterranean communication that goes on between trees in a forest. Suzanne studies the microscopic fungi that live in the soil, wrapping themselves around and thereby connecting the roots of trees over a vast geographic area. These so-called mycorrhizal networks of fungi function as a kind of "wood wide web" of communication. Suzanne insists that trees "talk" to each other this way, by sending chemical messages through the network that can, among other things, alert other trees to the presence of invasive predators.

Trees also can nourish one another by sending water and food (in the form of carbon and nitrogen) along this same microbial pathway. In fact, Suzanne's research shows that older trees nourish younger ones and healthy trees nourish sick ones, because every tree is healthier when the whole forest is healthy.

Dying trees play their part, too. When an old tree dies in the forest, it transfers its nutrients to the next generation of trees, to its own offspring and to other species as well. In that sense, you could certainly say that a tree does "lay down its life" for its forest family and friends.

With Suzanne's popular TED Talk in mind, I was finishing my run and heading back to the car when I saw a huge Live Oak tree that had uprooted and toppled over. I marveled at how old it must have been and how long it would take for a tree to grow that big again. Then I remembered that this tree will be laying down its life for its friends for a long time yet. Even though we would say it is as good as dead, in a very real sense, it is still a "Live Oak" tree, still giving life.

Fortunately for us, we don't need fungi to communicate life to those around us. The Spirit has given us a different kind of language: the language of faith, hope and love. These are the essential nutrients that sustain life in our "forest." As long as we are rooted in Christ, we are connected to this life and interconnected with everyone else. No matter how old or sick we get, we can still nurture the young. Even as we are dying, we still have spiritual food to offer. We still have all the essential nutrients—lessons in love, training in faith and reasons for hope—that we can pass on.

 I wrote that on March 6, 2017. Since then, Suzanne Simard has helped me learn to read the Book of Nature and, whether she knows it or not, to see Christ in Creation. And you can learn, too. Just get out in it! Look around at all that beauty, gaze on all that glory, and ask yourself: Where do I not see Jesus, my Lord? [Sing: Have You Seen Jesus, My Lord]