

“Wild Deer-ness”

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Rom. 8:18-27

Matt. 20:1-16

“... creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay
and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”

Rom. 8:21

Let us pray... O God,

In the midst of those times of our lives when we are in uncharted territory,
comfort and strengthen us, inspire and guide us.

Amen

This month, we have been reflecting on themes of the environment
as a source of inspiration for our faith
and a challenge to recognize our responsibility for its care.

Today’s message explores ‘wilderness’...

Traveling in NJ along I-78,

there is an overpass with no access – and no paving;

And that is because it is meant for deer to cross.

There’s been a big problem over the years of overcrowding in northern NJ –
both herds of deer and people living amongst each other
amidst diminishing woodlands and a growing suburbia.

Deer certainly do their share of destructive behavior like eating flowers,
getting hit by cars – and they starve when they can’t find enough to eat.

In recent years, Essex County authorized licensed ‘volunteer sharpshooters’
to cull the herd, and you can imagine this has created quite a stir
in some neighborhoods.

That program has effectively reduced the number of deer
and the number of deer-related auto accidents.

<http://newyork.cbslocal.com/2010/11/10/essex-county-opens-deer-hunt-to-ease-overcrowding/>

However, the deer are still there, which I can verify
from my recent trip up north.

While visiting my brother & his family in the northwestern part of the state,
the first thing we saw that morning was at least four deer
in their backyard – one of whom was a four point-buck.

In contrast, Florida panthers are an endangered species
that live mostly in the southwestern part of our state.

An individual panther needs about 200 square miles to hunt,
but they have lost 95% of what had been their traditional range.

Willard, p.2

Deer are a major part of their diet and their habitat has been affected, too –
so you'd think FL could work out a deal and export a few panthers to NJ.
A side benefit for the panthers is they could get their NJ tourists fresh
rather than have to wait till winter! Just kidding!

http://earthjustice.org/irreplaceable/florida_panther?gclid=CLbLkbOBoqsCFUTs7QodtndrdQ

The larger issue is to ask, “How can civilization live alongside wilderness?” –
which is already a problem and will become a bigger one as time goes on.
How do we preserve the wild places – the wilderness, or the ‘wild-deer-ness’
of our land... and within ourselves?

The love for wilderness is part of our American heritage, but so is the desire
to fill up and conquer empty spaces, to clear trackless wastes,
to tear down forests.

What goes in their place these days are often malls, condos, parking lots,
and in our case, developments –
with golf courses as a welcome exception.

I was hopeful when I heard ethanol – made from corn,
is a renewable resource and a viable alternative to petroleum-based fuels.
I imagined the tearing up of a few of these parking lots, etc.
to make room to plant broad fields of corn and
expand our horizons once again with vistas of growing things.

But then it's been reported ethanol is more expensive to produce than gasoline
and the prospect of using ethanol for fuel has driven up the cost of corn –
which is also a source of food.

And there are concerns about ethanol production linked with air pollution.
Ironic, isn't it? No easy answers –
not even when we try to help preserve the wilderness.

Still, there are people dedicated to finding cleaner, greener ways for us
to coexist with nature.

Though limited as individuals, we can still work to preserve the wilderness –
beginning with the ‘wild deer’ place within us.

It is reported that more 90% of ordained ministers have had some
experience of outdoor camp.

The significance of this trend must be in the recognition of God's handiwork
in a well ordered universe that is inter-connected.

The seasonal changes; the paths of sun, moon, and stars; ad
the balance maintained between vegetation, deer, and panther
demonstrate a rational economy of resources.

Willard, p.3

When the world gets too crazy, we need only take a walk outside
to get a glimpse of the sanity of nature to restore our own.
Observing the environment – or learning from those who have studied it,
helps us get perspective and some understanding of human nature.
And this contributes to the reverence we practice in our devotion to God.

However, some people say they don't need to go to church
because they can find God while they're out on a boat
fishing and gazing out at the sea,
or on the 12th hole of an executive golf course
looking up at a mackerel sky of scallop-shaped clouds,
or kneeling in a garden pulling up weeds and planting flowers.
I think this is important and true,
but what is served if this remains a solitary personal experience?

Lillian Daniel is a writer for the Stillspeaking daily devotional
offered by our national church online.

She says she has a problem with people who speak with contempt
about 'church' and say their spiritual needs are better met
by a walk on the beach, watching a sunset.

In her opinion:

*'Being privately spiritual but not religious
just doesn't interest me.*

*There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts
all by oneself.*

*What is interesting is doing this work in community,
where other people might call you on stuff, or heaven forbid,
disagree with you.*

*Where life with God gets rich and provocative
is when you dig deeply into a tradition
that you did not invent all for yourself.'*

This is not to say that being 'religious' and involved in church
cancels out being 'privately spiritual' and marveling at nature –
We need both.

