

Ravished by Beauty
Matthew 8: 18-27
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Wilton Presbyterian Church
Lent Week 5: March 21, 2021

In preparation for the sermon today, I did a little looking into the backgrounds of two people who are credited with major contributions to the modern environmental movement: John Muir and Rachel Carson.

After immigrating from Scotland at age 11, Muir grew up in Wisconsin and later settled in northern California, among the great sequoias. In his early years, he played outside “in the glorious Wisconsin wilderness.” They homesteaded there. He worked the land by day under the hand of a strict father, but also found great delight in hours of playing outside in creeks and meadows, saying that time “shaped his soul” (a good reminder to parents and children of today). At night, even though forbidden by his father, he rose and read books which would give him the foundation and map to guide his future path.

At age 29, he took his skill in machinery to begin work in Indiana. Some viewed his skill at genius level. But one day, while working, a metal file flew up and gouged his eye, piercing his cornea. That event changed forever. For four weeks, he sat in darkness, eye bandaged, not knowing if he would ever regain sight in that eye. It was a period of deep spiritual journey guided by the hand of God, he says. And he spent those long days dreaming of places he wanted to visit... and experience... such as the mythic Yosemite Valley which he’d read had “cascades which batter the earth and trees stretching to the sky.”

Miraculously, his eye healed and his journey shifted to finally lead him to northern California, where he would remain throughout his life living and working near Yosemite and the Sequoias.

Muir's work earned him the title as Father of the Environmental Movement and he became the first president of the Sierra Club.

Rachel Carson's expertise was in the area of marine biology. She was the second woman to be hired by the Bureau of Fisheries. Born in 1907, her life overlapped Muir's by only 7 years, and she too, is credited with having moved the environmental movement forward to the next level. Her nationally acclaimed and award-winning writings such as, *The Sea Around Us* (a life history of the ocean) were major contributions to our view of sea life and coastal ecosystems up and down the Eastern seaboard. In her book *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, she was the first to document the adverse environmental effects caused by the indiscriminate use of pesticides.

Both of these people faced tremendous odds and huge backlash from major industries, which could have stopped them in their tracks. But they used their voices and their visions to realign human vision to be stewards of the earth, not users and abusers of it. Their lives show the power one person can have in not succumbing to fear or misfortune in order to make change, and to reawaken the human spirit to a sense of wonder at the beauty of Creation.

Rachel Carson once said, "The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe, the less taste we shall have for destruction."

Jesus was always at home in creation and appreciated and acknowledged the power of nature. You might say he was at one with nature.

A colleague and friend writes:

It is little known how much John Calvin, the dour Reformer and theologian, is a precursor to contemporary environmentalists. At least he is to me. Calvin once said, "the world is the theater to God's glory." By that he meant humans can perceive and experience the wondrous glory of God through the lens of creation. When describing his own experience - which is exceedingly rare for Calvin - he said about his experience with the earth, he was "ravished by beauty." Later, the theologian, writer and environmentalist Belden Lane wrote a book exploring the earthly spirituality of the Reformed tradition, borrowing Calvin's phrase for the title.

Recently, he says, he was standing by a field bathed in the golden light of dusk. I had responded to an alert that short eared owls had been seen feeding over that field. With only my binoculars, I waited eagerly as if I were waiting upon a sighting of God's glory made visible. There must have been at least 30 other people with very expensive cameras. Perhaps, unknowing, they were waiting, searching for the same. One of them, an inexperienced birder, introduced herself, eager to learn. Within moments, the owls appeared and there was an audible gasp; thirty voices raised in joyful wonderment. The owls soared over the field, dipping and ascending in golden light. People gasped: Wow! Oh my God! Look! Look! The cameras clicked at rapid speed. I believe collectively we were ravished by beauty.

He concludes with these words, "I remain ravished by the beauty. Thanks be to God." (Roy Howard, FB post)

Ravished by beauty. What a mind-expanding phrase. Are you ravished by the beauty of the earth?

John Muir seemed to be constantly ravished by the beauty of creation. After a storm in the lofty mountain forest, Muir exults in the scene with

the words, “The setting sun filled them with amber light, and seemed to say, while they listened, ‘My peace I give unto you’” (The Mountains of California, p. 257, and John 14:27).

Perhaps Jesus was ravished by the beauty of Creation as well.

During the pandemic, so many of us have been confined in body mind and spirit in our homes and in our minds. We’ve had to be. The deadly reach of COVID 19 has been broad and wide and unforgiving in its lasting impact.

Our series, *Holy Vessels, a Series of Recovery*, touches today on the healing of the environment... and in renewing our vision, our role in being stewards of the earth.

This week, the reaction of the crowd in the story is amazement at Jesus’ connection to the cosmic forces of wind and wave. As scientists now try to teach us, all things are connected. We are part and parcel of all creation. Rather than dominion, we are to be a-tuned to all around us. We see the cry of creation in awakened natural disasters, and we must heed the call not to hide in fear, but to work for healing and to continue to open our hearts to the ravishing beauty which is all around for us to see... and to be blessed by such sights and sounds all around us.

While we may have felt stunted this year, perhaps it is an opportunity to refocus, as John Muir did in his months in darkness. We can move forward. We can make changes. We can face storms because we are a people led by the Healer, the Calm-in-the-Storm who can offer us faith in the midst of fear.

Muir once said, “Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul.”

May you find that place today and may your soul be ravished by beauty.