

Easter 3B - 4/26/09
St. David's

There I am, standing on the bank of a swift flowing river. It is an isolated spot, with no sign of human habitation in any direction. The sun is low in the western sky, creating an almost mystical glow across the water. It is stunningly beautiful here, though unlike anything I have seen before. The trees on either side of the river are not like the dense chlorophyll foliage of my youth in eastern America. It also looks little like our own rugged canyon country that surrounds us here, or like a fly fishing river somewhere in the wilderness of the mountains directly to our north. In the midst of these thoughts, I watch as a fish leaps out of the water, 50 feet in front of me. A few seconds later, a second makes a similar leap.

I realize at this point that the solitude I have been experiencing has been broken. I look across the river and see a form moving against the trees. It turns in the direction of the river, upstream a bit from me. As it gets closer, I see it clearly. It is not a human, as I was expecting, but something much larger. It is a bear, a huge brown bear with a slight hump on its back, indicating its membership in the family *ursus arctos horribilis*, commonly called the grizzly. I feel my heart leap as it lumbers closer to the river and then I notice that two more of his species are following him. I become as motionless as the rocks around me, not because I am worried for my safety, but because I am transfixed by the wonder and magnificence of these bears in this place. I sit there in a state of heightened awareness as these bears fish by diving, swatting and leaping for their prey. But just as I am feeling overwhelmed by the scene, something else catches my eye. I see a black dot on the western horizon coming toward us, and I watch as a bald eagle comes into focus. The hair

literally stands up on my arms as I watch him dive down toward one of the bears eating his fish. The eagle snatches the fish with his massive claws, and flies off right past me, heading down river with his catch. I cannot believe I have just seen this, and am overwhelmed with emotion, my body involuntarily shaking. Then...then....I wake up.

Do any of you have recurring dreams? Well, that one is mine. It started when I was a child, becoming more defined as a teenager, and it continued right up until last year. As some of you know, that dream became reality for me last July when Jean and I visited the last state we had not yet been, Alaska. I watched as that exact scene I had dreamed of for so many years actually unfolded in real life, right in front of me.

Why do we have recurring dreams? What do they mean? This dream was always memorable to me, but I still did not really understand why I had it. But now I think I do. I believe that my recurring dream was a calling. It was a deep, internal desire to not just have a specific kind of wilderness experience, but to feel and see the utter magnificence of the presence of God in the natural world. When I actually had the experience last year, I became convinced of that fact. Sitting there with all those bears on the McNeil River was a direct experience of the presence of God. It was and is my Easter experience, my experience of the Risen Christ.

Now there was a time in the history of Christianity when saying such a thing in a church, especially as part of a sermon, would have been heard as sacrilegious and heretical. That time probably began sometime in the fourth century, when Christianity came in contact with the Celtic folk of what we now call northern England and Wales. The Druids descriptions of God being present in the trees and the rocks made Christians from Rome very nervous

and they shut down that kind of talk pretty quickly. They told our Celtic ancestors that such an understanding of God was not Christian at all, and they needed to let go of it if they were going to convert. They explained that God was separate and totally distinct from creation. The church's teaching of the discontinuity between nature and God continued for centuries before it ended...well, the truth is, it has not ended at all. There remains to this day a majority of Christians who find such theology not just heretical but offensive, hearing it as demeaning God. I have, in fact, had people stand up and ceremonially walk out of church after I suggested that God could be found in nature. And my bet is that come this Wednesday, there is a better than even chance you will read a letter to the editor in the Chronicle accusing me of heresy once again.

On this Earth Day weekend, I think it is good for us to explore the roots of the theology that suggests that God is totally distinct and separate from the world and the effect that this teaching has had on our relationship with the planet. In addition, it seems to me that today's Gospel also has something very important to say to us about this.

The earliest historical evidence of a disconnect in the church between Creation and God comes in the first heresy that the church fathers must face. It was called Gnosticism or secret knowledge. Gnosticism was born well before Christianity and despite the fact that it was condemned by the second century church, it continues to exist in many forms today, religious and otherwise. There are many aspects of Gnostic thought, but the part that has most influenced teachings about the relationship between the Earth and God is its dualistic understanding of the cosmos. Gnostics taught that the world was not created by THE God, but by a lesser divinity called a demiurge. Christ came to earth, the Gnostics said, as an

emissary of the real supreme divine being, a being who was far, far away from us. Christ came to offer us this special knowledge that allowed for redemption of the human spirit. Note I said human “spirit” could be redeemed, because Gnostics believed that the flesh could not be saved. They believed that everything material (from the lesser being) was bad and everything spiritual (from the supreme being) was good. Are you with me so far?

While the church taught that such teaching was wrong, in many ways it stuck anyway. This began all sorts of new behavior by Christians. Believing our bodies to be evil, it caused some to wander off into the desert to scourge themselves. This was also the time that martyrdom became the ideal ticket to heaven. Others, like our pal Augustine of Hippo, started writing treatises on the evils of the flesh, like sex. The goal of these Christians was to get out of their skin as soon as possible, so that their spirit could be united with God in some faraway place, separated completely from the evils of the created world.

