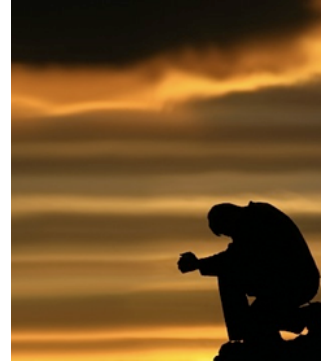
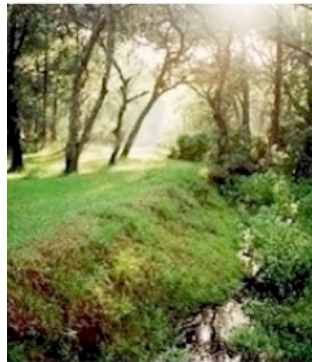




Sermon, October 18, 2020
Rev. Dr. Craig S. Pesti-Strobel
Junction City United Methodist Church

Sermon Series: JP21 – The Way of Ways

Time Alone in the Natural World



Scripture: Matthew 14:22-33

Immediately (after he fed the multitudes, Jesus) made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

²⁸ Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹ He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

"After Jesus had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them." Most of us when we hear the story from Matthew about the disciples in their boat, caught in a storm on the sea of Galilee eagerly listen for the part where Jesus walks on water, and where Peter

Time Alone in the Natural World

attempts to, and falls in. And how we like to quote Jesus: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" It is one of our favorite little morality tales of needing to have faith, presumably so as to move mountains.

But I would like to take a look at the short pithy sentence that I just quoted: "He went up to the mountain to pray, and he was there alone." This sentence forms an interesting bridge between the story of the amazing way in which Jesus showed his disciples to feed thousands of people with very few resources at hand, and the story of the disciples caught in the storm, and Jesus then apparently walking on the water. What is intriguing about this transition in Matthew is the contrast between Jesus seeking a time of solace and spiritual refreshment out in nature, and the disciples terror and fear at what the natural world can stir up. Several of them were very experienced fishermen who for years had worked all along and across the Sea of Galilee. They knew about the storms that come up suddenly, and they knew enough not to chance it. But here they were, fighting the wind and the waves. And then along comes Jesus, not at all concerned about the tempest. Why? I would suggest to you that it is because he spent time in nature, and found strength therein to face the inevitable turbulence that gets stirred up the natural world. To Jesus, it was not "man against nature," as if he were living in a Hemingway novel. Rather, it was humanity in nature, as part of the natural world.

If you read the Gospels closely, you notice how much of the reaction of the disciples as well as figures of authority struggle with Jesus and even balk at his teachings from time to time. When Jesus told his followers to feed the multitudes, they objected, resisted. Jesus and Peter frequently butt heads. The disciples and others experienced faith and the spiritual journey as a struggle of the heart and soul against all sorts of forces and impulses. The flesh itself was something to be conquered and chastised.

Jesus was different. He didn't view the natural body, in its fleshliness, as something to be mortified or conquered. The natural world was not something to be tamed. Part of the abundant life that Jesus came to give involved returning people to their home and place in the blessings of

Time Alone in the Natural World

Creation – the world of nature. Jesus spent time renewing his spirit in nature as a natural means of communing with its very Creator.

Quite often in my ministry I have spoken with people, usually men, who would rather spend time out in the woods hunting, or out on a lake or by a river fishing, or hiking up a mountain than come to church. They would often confess to me that they felt closer to God out in nature. In researching the ministry of Jesus, I have come to believe they got it half-right. Jesus did spend significant amounts of time in the natural world as a means to restore his soul and refresh his mind. After his baptism by John in the Jordan River, Jesus spent time in the wilderness in a time of fasting and prayer. The Gospels record that he was known to depart from the buzz of his disciples and the pressing crowds that followed him to “lonely places” – places that were apart from human habitation.

Spending time alone in the natural world was a way that Jesus used to reinvigorate himself after expending so much personal time and energy in service to others. However, this was always balanced by spending time in fellowship with his disciples, worshipping with them, and engaging in the sort of education and learning that can only occur in human society. The key word here is balance. Jesus balanced the intensity of daily human interactions with the solitude of communion with the natural world.

Humans are as much a part of the natural world as are other animals and plants, trees, rivers, mountains, sun and stars. We have developed over centuries and millennia in direct contact with the natural world, and human psychological health is dependent upon continuous engagement with the rest of creation. However, human civilizations have increasingly become separated and even alienated from the natural world. By losing contact with nature, we humans can forget the fact that we are also creatures. We have a Creator. The human hubris of thinking that we are the authors of our own existence and the final arbiters of our actions arise out of this creaturely amnesia.

Spending time in natural places, and especially wild places can restore us to our place in creation. It works in concert with devotional practices by expanding our vision and exercising our sense of awe and wonder. The

Time Alone in the Natural World

beauty we encounter feeds our souls in ways that we are unable to accomplish out of our own volition. The natural world comes to us as a tremendous gift – a blessing we have not earned and cannot claim to deserve. And so it serves as a tangible experience of God’s grace.

Anyone who has taken time apart to go hiking or camping or even just sitting in a park or garden with no pressing agenda can understand the psychological and emotional benefits that that time apart can provide.

Imagine, for example, that you are sitting in a cabin at a writer’s retreat along a river. Steep canyon walls lift the horizon high above the river. Trees surround the cabin and embrace the river shores on either side. The unrelenting, unresting as well as unhasting pace of the water as it tumbles and trips over the rocks outside the window calls you to a different pace of life. Along this river there is space to think and ponder, permission granted to wonder and consider, room simply to be and not prove yourself. You can drop your pretenses, set aside your feigned self-importance and hang up for a time the demands placed upon you. The trees and rocks and river don’t care if you are the CEO of a multinational company or a garbage collector. Here in this spot in nature you can simply be.

The times Jesus spent in the lonely places of the natural world were just such retreats from *doing* into the depths of *being*. Such time apart serves to settle us back and center us down into the blessed giftedness of life, a gift given to us beyond any consideration of whether we have earned it or deserve it in any way. Time apart in the natural world can return us to the mysteries of grace and providence.

So take time in nature. Spend time quietly sitting in your garden, watching the birds, observing the clouds pass by, the bees visit the flowers. Take a walk in the woods. Do it silently. Rest often. Just look around and take it all in. Sit by a lake or a stream. Let the sounds wash over you. Be still, and be at home. Rest in Creation as a part of Creation. Learn from Jesus the power of some time apart. And find rest and replenishment for your soul.