Here in Florida, we can't ignore the wilderness
with its weeds and insects that are not easily discouraged;
dramatic skies that can simultaneously hold both sun and moon
or be filled with storms;

And every time you see a palm tree or a white bird,
you are reminded that you are not in Kansas anymore,
or Michigan, or Pennsylvania, but you are someplace else.

Willard, p.4

The wilderness pulses with life – unlike the wasteland in its desolation,
and in our journey of faith, we can find ourselves alternately
traveling through a wilderness – or being stranded in a desert.
Being in the wilderness can mean facing dangerous situations and ideas
meant to test you, to tempt you, to try your strength – and teach you.

Here we can lift up our common joy about God's creation
as well as our concerns for it.

Then we see that creation is not limited to the beauty of nature,
but the unfolding frontiers of human life on earth.

There are still dangerous frontiers that need exploring,
terrible enemies to be challenged and overcome,
yet new opportunities for growth and expansion.

I can tell you from experience that our schools – public and private,
are frontiers filled with peril.

Can you imagine what it is like for children growing up these days?

Their fears are fueled by hormones;

They're still ignorant of the wider world despite their twittering and texting,
but they are intelligent.

And can you imagine the challenge for their teachers
to guide them through the wilderness?

The early Christians had their work cut out for them,
venturing out on the Roman Empire's cobble-stoned roads
and Mediterranean sea-lanes to bring the Good News
to regions of wild people just as brutal as any natural dangers.

The Apostle Paul was routinely arrested and beaten and eventually put to death
by the worldly powers that were threatened by his message
of a world to be changed by 'the children of God'.

He is not specific as to how this will take place,
but when the 'the children of God' finally appear on the scene,
they will make the difference.

I would like to think that what he meant by 'the children of God' –
was a humanity transformed from the inside out
with the purpose of telling about God's love through Christ.

We are to take into account the wildness of our human nature
to appreciate and live creatively with it,
while controlling our self-serving and destructive impulses.

Willard, p.5

Jesus' parable speaks of a spiritual reality – the economy of the Spirit,
the wild generosity of God's love that is contrary to the wisdom of
better business practices or improved labor relations.

But he is teaching about that transformation of the old world into the new –
whether we join in at the start or later on in the journey
the work of the Spirit is its own reward.

The world is groaning toward this new reality
as ethnic and religious cultures, women and specific gender people,
seniors and youth, the poor and the rich strive for liberation –
the liberation of becoming who we are created to be and
guided by the instinct of rational loving-kindness.

And our companion on this journey through the wilderness toward liberation
is the Spirit of Christ.

As Paul said,

“...the Spirit helps us in our weakness;
for we do not know how to pray as we ought,
but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”
Rom. 8:26b

And that means our sighs and groans that are prayers too deep for words –
like Walt Whitman said in his “Leaves of Grass”...

*I too am not a bit tamed – I too am untranslatable;
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.*

<http://www.bartleby.com/142/14.htm>

The world is a wasteland that yearns to be re-forested –
and God would have us re-plant it as an endless orchard
that will bring a harvest of justice and righteousness,
of love and peace, having learned to live in harmony
with the wilderness round about and within us.

The human heart is the same way –
crying out for the freedom of the wilderness,
the adventure of new discoveries, the promise of new life.

And Christ calls back to us to follow him into that wild, ‘deer’ place
to find how God's Kingdom of Heaven has already come true.

Amen

Our lesson today is from Romans 8:18-27 in which the Apostle Paul declares his hope in the promise that the world will be transformed by the 'children of God' despite the hardships of the present.

- 18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time
are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.
- 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing
of the children of God;
- 20 for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will
but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope
²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay
and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.
- 22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning
in labour pains until now;
²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves,
who have the first fruits of the Spirit,
groan inwardly while we wait for adoption,
the redemption of our bodies.
- 24 For in hope we were saved.
Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?
- 25 But if we hope for what we do not see,
we wait for it with patience.
- 26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness;
for we do not know how to pray as we ought,
but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.
- 27 And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit,
because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Matt. 20:1-16

[Jesus said,]

²⁰For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner
who went out early in the morning
to hire labourers for his vineyard.

²After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage,
he sent them into his vineyard.

³When he went out about nine o'clock,
he saw others standing idle in the market-place; ⁴and he said to them,
"You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right."
So they went.

⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock,
he did the same.

⁶And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around;
and he said to them,
"Why are you standing here idle all day?"

⁷They said to him,
"Because no one has hired us."

He said to them,
"You also go into the vineyard."

⁸When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager,
"Call the labourers and give them their pay,
beginning with the last and then going to the first."

⁹When those hired about five o'clock came,
each of them received the usual daily wage [about \$20].

¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more;
but each of them also received the usual daily wage.

¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying,
"These last worked only one hour,
and you have made them equal to us
who have borne the burden of the day
and the scorching heat."

¹³But he replied to one of them,
"Friend, I am doing you no wrong;
did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?"

¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go;
I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.

¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?
Or are you envious because I am generous?"

¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'