You won't read this in any church history book, but the reason I believe Gnosticism has never died and continues to play a central role in orthodox theology is because it is so attractive to anyone who is suffering in this world. I am thinking this morning about my own Mom. Today is her birthday and she would have been 73. My mom was a great inspiration to me, living with chronic pain and constant respiratory issues. I miss her and her encouragement so much. But basically, Mom was a gnostic. She saw her material body that gave her so much trouble as evil and could not wait to have only her spiritual part, when she would be united with God far away from here.

I think Gnosticism has assisted us in many ways. It has helped us to be aware of, understand and care for our spiritual natures. But its dualistic way of seeing the world has

also created a radical separation between God and Creation. This has caused much of Christianity to also see the earth as bad, or at least something we need to escape from, suggesting that Christians would be wasting their time if they spent any effort trying to protect this material world. This, as we all know, has caused disastrous results for the health of the earth, and now the health of humanity.

The bizarre thing about all this is that while the church fathers rejected Gnosticism and labeled it a heresy, this one tenet of it became orthodox teaching in the Western church. Body - bad, spirit - good, God up there, Us down here.

This morning, I would like to suggest that the time has finally arrived that we let go of this tenet of Gnosticism once and for all. If we do not, I believe we are doomed as a species and as a planet. But beyond that, it has no theological justification within Christianity. First, from a biblical perspective, Gnosticism is rubbish. Genesis makes it clear that all of creation came from God, and that, in fact, God said that it was all good. The notion that has continued to survive, that spirit is good and material is bad has no theological underpinning. And in fact, the whole idea of Easter flies directly in the face of a theology that suggests that God is only Spirit.

If God is only spirit, why is it so important for all four of the Gospel evangelists to make it clear that Jesus's *body* was resurrected? Because that is the point of Jesus coming to earth. God became human. God loves the world so much that God became a part of the world. The material world cannot be evil, because God is part of it. His bodily resurrection affirms that God is still a part of creation, that God is still here with us in a physical way. In fact, what Easter teaches us is that not only are our physical bodies and all of creation not

evil, not even just good, but sacred. If God is within it, how could it be anything but sacred?

Last week we heard from the Gospel of John, Thomas's need to *touch* the hands and feet of the risen Christ. Why? Because resurrection is all about the connection between God and Creation, God and the material world. Christ is Spirit yes, he can walk through walls. But He is also flesh. He is a material being that Thomas can touch.

Now in today's Gospel, Luke once again makes sure that we understand that Christ is not a ghost figure. "Here," Jesus says. "Look at my hands and feet...touch me and see that I am flesh and bone." To top it off, he then tells us that Jesus eats a piece of flesh, as human an action as possible, the same human action that he engaged in with the disciples before his death and so many times before. Christ is both a spiritual being and a real physical presence here with us as part of creation.

The fact that Christ is experienced both as a spiritual being and also a flesh and bone human being has profound implications in how we understand the relationship between the earth and God. First, it confirms once and for all that Creation is good, but it also takes us much further. No longer can we say that God is just separate and distinct from us. Christ is described as once and for all in the midst of the material world, a part of creation just like you and me.

Easter then, is God's assertion that Creation matters. It is God's assertion that God is here in the world in a real and tangible way. That is why each and every one of us can feel God's presence when we spend time in Creation. That is why I was overwhelmed with emotion and when I took my first step into the dense rain forests around Anan Creek in Alaska. That is why we feel a power deep within us when we sit silently in a slot canyon.

From the perspective of the Earth, what Easter teaches every one of us is that our God is present in a real way in this place. And if that is the case, how could we do anything else but protect it and care for it, just like we care for one another? The Easter story links us in an intimate way with all of the tangible world around us, while also affirming that we are spiritual beings too.

We talk about it all the time. You probably get tired of me saying it. But for Jesus, it was all about the kingdom of God. Certainly, like my mom, that kingdom is something each of us is striving to reach after we have died in the spiritual dimension. But think about those words we say every single week, when Jesus described for us what he meant when he said the kingdom of God. "Your kingdom come, your will be done, ON EARTH as it is heaven. It seems to me then, that is Christ's recurring dream. He envisions the kingdom of God becoming a reality here on earth. He continually dreams of a world where each of us begins to see all of the earth as our neighbor. I now see my own recurring dream as a very tiny version of the dream of Christ.

This then, is also what it means that we are Easter people. Love the earth and the sun and the animals. Love one another and love yourself. See God in each other and in all the world. Care for your spirit as well as your body. Don't just wait for God's kingdom, but help bring it about, right here, in the midst of this wild, wonderful, beautiful earth. That is Christ's dream, it is God's dream and it is all of our dreams. Let us turn those recurring dreams into reality. Amen.